

J. SCOTT CHRISTIANSON

State shouldn't mar scenic forest land with OHV trails



There are many reasons why the proposal to build 308 miles of trails for off-highway vehicles in the Mark Twain National Forest should be canned. Many of you are aware that the Forest Service is now taking comments on the draft environmental impact statement for this proposal and will decide in April whether to crisscross the forest with trails for dune buggies, three-wheelers, "motocross" motorcycles and four-wheel-drive trucks.

Many advocates for the trails point to the popularity of the two parks in Missouri that already are designated for heavy OHV use: St. Joe State Park near Flat River and Finger Lakes State Park north of Columbia. However, both sites were built on land already decimated by strip mining, not on land of scenic beauty. Sacrificing the beautiful and tranquil environment of Mark Twain Forest for OHV trails is not appropriate.

The Forest Service estimates it will cost \$246,000 to build all 308 miles of proposed OHV trails. Annual maintenance and law enforcement are projected to cost \$29,000 and \$59,000 respectively. Money for the OHV trails would come from two sources: the Forest Service and the federal gasoline tax. The Forest Service budgets money for blazing 16 to 100 miles of hiking and horseback-riding trails each year. If the OHV proposal is approved, part of that yearly allocation would be diverted to OHV trails. Additional money may also come from the gasoline tax, as authorized by the Federal Transportation Act.

OHV trails are a poor use of tax dollars because they cater to a small number of people and cannot be used for other purposes. Hikers, horseback riders and campers can't use OHV trails because of the danger of sharing the trail with motorized vehicles.

Former secretary of the interior Steward Udall approached OHVs on public lands from a more basic level. "Why should we recognize sit-on-your-fanny-and-gun-the-machine activities as legitimate outdoor recreation, anyway?" asked Udall.

Determining what is and isn't legitimate outdoor recreation might

seem controversial, but some distinction must be made if the forest is to continue to be a place of beautiful landscapes, clear streams and plentiful wildlife — for ourselves and future generations. A cynical letter written in response to a proposal for OHV trails in the Hoosier National Forest in Indiana illustrates the importance of deciding what is a valid use of our forest lands.

"Why do you plan to accommodate off-road vehicles such as dirt bikes when there are many other forms of recreation and people who also have legitimate requests for the use of the 188,000-acre Hoosier National Forest. My wife and I are avid flamethrower enthusiasts and believe that we, as taxpayers, deserve the opportunity to practice our form of recreation in the forest. There aren't many places we can exercise our right to engage in our hobby. But with the Hoosier National Forest available to us, we would be able to defoliate a designated area of the forest and utilize our flamethrowers to the fullest extent."

FOREST SERVICE OPEN HOUSES

The Mark Twain National Forest will host two open houses for people interested in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement developed for OHV trails in the Salem and Potosi districts of the forest. Participants will be able to discuss the impact statement with the resource specialists who developed it and submit written or oral comments.

The first open house is from 3 to 7 p.m. Tuesday in the cafeteria at Viburnum School on Highway 49 in Viburnum. The second is from 2:30 to 6:30 p.m. Wednesday at the St. Louis County Library Headquarters, 1640 South Lindbergh Blvd., in St. Louis. If you have any questions about these open houses, call Charles Gill at 1-364-4621.

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.