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Tonto National Forest ORV Plan Will Hurt Wilderness, Wildlife, Water and Cultural Artifacts

PHOENIX, Ariz.— Conservation and archaeological groups joined thousands of other Arizonans this week in submitting formal comments asking the Forest Service to revise its proposed travel-management plan for off-road vehicles in the Tonto National Forest to protect wildlife, air quality, cultural resources and wilderness values. The plan would add more than 600 miles of open motorized routes and almost 7,000 acres of unrestrained off-road vehicle areas — allowing damaging motorized use in protected wilderness areas, beaches, rivers and essential wildlife habitat.

In their [comments](#), conservation groups criticized the badly flawed Forest Service proposal for allowing excessively high road densities along sensitive streams, which would pollute water relied on by millions of Arizonans, and for including hundreds of miles of damaging roads and trails within critical habitat for endangered species. All of this is being proposed in spite of the fact that the Forest Service is undertaking travel-management planning to reduce the significant damage to our national forest from unmanaged off-road vehicle use.

“The Forest Service has a unique opportunity and responsibility to improve wildlife habitat and water quality on the Tonto National Forest by developing a responsible plan for managing motor vehicles,” said Katie Davis, a public lands campaigner with the Center for Biological Diversity. “But this plan is irresponsible and damaging. It ignores the hundreds of thousands of people who visit the Tonto for hiking, bird-watching and other quiet recreation. And it will hurt the recovery chances of Mexican spotted owls and southwestern willow flycatchers.”

Under the Forest Service’s proposal, more than 1 million acres of forestland would be open to game retrieval — essentially allowing ORVs to travel anywhere, including along and through rivers, wildlife habitat and roadless areas. And continued use on hundreds of miles of dirt roads is causing widespread dust pollution, a significant public health concern the Forest Service has repeatedly failed to address.

“The Tonto National Forest provides many important benefits to our Arizona communities — clean water, clean air, quiet recreation — and significant habitat for a diversity of plants and animals,” said Sandy Bahr, director of Sierra Club’s Grand Canyon Chapter. “Irresponsible off-road vehicle activity and the plethora of user-created roads associated with it have devastating long-term impacts on streams and rivers — even a single vehicle driving through these areas can destroy bank structure and introduce invasive species, leaving scars on the landscape that can last for months or even years in our arid region. We need a much better plan to limit the abuse of the land and protect these resources.”

Comments also focused on the proposed plan's ineffectiveness at mitigating the impacts of off-road vehicles on hiking trails and irreplaceable archaeological treasures. The Forest Service and members of the public have extensively documented defacement of ancient petroglyphs and looting of cultural sites that are readily accessible from motorized routes that provide no benefit to the forest transportation network and would remain open under the proposed plan.

"The Tonto National Forest archaeological resources are world-class," said Andy Laurenzi, Southwest field representative with Archaeology Southwest, "and we remain disappointed that the proposed travel-management rule fails to recognize that closing certain roads to motorized public use is the most cost-effective strategy to ensure the long-term preservation of highly visible archaeological sites that continue to experience vandalism including looting. Many of these roads are in remote areas of the Forest that serve no other useful purpose and place important cultural resources at risk. Once these resources are damaged, the loss of part of our cultural heritage is forever."

The Center for Biological Diversity, Sierra Club, Archaeology Southwest, WildEarth Guardians and the Wilderness Society submitted the comments.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 775,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places. www.biologicaldiversity.org

The Sierra Club is America's largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization, with more than 2.4 million members and supporters nationwide, including 35,000 in Arizona as part of the Grand Canyon Chapter. Sierra Club's mission is to explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of earth's ecosystems and resources; and to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment. For more information, visit <http://arizona.sierraclub.org/>

Archaeology Southwest has practiced a holistic, conservation-based approach to exploring the places of the past for over three decades in the Southwest. We call this Preservation Archaeology. By exploring what makes a place special, sharing this knowledge in innovative ways, and enacting flexible site protection strategies, we foster meaningful connections to the past and respectfully safeguard its irreplaceable resources. www.archaeologysouthwest.org