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OHV trails inappropriate for Mark Twain National Forest



The U.S. Forest Service is considering a proposal to build 308 miles of off-highway vehicle, OHV, trails in the Mark Twain National Forest in southeastern Missouri. The proposed trail system would open most of this wonderful forest land to off-highway motorcycles, dune buggies, three-wheelers and four-wheel-drive trucks.

The Forest Service released the draft environmental impact statement on this project in December and is now receiving public comment about whether it's best to proceed with the project. Forest supervisor Eric Morse will decide by mid-April whether to proceed with this or an alternative plan.

OHV trails, especially on this scale, are not an appropriate use of the Mark Twain Forest. They damage the soil, displace flora and fauna, muddy the streams and disturb the peace and solitude that makes the forest valuable for hiking, camping and other recreational uses.

The draft environmental impact statement acknowledges "There are adverse consequences which cannot be avoided. These are soil erosion ... increases in turbidity in live streams could be expected at OHV crossings and annoyance on the part of the adjacent landowners by OHV noise. The irreversible effects are direct

mortality to wildlife during development and use of OHV trails/roads and loss of individual trees and vegetation in the travel way of OHV trails/roads."

The statement relegates important issues such as wildlife disruption, wildlife habitat, aquatic habitat degradation, safety and noise concerns to the category of secondary issues that can theoretically be mitigated.

OHV enthusiasts have caused problems on the 20 miles of trails already in the forest, including littering, illegally riding on dams, state roads and private property. The impact statement acknowledges that hundreds of miles of unauthorized OHV trails have sprung up in the forest. "I don't have enough employees to stop the violations there now," Morse said.

If the forest service can't manage OHV use on 20 miles of trails, why is it eager to build 308 miles of new trails? Given the precedent set by limited trails, large-scale use of the forest by OHVs is unthinkable, if not insane.

"People are only beginning to understand what it will mean if they set up designated ATV trails," said one property owner in a recent Post-Dispatch article. "It's going to attract people from all over the country. They'll be turning the forest into a

raceway."

Robert Anderson, chairman of the board at Richfield Co., predicted several years ago that off-road vehicles would be "the single most dangerous and damaging use of our public lands.... Erosion caused by their unregulated use will be with us for generations. What will happen to our wildlife habitat? That aesthetic value of our public lands is appreciated by most Americans; however, values will be altered drastically unless we address the off-road vehicle problem immediately."

"Damage done to the land by off-road vehicles is completely out of proportion to the benefits received by those who use them," Anderson said.

Now is the time to make your voice heard. Take a look at the impact statement and decide for yourself if criss-crossing the forest with OHV trails is a worthwhile and wise use of our tax dollars.

A copy of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Off-Highway Recreational Vehicle Opportunities in the Salem and Potosi Ranger District is available at the reference desk of the Columbia Public Library or by calling 1-364-4621. All comments on this document must be sent by Feb. 23 to Darsan Wang, Mark Twain National Forest, 401 Fairgrounds Road, Rolla, Mo., 65401.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.