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Comments:

Dear Allen & Mike,

I have a recreation request I am asking you to consider in the new management plan. I know the "official" comment date has closed, but I also know that you accept comments after the closure date. Sorry I didn't get this put together sooner. Here goes.

Background: Many of us have Off Highway Vehicles (UTV's/ATV's) that we use to work around our property - but they have much more enjoyable uses if we have the opportunity. There are very few places where they can be ridden on Forest roads. None are near us in the Nantahala. The idea came to mind as I started thinking about the upcoming seasons when our mountain wildflowers will be blooming and how much Sharon and I enjoy them. While thinking about those flowers it occurred to me that there are many unique flower locations that I have found while hunting/hiking that Sharon will never get to see because she can't hike there. I do share pictures, but it's not the same.

Many of us are reaching the age where we cannot hike the distances/inclines of our gated forest roads. Overall, we have an aging population - especially among those oriented to the outdoors. We also know that unlimited/uncontrolled OHV usage can seriously erode/damage forest roads. I believe there have been some attempts in the past to accommodate OHV's in certain places in the Forest but they did not work out. I am hoping that we can find a middle ground. If this idea has merit, I would like to float it through the Stakeholders Forum, but am limiting it to FS personnel at this point until I hear back from you.

Proposal: Please consider a method whereby there could be periodic usage by small groups of qualified OHV operators for trips on Forest roads that are normally gated. Here is what I would propose:

1. OHV operators would need to pass a course in responsible operation on Forest roads.
2. OHV operators would need to belong to a club/group and would pay a permit fee if necessary.
3. OHV operation would be limited to on-road operation only. No racing, mudding, hill climbing, trail riding, etc. would be permitted.
4. The number of OHV vehicles per trip would be limited.
5. OHV usage could be limited to a set number of trips per month/per road, depending on the road - to be determined by the District Ranger.
6. Roads would be closed to OHV trips while timber operations were underway, major maintenance was being performed, etc.
7. OHV road usage would need to be scheduled in advance through the District Ranger office and a key picked up from the District Ranger office prior to the trip and returned the business day after the trip.
8. Each OHV club/group outing would include at least one trained/qualified person to operate a chain saw/tools to remove downed trees, limbs, etc. from Forest roads. Trash removal would also be required. These actions would provide a maintenance function to supplement Forest Service efforts and help keep roads clear for emergency access.

9. A report to the District Ranger office the week following the trip would be required to note any erosion, landslide, blockage, etc. issues on the road.
10. Trailer parking would be an issue and would need to be worked out at the entrance to each gated road before that road was qualified for OHV usage. OHV clubs could assist in funding, building parking areas inside the gated entrance.
11. It is possible that OHV trips could be expanded to support field trips, research, etc.
12. If necessary, OHV usage on certain roads could be restricted to certain days of the week/month/season so as not to conflict with other users (horse riders, hikers, etc).

I would like to take this idea forward because I know many people who would like to get more involved with Forest usage, support and recreation but are physically unable to do so. Let's expand our forest usage to more people - but, let's do it responsibly. I would like to head up putting this together from the users standpoint. Please give this serious consideration and let's at least try a test case in the Nantahala.

Thanks for your consideration - looking forward to hearing from you,

Jim Gray