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New Tahoe National Forest Proposal Lacks Balance, Quiet Recreation Shortchanged

Hikers, campers, anglers and other forest visitors worry that new Forest Service proposal would lead to more noise, pollution and safety risks from dirt bikes and off-road vehicles

Nevada City, CA – The Forest Issues Group, Center for Sierra Nevada Conservation, The Wilderness Society, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility and local residents are raising serious questions about a new management proposal for the Tahoe National Forest released today that they say fails to protect clean water, wildlife and traditional, quiet recreation, such as hiking, fishing and horseback-riding. While the vast majority of Tahoe visitors enjoy quiet recreation, the new Forest Service proposal would allow dirt bikes, ATVs and other off-road vehicles on most of the forest, leading to more visitor conflicts and damage to land and water.

“We all have a right to enjoy the Tahoe National Forest, but no one has the right to abuse it, said Don Rivenes of Nevada City–based Forest Issues Group. “Dirt bikes and off-road vehicles have already caused soil erosion and damaged water quality in places like the Truckee River and Fordyce Creek. There is hardly any place on the Tahoe National Forest where people and wildlife can go to get away from these noisy, polluting machines.”

Forest Service officials today released the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for Travel Management on the Tahoe National Forest, the agency’s proposed plan for managing recreational travel. This plan will determine which roads, trails and areas will be protected for fly fishermen, hikers, family camping, biking and equestrian use, and what areas will allow the noisy activities associated with off-road vehicles like dirt bikes and All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs).

The planning effort began in 2004. All national forests, including the Tahoe, are required to designate their roads and trails for motorized or non-motorized recreation and by vehicle type by 2010. The project was originally intended to stop destructive cross-country travel by dirt bikes, ATVs and 4-wheel drive vehicles, but new Forest Service rules adopted in 2005 require the Tahoe and other national forests to complete broader recreational planning, and to identify an ecologically and economically sustainable road and motorized trail system.

The Tahoe National Forest currently has over 2,900 miles of roads and ORV trails that they cannot afford to manage adequately. They have been neglecting to maintain their current transportation system for many years and now estimate it would cost nearly \$170 million to bring their roads and trails up to standard. Yet, the plan does not consider restoring any of the costly, unnecessary, or ecologically damaging roads to natural conditions. Instead the Tahoe proposes to add 70 miles of additional ORV roads and trails, including new trails in roadless areas and critical wildlife habitat.

Tahoe National Forest recreation surveys show the vast majority of Tahoe visitors enjoy quiet recreational pursuits such as hiking, wildlife viewing, fishing and picnicking, that are negatively impacted by noise and dust from ORV activity. But local conservation groups, recreationists and residents say the agency's plan is unbalanced and will lead to more conflicts between recreationists and harm to wildlife and water quality.

"Unfortunately, the Tahoe National Forest proposal lacks balance," according to Karen Schambach with the Center for Sierra Nevada Conservation. "While fewer than 10% of Tahoe visitors use ORVs, this plan makes them the dominant use of the forest. The majority of forest visitors who want quiet places to enjoy the Tahoe with their families need to speak up now, or face losing those places forever."

Monte Hendricks, an avid fly-fisherman, wants to see quiet protected in the canyons he fishes. "A big part of the enjoyment for fishermen is getting to places free from the racket of civilization. I had hoped the Tahoe Forest Supervisor would be sensitive to the recreation needs of all those who enjoy the forest. Unfortunately, that appears not to be the case."

Grass Valley resident and hiker John Timmer observed, "The next time you try to find a quiet corner of the forest may be more difficult if we do not let the Forest Service know now that the quiet majority of forest users prefer peace and quiet when we go for a hike or angle for a fish."

Release of the draft environmental document kicks-off a 60-day public comment period, during which the public can tell the Forest Service how they feel about the way the Tahoe has allocated its lands between ORVs and more traditional recreational activities.

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See the Tahoe National Forests Draft EIS for Travel Management at:
http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/tahoe/projects_plans/ohv_inv/DEIS_overview.shtml

See the Tahoe's recreation survey at:
<http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/nvum/reports/year5/tahoe.htm>