



Forging a Sustainable System of Routes and Areas for Motorized Use

Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth
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It's a pleasure to be here at this collaborative summit. I guess I might be the first Forest Service Chief to have the honor of attending an occasion like this. I think it shows how far we've come in the last 20 to 30 years: Much of our focus at the Forest Service has shifted to outdoor recreation, and a lot of the recreation on national forest land is now motorized.

Let me say one thing right off the bat: 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 in a way that's responsible, then we've got to work together. So I welcome the *collaborative* spirit of this summit.

Focusing on What Matters Most

Let me start with some context. This year, the Forest Service is exactly a century old. We've been using this occasion to look back at where we've been and to reflect on where we're headed, and there are some huge challenges ahead—things like global warming and the loss of ecosystem services like carbon sequestration ... things like population growth, where we expect to more than double our population by the end of this century ... things like the need to balance our land ethic with a consumption ethic, since our consumption as a nation is vastly outstripping our production of things like energy and timber.

These are enormous challenges, and they are pressing. My biggest fear for a number of years now has been that we're not focusing on them enough. That's why we at the Forest Service started focusing on the Four Threats—fire and fuels, invasive species, loss of open space, and unmanaged outdoor recreation. These are long-term concerns that we as a nation urgently need to address.

The Four Threats are interconnected with the other issues I just mentioned. The huge fires and all the invasives we're getting, not to mention loss of working farms, forests, and ranches, mean that we are losing ecosystem services like clean air and water, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration. And population growth has to do with our growing consumption and the boom in outdoor recreation that is outstripping our management capacity. We need to focus national attention on these concerns, because whether or not we rise to the challenge will decide in the years ahead whether we will be able to conserve our natural resources for future generations.

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Finding Collaborative Solutions

But it's not just a question of *what* we focus on, but also *how*. The Forest Service has had a whole century of experience in dealing with natural resource issues. Sometimes we've been wildly successful, like in getting our fire program to the point where we quickly suppress 99 percent of our fires. But we haven't always been quite so successful, particularly when it's not primarily a matter of technology and knowhow.

And dealing with the Four Threats is not primarily a matter of finding technical solutions. Each threat has social, economic, and ecological components that are complex and extremely difficult to reconcile, whether it's fire and fuels, invasive species, loss of open space, or unmanaged outdoor recreation. We can't simply apply technical or regulatory solutions and hope to succeed—the OHV issue, for example, is not just a matter of law enforcement.

The last few decades have shown that dissatisfaction breeds conflict, litigation, and management by default through the courts. Nobody wins, least of all the environment. Our way of dealing with issues in the past through top-down approaches and through conflict and gridlock doesn't work. We need to find new models for dealing with the most pressing issues we face today.

There's hope. This year, we kicked off our hundredth anniversary with a Centennial Congress in January. Hundreds of people from all over the country attended, including many of our partners. One of their central tasks at this Congress was to think about the conservation challenges ahead and to come up with suggestions.

The response from our partners was tremendous. They focused on the big issues that will matter for years to come, like ecosystem services and what to do about loss of open space. They focused on building our role at the Forest Service as a convener and facilitator instead of a top-down director of everything that happens. They focused on the need for engaging our publics in finding solutions for themselves, because they are the ones who are out there on the land and can truly make a difference. They focused on community-based stewardship.

Serving People

And that collaborative spirit gives me hope that we *will* be able to overcome the Four Threats. Let me turn for a moment to the OHV issue, then come back to collaborative solutions.

Today, the Forest Service is squarely in the business of outdoor recreation. Since 1946, the number of visitors to the national forests and grasslands has grown about 18 times. In 2002, we had more than 214 million visits, with about the same number driving through just to enjoy the scenery. As I mentioned, these numbers are only going to grow as our population grows.

National forest recreation has therefore become the biggest contributor to many of our local economies, and recreation management accounts for much of our workforce. Recreation offers hope for our rural economies, whether it's cruise ships in Hoonah, Alaska, or ATV riders on the Hatfield-McCoy Trail in West Virginia.

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OHV use has contributed to that recreational boom, and in many ways it's a plus. We now get something like 11 or 12 million visits a year on national forest land where OHVs are either the primary use or a secondary use. About half of the users travel more than 50 miles for the opportunity to ride on national forest land, and about a third of them say they have no other place to go.

So we have a tremendous obligation—and a great opportunity—to serve these folks, and through them our local communities and economies. We see it as part of our mission, and I think we've fulfilled it in a number of ways:

- According to a survey we did last year, more than 200,000 miles of forest roads are open to OHV use. That's more than 60 percent of our entire road system.
- We've also got more than 36,000 miles of OHV trails, or about 28 percent of our total trail system open to OHV use. That includes some premier riding opportunities, like the Paiute Trail in Utah, a huge loop around most of the Fishlake National Forest. Some of you might be familiar with it.

Irresponsible Use

Unfortunately, there's also been a downside to OHV use. I believe that the vast majority of our OHV users are responsible. They leave no lasting trace on the land. But if just one percent leave unacceptable damage, that's still an awful lot of damage: one percent of 11 or 12 million visits is 110 or 120,000 visits. If every one of those visits does damage, the cumulative impact is tremendous.

You don't have to go far to see it. I could show you slide after slide—tire tracks running through wetlands; riparian areas churned into mud; banks collapsed and bleeding into streams; ruts in trails so deep you can literally fall in; and sensitive meadows turned into dustbowls. Water quality deteriorates, soil erodes, and native plant communities decline, partly because invasive weeds are spread by tires going where they shouldn't be going. Such use also threatens habitat for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species, like the desert tortoise in areas east of here.

Noise alone is a huge issue. Noise can also pit users against each other or users against homeowners; it's maybe the single biggest source of social conflict we have when it comes to outdoor recreation.

