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Rules about to change on backcountry roads

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Beginning Tuesday, a backcountry jaunt on the wrong road could prove costly.

That's when the U.S. Forest Service will release <http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/htnf/recreation/mvum/mvum.shtml> "Target="_blank">motor vehicle maps for national forest land at Peavine Peak, the Martis area between Reno and Truckee and the hills west of Carson City.

That's also when someone riding a motorcycle, Jeep or all-terrain vehicle on a road designated as closed to motorized vehicles can be cited, with fines starting at \$250.

"It's going to be a huge world of difference from what we've been doing in the past," said Genny Wilson, chief of the Carson Ranger District. "It's a huge deal."

Release of the maps is part of the government's policy to control off-highway vehicles, an activity identified in 2005 by then-Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth as one of the four biggest threats to national forest land.

That year, Bosworth announced a policy that would restrict off-highway vehicles to designated roads and trails across nearly 193 million acres of forests and grasslands.

Federal land managers have been mapping existing roads and trails used by OHVs to designate roads that will remain open for continued use by off-highway enthusiasts and close others to minimize damage to the land.

Under a travel management plan for Peavine Peak, about 90 miles of roads and trails were designated to remain open, with 75 miles closed to further use. Similar steps were taken at Martis and in the Kings Canyon and Clear Creek areas near Carson City, all part of Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

The Forest Service has lacked authority to cite people using closed roads but that changes Tuesday in the areas covered by the new maps. While officials will initially focus on educating violators, a get-tough approach will soon follow, Wilson said.

"As time goes by, if people are violating it, they are going to get cited," Wilson said. "We're going to enforce it, definitely."

The impact will be wide ranging, said Carl Adams, an off-highway enthusiast and organizer of the Washoe County Backcountry Coalition.

"Everyone that wants to take a motor vehicle into the forest is affected by this," Adams said. "Hunters, fishermen, campers, birdwatchers, even hikers -- people that aren't even part of the debate are affected by this, and many of them don't have a clue what's going on."

Adams is critical of a process he considers to be "another major step in a downward spiral" in providing access to public land to people who enjoy an increasingly popular sport.

"Every time they do this, we lose roads we think are very neat roads," Adams said.

While Adams acknowledges some need for the government to designate roads proper for continued motorized use, he is critical of the end result.

Many areas where closures will be enforced, Adams said, are still improperly signed and the government's maps won't really inform people where it's legal to drive and where it is not.

"How are we supposed to know where we are?" Adams said. "You could be out there in complete ignorant bliss.

"Whatever you believe about the eventual merits of what they want to do, the implementation sucks."

Rangers are working to install signs in affected areas, with Peavine "in pretty good shape," said Marnie Bonesteel, a Forest Service recreation officer.

People who use the affected land acknowledge different perspectives of the debate.

"Everyone needs to have their space," said Reno resident Steve Knapp, pausing during a mountain biking excursion on Peavine one recent afternoon.

Knapp said he suspects a minority of irresponsible off-highway riders are forcing the government to crack down on a sport most people pursue responsibly.

But closing some roads to motorized use makes sense, Knapp said, as long as closed roads are clearly marked.

Greater restrictions on OHV use are necessary to reduce worsening damage to a sensitive landscape, with cross-country travel particularly destructive, said Dennis Ghiglieri, a Reno conservationist with the Sierra Club.

Recently retired Terry Mitchell likes to drive his four-wheel-drive vehicle on back roads. Now that he has more time, he wants to do more dirt biking as well. Mitchell worries over growing access restrictions to public land.

"We need access. We need places to go," Mitchell said. "I want to be able to get there. I want to see the country. I want to have a nice ride."

The popularity of off-highway vehicles is soaring, with the number of OHVs rising from an estimated 5 million in 1970 to more than 50 million today, according to Forest Service estimates.

With Reno-area homes pushing to the forest boundary, a greater control of OHV use is necessary to prevent mounting damage, Wilson said.

"Land is being decimated," Wilson said. "That land is why so many people moved to this country, to have that out their back door. Now, it's getting ruined because so many people are going out their back doors."

Mitchell acknowledges some people do "tear up the land" and that some restrictions are probably necessary.

It makes for a difficult issue, he said.

"We've got to take care of the land," Mitchell said. "Where's the middle ground? It's a tough topic."
