

# JUST DON'T TELL ME NO: MANAGING OHV RECREATIONAL USE ON NATIONAL FORESTS

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## Abstract

Impacts to natural resources from Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) use on national forest lands are a growing concern for U.S. Forest Service managers. Research strongly indicates that impacts occurring in “non-designated areas” are causing damage to sensitive plant and wildlife species, eroding soils, and exceeding road density standards. Surveys were sent to 600 OHV users from 11 counties in eastern North Carolina, with a 12 percent response rate. Findings suggest that the majority of OHV users live in the country, are primarily middle-aged males, have moderate to above average incomes, have received safety training and support future efforts to do so, especially for beginning riders. Even when riders indicated that they are satisfied with OHV opportunities and support non-government management of OHV areas, they do not want their use restricted nor do they support annual registration or user fees. Although managers can expect support for OHV safety programs, there appears to be little support for increasing regulations, user fees, or government involvement.

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## 1.0 Introduction

With the growing popularity of OHV use in the United States, there have been increasing impacts to natural resource conditions on national forest lands. Between 1976 and 2000 the number of OHV users increased from 5 million to 36 million, creating conflicts with other users as well as with the growing number of homeowners who live adjacent to national forests. Unmanaged OHV use has resulted in miles of unauthorized roads that cause erosion, degradation to watersheds, and damage to cultural resource sites (Cordell et al. 2004).

On July 7, 2004, the Forest Service issued a national OHV policy restricting OHVs to designated roads and

trails on federal forests and grasslands as part of an effort to curb both environmental damage and ease conflict with visitors (36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261, & 295). Under the proposal, each forest and grasslands district manager was asked to work with the public to identify routes, trails, and other areas suitable for OHVs. As the result of extensive national forest road and trail inventories, managers have identified areas where OHV users are developing new user-created trails, which are both exceeding the allowable trail/road density standards for the area. Such activity potentially impacts threatened and endangered plant and wildlife species that are being compromised by extensive erosion and noise problems in riparian areas (USDA Forest Service, Washington D.C. News Release No. FS-0418). On July 15, 2004, the Forest Service published proposed regulations in the Federal Register to govern OHVs and other motor vehicle use on national forests and grasslands. Forest Service Chief, Dale Bosworth, stated:

“We believe that off-highway vehicles are a legitimate use in the right place. That includes many places on national forest land. But it’s a use that’s got to be managed if we want to keep it. That’s what our proposed new rule for OHV use on national forest land is all about: managing that use now to sustain it in the future. And if we want to sustain that use, then we’ve got to work together.” (<http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/ohv/>)

### 1.01 Proposed OHV Rule

The proposed ruling, if implemented, will require designation of roads, trails, and areas open to motor vehicles. Designation would include class of vehicle and, if appropriate, time of year for motor vehicle use. A given route, for example, could be designated for use by motorcycles, ATVs, or street-legal vehicles. Once these areas have been designated, the rule would prohibit motor vehicle use off the designated system or those areas inconsistent with the designations. Stakeholder involvement will be facilitated by Forest Service managers in an effort to enlist local residents

in the decision making process. This collaborative effort between local residents and special interest groups, together with state, local, and tribal governments will address identified problems and create potential solutions to develop effective OHV programs.

### 1.02 Future Collaboration

Many motor vehicle users, and non-users, agree that a designated system of motor vehicle routes is desperately needed. Effective partnerships with state and local governments and user groups are already generating collaborative planning, maintenance, and shared resources to better manage OHV use. Sustainable OHV recreation will require continuing partnerships to address road and trail maintenance, enforcement, and protection of natural resources (<http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/ohv/index.shtml>).

Based on current national forest trail and road inventories, national forest managers believe that OHV users are developing new user-created trails, which are both exceeding the allowable trail/road density standards for the area, impacting threatened and endangered plant species, and causing extensive erosion problems in riparian areas (Cordell 2001). Although National Forest managers and resource planners are required to document OHV use, and determine the impact OHV use is having on forest resources, little information is available. Moreover, a clearer understanding of OHV use on National Forests is critical because federal agency resource managers are increasingly required to adhere to the following: enforce guidelines and standards written in forest plans, work with stakeholders regarding management of natural resources, and respond to concerns relating to Threatened and Endangered Species designation and protection. Without research fostering a better mutual understanding between federal land managers and OHV users, it is likely that conflict will continue concerning quality land stewardship, environmental impacts, and the overall influence OHV use has on the quality of visitor experience for non OHV users (Fisher et al. 2001).

**Table 1.—Demographic information on OHV riders**

Rider characteristics	Group		% used for recreation	% used for work
	M	N		
Gender	F	2	80	20
Household income	\$75,000 - \$100,000			
Mean age	43 years old			
Place you are from	88% live in country/small town			

### 2.0 Methods

The research area for this study included a 150 mile radius in eastern North Carolina from Highway 93 east to the Atlantic Ocean. Using OHV dealer mailing lists of individuals who either purchased an OHV, or OHV parts, researchers sent out a survey during January 2005 to 600 OHV users from nearly every county in eastern North Carolina. Of the total surveys mailed, 74 were completed and returned for a response rate of 12.3 percent. Data were entered and analyzed using SPSS 13.0. Table 1 shows frequency distributions based on Likert scale survey questions.