This isn't just a matter of a few user conflicts or a few user-created trails here and there—not anymore. In 2003, we figure we had more than 14,000 miles of user-created trails on the National Forest System. That's a lot of unmanaged use, and it costs a lot to repair. It can lead to lasting damage.

That's why we've got to change the way we manage it. Our nation isn't the same place anymore. OHV use has reached critical mass. We can't just leave it alone anymore and hope it comes out

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all right. If we want all the benefits from OHV use to continue, then we have to make sure it is done in a way that is responsible. And that means better managing it.

A Better Way to Manage OHV Use

That's why we proposed a new rule for motorized use. We want responsible use to continue, and we need this rule to ensure that it does. This rule will give us a nationally consistent approach to travel management. It will let us balance the public's enjoyment of OHVs with the best possible care of the land.

Let me be clear about one thing: The rule itself won't open or close a single trail or a single acre to OHV use. Those decisions will all be made after the final rule comes out. They'll be made at the local level as we revise our travel management plans. Any decisions will be fully open to the public, and we invite everyone to get engaged. If you care which trails or roads should be opened or closed, that's the time and place to get involved. Everyone will have the same chance to influence the outcome.

Our goal is a *sustainable* system of routes and areas designated for motorized use. That doesn't necessarily mean closing every user-created trail. If adding a user-created trail to the system would make it more sustainable by, say, completing a loop that riders want—and if the impacts are minimal—then that might make good sense. We will be carefully listening to local communities and user groups to identify the best locations for OHV trails and areas. That means taking our existing trail system and seeing what we need to add or subtract.

Ensuring that our road and trail system is sustainable means thinking through our recreation niche within the broader landscape. National forest lands probably can't meet every recreational demand from every potential visitor group. We need to look at what services other lands provide and what we have that's unique. We also need to avoid "bean counting." We should ask not how many routes and areas we close or open, but rather how well future generations are served.

We issued the proposed rule last July, and the comment period closed last September. We received more than 80,000 comments, including broad support for the concept of a designated system of routes and areas for motorized use. But there was also substantial concern about our commitment to the process and about funding and enforcement. Those concerns are partly what we're here to discuss.

Common Ground for Partnership

To make it work, we're going to need help. Fortunately, I see a lot of common ground, because most OHV users don't come just to ride. They come for the same things other people do. More than half say they come to experience nature and more than 40 percent to see wildlife. A lot of them don't come primarily to ride at all, but rather to hunt, camp, fish, or hike. They don't want to see trashed landscapes or be disturbed by unwanted noise any more than anyone else does.

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They're often willing to help, and I could show you slide after slide of volunteers going out on their OHVs to clean up trash, fix trails, repair damaged meadows, and so forth. We've got some great partnerships with user groups. Some of them help out by teaching and reminding riders to be responsible. Some even help out with enforcement. Some have education programs for kids, and by reaching kids, they also reach the adults who shepherd them through the program.

Moreover, we must be realistic. These are tight budget times; we've always had to set spending priorities, and we always will. Today, we wouldn't be able to maintain much of our trail system without support from our volunteers and partners, and we will continue to need that support. That's part of collaboration, too.

The Challenge of Collaboration

The fact that we *do* get so much help and support gives me great hope. I believe we *can* rise to the challenge of managing outdoor recreation, including OHV use, but only if we work together in a truly collaborative spirit. I'll briefly recapitulate, then say a few words about collaboration before closing.

We believe that OHVs are a legitimate use in the right place, and that includes many places on national forest land. But the days are over when folks could just drive wherever they pleased. These days, there are just too many users having too much impact.

That's why we need a new rule governing OHV use. The new rule will lay the foundation for a *sustainable* system of routes and areas for motorized use, and everyone will have a fair say in determining where those routes and areas will be located.

But the OHV rule will be the easy part. The hard part will be all the decisions that will have to be made on the ground as we revise our travel management plans. That's where folks will have to come together to agree on a system that is truly sustainable in the long run.

And that's where we'll need a collaborative spirit. Of course, collaboration means different things to different people. To me, it doesn't mean "helping the enemy." It means coming together with those you disagree with, suspending your distrust, and accepting that they have a legitimate interest and role to play. Then it means finding common ground and coming to some agreement based on the goals you share.

These are hard things to do. No collaborative process I know of has ever succeeded without a lot of hard work and a gradual building of trust. But it's usually been well worth it, and I've often found that folks have been surprised by how much they have in common, despite their disagreements.

Rising to the Challenge

So I have great hope. I think people are tired of top-down approaches and management driven by conflict. They are looking to the Forest Service not to give them the answers, but to facilitate a

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consensus based on a shared love for the land. It will be up to all of us, working collaboratively, to find sustainable solutions on the ground. I believe we can and will find lasting local solutions based on our collective commitment to conservation.

It won't be easy. There's hardly an issue I can think of in national forest management today that is as contentious and emotionally charged as this one. But that makes it all the more important to try—all the more important to succeed—because this is only part of a much bigger picture. This is only one issue among many we face today—those major long-term challenges I mentioned at the outset of my remarks: fire and fuels, invasive species, loss of open space, global warming, consumption issues, population growth, and all the rest.

But if we can succeed here, on the OHV issue, as contentious and seemingly intractable as it is, then we will have accomplished something enormous. If we can come together in the spirit of collaboration and forge a truly sustainable system of routes and areas for motorized use, then we will have passed a conservation milestone. We will have shown how other issues, too, can be resolved through collaborative governance.

So that's the challenge we face. It's up to all of us here to come together in a truly collaborative spirit, knowing how high the stakes are. Future generations will depend on us to rise to the occasion and find sustainable solutions on the ground.