



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Tonto National Forest

2324 E. McDowell Rd.
Phoenix, AZ 85006
Phone: 602.225.5200
Fax: 602.225.5295
V/TTY: 602.225.5395

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Route To:

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Subject: Travel Management Scoping Letter including Proposed Action for EIS
To: Interested Parties

This letter is to inform you that the Tonto National Forest will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) to disclose the effects of designating a system of roads, trails, and areas for motorized vehicle use, in order to develop a motorized travel management plan. The project area is defined by the boundaries of the Tonto National Forest, and includes the Cave Creek, Globe, Mesa, Payson, Pleasant Valley, and Tonto Basin ranger districts.

Background

In order to comply with the travel management regulations, the Tonto National Forest participated in a forestwide travel analysis process that was facilitated by a contractor beginning in 2007. The intent of this process was to help the forest determine the minimum transportation system necessary to provide safe and efficient travel and for administration, utilization, and protection of National Forest System (NFS) lands (36 CFR 212.5(b)). Based on internal scoping, the forest supervisor determined that the Tonto National Forest would prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) to complete the analysis required to comply with the Travel Management Rule.

In October 2009, the forest released a proposed action. Seven public meetings were held throughout the communities within and proximate to the forest in November and December 2009 to gather input about the proposed action, including roads and trails proposed for motorized use. Comments to the proposed action were accepted through December 4, 2009. A draft version of the EA was released for public comment on January 6, 2012 for a 30-day comment period. Due to the length and complexity of the Environmental Assessment and requests from the public, an additional 30-day comment period began on February 5, 2012. Approximately 300 letters were received during these two comment periods.

After initiating compliance with the Travel Management Rule under an EA, the Tonto National Forest determined that the level of significance reached a point that environmental analysis for travel management under an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) would be more appropriate. All comments provided throughout the process thus far, including those to the 2009 proposed action, the 2012 Environmental Assessment, and public meetings, will continue to be considered



and may be incorporated into either the proposed action for the EIS or alternatives to that proposed action.

Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose of this project is to comply with the Travel Management Rule by providing a system of roads, trails, and areas designated for motor vehicle use by class of vehicle and time of year on the Tonto National Forest. There is a need to determine which, if any, authorized National Forest System (NFS) roads currently open should be closed to motorized travel. In addition, there is a need to determine which, if any, authorized roads currently closed should be open to motorized travel. There is also a need identify any restrictions on allowed uses, classes of vehicles, and/or seasons of use for specific routes. There is also a need to determine which, if any, unauthorized routes should be added to NFS as trails and roads open for motorized access. Furthermore, there is a need to determine if, when, where, and how far motor vehicles may be driven off designated roads for the sole purpose of motorized dispersed camping or big game retrieval. And finally, there is a need to amend 1985 Tonto National Forest Plan to prohibit motor vehicle use off designated NFS roads, trails, and areas on two ranger districts (Payson and Pleasant Valley) except as shown on the Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) and to revise wording for consistency regarding definition to comply with Travel Management Rule, 36 CFR 261.13.

Proposed Action

For the purposes of this project and notice, the term “road” or “trail” is defined as a National Forest System (NFS) road or trail that is designated for motor vehicle use pursuant to 36 CFR 212.51. An unauthorized road or trail is, “a road or trail that is not a forest road or trail or a temporary road or trail and that is not included in a forest transportation atlas” (36 CFR 212.1). Unauthorized routes have generally developed without agency authorization, environmental analysis, or public involvement and do not have the same status as NFS roads or trails included in the forest transportation system. On the Tonto National Forest, approximately 550 unauthorized routes have inventoried. However, there exist additional unauthorized routes that have not been inventoried at this time.

The actions listed below are proposed to meet the purpose and need of the project. The proposed action has been modified based on comments received from the 2009 scoping period through the 2012 Environmental Assessment comment period. This proposed action would result in approximately 3,812 miles of designated NFS roads and trails and 1,417 acres of designated areas open to motor vehicles on the Tonto National Forest.

Roads proposed open to motor vehicles: Approximately 2,567 miles of roads would be open to high clearance vehicles and approximately 967 miles would be open to passenger vehicles. Specifically, the following is proposed:

- Open approximately 327 miles of currently closed roads for high-clearance vehicles.

- Open approximately 0.5 mile of currently closed roads for passenger vehicles.
- Convert approximately 33 miles of roads currently open to high-clearance vehicles to passenger vehicle roads.
- Convert approximately 80 miles of roads currently open to passenger vehicles to high-clearance vehicle roads.
- Restrict approximately 99 miles of high-clearance vehicle and passenger vehicle roads to seasonal use.

Approximately 1,187 miles of existing roads would be designated for Administrative Use, restricting use to federal employees and permitted uses. Specifically, the following is being proposed:

- Convert approximately 222 miles of routes currently open to administrative use only, which would close these routes to general motor vehicle use.
- Convert approximately 102 miles of routes currently closed to administrative use only, which would close these routes to general motor vehicle use.

Approximately 842 miles of existing roads would be closed. In this case, close means these roads would be closed to public travel. Some of these roads would be retained for periodic administrative use only (maintenance level 1) and others will be decommissioned (removed from forest inventory). The most relevant aspect of this action is closing the road to public travel. Decisions to obliterate decommissioned roads are outside the scope of this project, because they require further site-specific environmental analysis before being undertaken. Specifically, the following is proposed:

- Close approximately 96 miles of roads currently open to high-clearance vehicles.
- Close approximately 3 miles of roads currently open to passenger vehicles.