### 3.0 Results and Discussion

Surveys were conducted to characterize OHV users in eastern North Carolina, identify their perceptions of the current situation, and determine their level of support for the implementation of a future OHV recreation programs that will potentially implement use restrictions, user fees, and annual registration while improving OHV opportunities in managed areas. Preliminary findings suggest that the majority of OHV users are male, have moderate to above-average incomes, live in the country, and are primarily middle-aged.

When asked to express their opinions about proposed programs, many indicated that they strongly support rider safety programs and non-governmental run OHV programs while opposing annual registration fees, and programs run exclusively by government agencies. Furthermore, many expressed a reluctance to support a number of the proposed OHV programs. There seems to be at least a perception among respondents that increased government participation equates to increased regulations and restrictions for OHV riders (Table 2).

**Table 2.—Opinions about proposed OHV programs**

Do you support or oppose?	N	M	SD
Operator safety certification	64	4.8	.22
Annual registration fee	63	2.3	1.2
Household income	\$75,000 - \$100,000		
Gov program to manage areas	64	2.0	.66
Non-government management	62	4.2	.39

Scale 1=strongly oppose, 3=neutral, 5=strongly support

**Table 3.—Satisfaction of OHV riders**

Rider opinions	N	M	SD	NA
Opportunities in NC	55	3.1	1.39	9
Management in NC	55	3.9	1.13	9
Experiences in NC	58	3.5	.89	9

1=very unsatisfied, 3=neutral, 5=very satisfied

**Table 4.—OHV Riders willingness to pay**

How much will you pay \$?	\$0	\$5	\$7.5	\$10	\$15	\$20
Daily per vehicle use fee	14	13	0	22	6	5
How much will you pay \$?	\$0	\$20	\$30	\$40	\$50	\$75
For a yearly fee	9	13	6	5	17	12
How much will you pay \$?	\$0	\$20	\$30	\$40	\$50	\$75
For an annual license fee	32	18	1	3	3	5

When respondents were asked their opinion of how satisfied they are with OHV riding opportunities in North Carolina, a significant number indicated that they are neutral or satisfied with current opportunities. It is equally surprising given the respondent's reluctant support for improving management, that many riders endorsed support for current management of areas as well as indicating they are satisfied with their current riding experiences (Table 3). These results might partially reflect the absence of management or enforcement of existing regulations/laws in the study areas during the past decade.

In an effort for eastern North Carolina Forest Service land managers to better understand and manage OHV use, riders were given a set of questions in order to assess their willingness to pay for specific OHV programs. Responses clearly indicate that while riders seem to

understand that funding is necessary to pay for daily user fee programs and facilities, they are extremely reluctant to support an annual license fee (Table 4). It seems that a long history of no user fees in addition to little monitoring of use by Forest Service managers has left many users reluctant to support new programs, especially if they restrict use or include user fees.

While it is the goal of Forest Service managers to provide quality experience opportunities for OHV riders, there is equal interest in determining whether there is support for proposed actions for reducing user conflicts while protecting the environment. Again, riders strongly endorse efforts to educate riders in order to reduce environmental impacts, but show little support for actions that either reduce user numbers or mandate where riders can and cannot go (Table 5).

**Table 5.—Management actions to reduce conflicts and environmental impacts**

Level of support or opposition	N	M	SD	NA
Education to reduce impacts	55	3.9	.89	9
Reduce user numbers	55	2.6	1.13	9
Where riders can go	58	2.7	.89	9

1=strongly oppose, 3=neutral, 5=strongly support

Overall, riders indicated that they recognize OHV riding is potentially dangerous, can cause environmental damage, and do support a well managed OHV program by non-governmental entities. Even though riders indicated that they would like to see state and federal land managers provide more opportunities, how such a program can be developed and implemented, with a minimum willingness of OHV riders to pay for an annual registration or user fees, is less clear. Moreover, some respondents indicated that poor communication of rules and regulations causes problems regarding littering and impacts to soil and vegetation. These types of responses strongly suggest that myriad benefits may result from educational programs implemented to address responsible OHV use.

With little regulation currently in place to address the widespread OHV use in eastern North Carolina, managers are recognizing the need to address this issue while implementing actions that better monitor use. And although it is important to provide OHV riders more appropriate areas in order to minimize their impacts, it is equally important to set limits on where and when they can recreate on National Forest lands. Possibly the best avenues for accomplishing this task are twofold: to implement annual registration fees, and offer expanded opportunities in developed areas while enforcing restrictions in some sensitive areas where natural resource damage and conflict between user groups might occur.

#### 4.0 Conclusions

These findings provide a clearer understanding of OHV use on national forests in eastern North Carolina. This preliminary investigation is the first stage of an ongoing investigation to identify preferences by users and the level support for managing OHV use in eastern North

Carolina. These findings are important because Forest Service resource managers are increasingly required to work with stakeholders regarding management of natural resources while addressing problems occurring on national forests. Without research that creates a better understanding between federal land managers and OHV users, it is likely that conflict will continue concerning both environmental impacts and effects on other user groups. From this preliminary investigation, it is apparent that eastern North Carolina OHV riders, although somewhat satisfied with existing OHV opportunities, currently are not supportive of management efforts to better manage use in eastern North Carolina. One productive avenue to improve the situation is in the development and implementation of an extensive OHV educational program. Forest Service managers need to utilize existing Treadlightly! curriculum in an effort to educate and inform users of potential future opportunities as well as the limitations of when and where OHV use can take place.

#### 5.0 Acknowledgments

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