

What's Happening With Travel Planning, Motorized Travel, and the OHV Rule on the Clearwater National Forest

The Clearwater National Forest provides a variety of recreation opportunities – camping, driving, fishing, hunting, and more. Each year more and more people are involved in Off Highway Vehicle or OHV recreation whether driving all terrain vehicles (ATV's), trail motorcycles, or four wheel drive vehicles. Motor vehicles are an appropriate way to access and enjoy National Forest lands – in the right places and under appropriate management. Unfortunately, the growth in use of OHV's and their increasing ability to travel in rougher terrain has outpaced the development of management strategies for them. While most riders use their OHV's responsibly, the damage from growing cross-country travel is obvious. Proliferation of trails, vegetation loss, unsightly scars, soil erosion, and stream damage are a few of the issues with irresponsible use of OHV's nationally and here on the Clearwater NF.

To address this situation, the Forest Service adopted a national rule regarding OHV's in November 2005. The final content of this rule was shaped not only by the need for appropriate OHV management, but also by more than 81,000 public comments. The OHV Rule requires each National Forest to formally designate those roads, trails, and areas where motorized travel is permitted and to show them on a Motor Vehicle Use Map that would be available at no charge. Implementing the rule is a two-step process that starts with *travel planning* to identify a proposal for a motorized system followed by an *environmental analysis* of that proposal and of reasonable alternatives.

The Clearwater National Forest is now beginning the travel planning step of the process which will identify routes and areas that should be considered for various types of motorized and non-motorized traffic. In the course of travel planning forest managers will take a look at traffic types that are currently permitted on National Forest system roads and trails, desired future conditions for motorized and non-motorized use across broad areas of the forest, and also public suggestions for motorized or non-motorized travel. This work will include coordination with state, county, local and tribal governments as well as forest users.

During the remainder of 2006, and into early summer 2007, anyone with an interest in travel on the Clearwater NF is encouraged to get involved in travel planning. At this point the Forest needs your suggestions for motorized routes that already exist on the ground but are not part of the initial designated system. The initial designated system is shown in the 2005 Clearwater National Forest Travel Guide.

Later this fall, forest managers will settle on a proposal to take forward into step two of the process - National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis. Soon after, the results of the travel planning effort, including public suggestions, will be used to help develop alternatives. Field reviews and analysis of those alternatives will follow in 2007 with a final decision planned for early Fall 2008. The OHV rule will be implemented with publication of the Motor Vehicle Use Map in time for the 2009 summer season.

This process will primarily cover the Powell, Lochsa, and North Fork Ranger Districts. The Palouse District completed an OHV analysis in 2005 that meets the intent of the OHV rule and only the Elk Creek drainage needs further analysis before the rule can be implemented there.

The Clearwater NF website at www.fs.fed.us/r1/clearwater has additional information about travel planning, the OHV rule, and how to suggest a route for consideration. There are also answers to the most common questions about the rule in general and the Clearwater NF approach to implementing it.

For those of you who are knowledgeable and routinely engaged in the NEPA process, please note that this letter is not a scoping or comment request. We are not into NEPA yet. Once a proposed action is identified this fall we will solicit your issues through the normal scoping process. At this time we are soliciting only route proposals that can be considered in the travel planning and analysis as described above.