Approximately 280 miles of unauthorized routes would be added to the forest transportation system. These routes would be managed as roads or trails and will be open to public travel. Specifically, the following is proposed:

- Add 1 mile of unauthorized routes to the system as a road open to passenger vehicles.
- Add 104 miles of unauthorized routes to the system as a road open to high clearance vehicles.
- Add 22 miles of unauthorized routes as administrative use only roads.
- Add 165 miles of unauthorized routes as motorized trails.

Trails proposed open to motor vehicles: Approximately 251 miles would be open to off-highway vehicle (OHV) travel only. Specifically, the following is proposed:

- Open approximately 4 miles of currently closed roads as motorized trails.
- Convert approximately 53 miles of roads currently open to high-clearance vehicles to motorcycle trails.

- Convert approximately 23 miles of roads currently open to high-clearance vehicles to motorized trails.

Areas proposed open for cross-country motorized travel: Four areas within the Tonto National Forest would be designated permitting cross-country motorized travel. These areas include:

- Golf Course OHV Area within the Globe Ranger District (approximately 17 acres);
- Sycamore OHV Area within the Mesa Ranger District (approximately 1,391 acres);
- Sycamore Tot Lot OHV Area, intended for youth users, within the Mesa Ranger District (approximately 3 acres); and
- The Rolls Tot Lot OHV Area, also intended for youth users, within the Mesa Ranger District (approximately 6 acres).

Motorized big game retrieval: Motorized retrieval of big game, elk and bear only, would be limited to one mile off either side of NFS roads to retrieve a downed elk or bear by an individual who has legally taken the animal. This would occur on all open roads in Arizona Game Management Units 21, 22, 23, 24A, and 24B, but would not extend into wilderness areas or inventoried roadless areas. Unit 22 includes approximately 920 acres of the Coconino National Forest. The decision for motorized big game retrieval for these 920 acres of Unit 22 will be under the authority of the Tonto National Forest decision maker.

Dispersed camping: Motorized travel for the purpose of dispersed camping would not be allowed off designated roads and trails. Vehicles would be allowed to park one vehicle length, or up to 30 feet, from the edge of the designated road or trail.

OHV permit zones: Four permit zones would be designated within the forest: Bulldog Canyon Permit Zone within the Mesa Ranger District; St. Claire Permit Zone within the Cave Creek Ranger District; Sycamore Permit Zone within the Mesa Ranger District, and The Rolls Permit Zone within the Mesa Ranger District. Within a permit zone, vehicles would be required to stay on designated roads and trails. Motorized users would be required to obtain a permit and a gate combination code from the designated Tonto National Forest office before entering these zones.

The proposed action would amend the Forest Plan to prohibit motor vehicle use off designated NFS roads, trails, and areas on two ranger districts (Payson and Pleasant Valley), except as shown on the Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) and to revise wording in order to be consistent with the language and intent in 36 CFR 212.

Possible Alternatives

In addition to the Proposed Action, the No Action alternative will be analyzed. The Forest Service is required to analyze the “No Action” alternative under the provisions of NEPA (40 CFR 1502.14). Since the original scoping for this project in 2009, several concerns and issues were raised concerning travel management on the Tonto National Forest. These included the need to increase motorized travel opportunities on designated roads, trails, and areas; provide

greater protection for natural resources by decreasing the number of roads, trails, and areas; and provide greater motorized access to dispersed camping sites and retrieval of big game. These issues, along with issues raised during the scoping period for the EIS, will be used to develop alternatives to the proposed action.

Nature of Decision to Be Made

The Tonto National Forest Supervisor is the responsible official and will decide the following:

- Changes to the existing road system;
- Changes to existing motorized trails and areas open to cross-country motorized travel;
- The distance motor vehicles may travel off specific designated routes for the purpose of dispersed camping and big game retrieval; and
- Language and content changes to the Tonto Forest Plan via a forest plan amendment.

The decision will be based on a consideration of the environmental effects of implementing the proposed action or alternatives developed in response to significant issues. The Forest Supervisor may select the proposed action, an alternative analyzed in detail, or a modified proposed action or alternative within the project's range of alternatives.

Scoping Process

It is important that reviewers provide their comments at such times and in such manner that they are useful to the agency's preparation of the environmental impact statement. Therefore, comments should be provided prior to the close of the comment period and should clearly articulate the reviewer's concerns and contentions.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the Agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

Scoping Input Needed

To aid in the identification of issues and the development of alternatives, comments need to be received by **March 4, 2013**.

When submitting comments, please keep them specific to this proposal only. Comments which are not specific to the project and project area will be deemed outside the scope of the analysis and will not be considered. If you provide recommendations for changes to routes or areas, please include route numbers or location descriptions, as well as the reasons for your recommendations. If you are including references, citations, or additional information to be considered for this project, please specify exactly how the material relates to the project. Also, indicate exactly what part of the material you would like us to consider (such as page or figure number).

Send written comments to Neil Bosworth, Forest Supervisor, Attn: Travel Management, 2324 E. McDowell Rd, Phoenix, AZ, 85006. Comments may also be sent via e-mail to comments-southwestern-TMRTonto@fs.fed.us, or via facsimile (602) 225-5302.

For further information, contact Anne Thomas, Tonto National Forest NEPA Coordinator, 2324 E. McDowell Rd, Phoenix, AZ, 85006, (602) 225-5213.

Individuals who use telecommunication devices for the deaf (TDD) may call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 1-800-877-8339 between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., Eastern Time, Monday through Friday.



NEIL J. BOSWORTH
Forest Supervisor