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Forest travel management rules inconsistent, confusing

By Kurt Davis

If you recreate in Arizona's national forests and haven't yet encountered the new federal Travel Management regulations, you may be in for an unpleasant surprise.

In 2005, the U.S. Forest Service issued new regulations called the Travel Management Rule, requiring each national forest to develop a Travel Management Plan (TMP) to identify and designate roads, trails and areas open to motor vehicle use and to minimize cross-country motorized travel. Open roads are supposed to be marked on accurate Motor Vehicle Use Maps for each forest.

Although travel management is part of managing public lands, the implementation of this rule across the different forests has been haphazard, creating confusion for the public, problems for law enforcement, and too often denying citizens reasonable access to their public lands. As an example, the TMP on the South Kaibab resulted in a quarter of the roads being closed, many of which, without biological rationale.

There are other issues. Signage indicating open and closed roads has been inconsistent from one forest to another. Campers now face inconsistent and ridiculous restrictions, such as in one forest where motorized dispersed camping is only allowed within 30 feet of an open road, but a forest across the highway allows it within a 100- to 300-foot corridor. A 30-foot restriction creates a potential safety hazard for campers, particularly families with children. That lacks common sense. Access to some campsites has been closed despite those sites being regularly used, even before statehood. This concentrates more people in less space and often creates a poor quality of experience for campers.

Finally, the different forests have inconsistent and unreasonable restrictions on one-time motorized retrieval of legally harvested animals. Some forests allow one-time motorized retrieval for elk but not for other game species. Other forests allow it only in certain areas. This confusion creates challenges for hunters who try to remain lawful, and the restrictions are unfair to physically challenged and Wounded Warrior hunters. These rules can interfere with Arizona Game and Fish's ability to fulfill its wildlife conservation mission and should be changed to allow motorized retrieval for all large big game species.

The Arizona Game and Fish Commission has a record of supporting multiple use on our public lands and Travel Management Plans that are clear, consistent across forests, and don't unreasonably restrict public access beyond what is scientifically appropriate for the resource. Citizens should not be denied access to their public lands unless backed by science, not just the presumption of harm or pressure from special interest groups that seek to limit access for segments of the public.

Because Arizona Game and Fish officers are a major component of enforcement of federal laws or rules on public lands, the Arizona Game and Fish Commission has sent a direct, but important message, by initiating a policy to oppose and consider legal action pertaining to road closures that lack biological rationale, and to NOT allow the use of our officers to enforce forest Travel Management Plans (write tickets) related to campsites, game retrieval and road closures. Officers will continue to enforce laws related to habitat damage.

Unfortunately, it is necessary for the Commission to send a clear message that, while our public lands should be protected, rules should never devastate opportunities for Arizonans to responsibly recreate on their lands.

I encourage outdoor enthusiasts to engage in federal land management processes. Visit www.azqfd.gov/travelmanagement or call your local Ranger District for more information.

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