

Trail Advocates

of the Clackamas River Ranger District of the Mount Hood National Forest

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Road Closures in the WNF

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Roads to recreation could soon be closed **Adherence to the national Travel Management Rule could close forest roads and limit motorized access to public lands**

By [Mike Stahlberg](#)

The Register-Guard

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Mike Stahlberg/The Register-Guard

Floyd Staley, foreground, and some of the Oakridge-area trail riders, wood cutters, hunters, hikers and mushroom and berry pickers who oppose "travel management" restrictions to hundreds of miles of road in the Willamette National Forest.

News: Last Seven Days: Story

OAKRIDGE — Willamette National forest officials will soon be telling motorized forest users exactly where they can go.

Disgruntled trail riders, hunters, anglers, campers, mushroom pickers and other recreation enthusiasts upset by reduced motor vehicle access might be tempted to respond in kind.

Controversy over closing forest roads and other restrictions on motorized access to public lands is erupting as local forest managers work to implement the national Travel Management Rule of 2005. The rule requires all national forests to publish, by year's end, maps showing precisely where motor vehicles are allowed.

Cross-country travel and driving on any route not on the map will be illegal.

Currently, motor vehicles may be driven anywhere they are not specifically prohibited.

On March 13, the Willamette National Forest issued a “request for public comments” on its travel management plan as part of its “initial scoping” process under the National Environmental Protection Act. The deadline for comments is April 15.

The proposed plan identifies about 4,320 miles of roads and 70 miles of trails that will be open to motorized use. It also lists “access zones” in which it will be legal to drive short distances on unmarked routes to reach “dispersed” (unofficial, undeveloped) campsites.

But it’s the nearly 1,000 miles of unmaintained, little-used logging roads in the Willamette Forest that are not on the proposed new “Motor Vehicle Use Map” (MVUM) that have some folks up in arms.

In Oakridge, a former lumber town literally surrounded by Willamette National Forest lands, grumbling about reduced access is extensive.

“I’m just fed up with government intervention in our lives,” said Floyd Staley, a long-time volunteer active in high lakes fish stocking and forest clean-up work.

“The regulation of our freedoms to use the forest and outdoors is the ultimate insult as far as I’m concerned,” Staley said. “That’s why a lot of people live in Oakridge — to have immediate access to what belongs to the American citizens.”

Staley is not alone in criticizing cut-backs in forest access that have been ongoing for several years and which will be codified on the MVUM. Of a dozen forest users who showed up for a photo session and interview with a Register-Guard reporter Thursday, all but one was critical of restrictions on forest access.

One of the main complaints is that the plan makes it illegal to drive many old logging spur roads that are in poor shape, but still passable.

John Cape, an Oakridge resident since 1971, says the Forest Service is spending thousands of dollars to excavate “waterbars” (trenches) across unmaintained roads to discourage their use.

“They’re spending money to ruin roads now so they don’t have to spend money on maintenance in the future,” Cape said. “If they’d just leave the road alone, eventually Mother Nature is going to take it back and then we won’t be able to use it. But why can’t we use it up to that point? We paid to have them built.”

Forest officials say safety is a concern on any mountain road that has not been properly maintained or inspected for potential failures. The routes will continue to be open to mountain bike and foot traffic.

Cape says he uses many old spur roads while gathering mushrooms, hunting deer, or cutting firewood.

Staley uses unmaintained roads to reach trails he hikes while delivering fingerling trout to about half of the 20 lakes he stocks every other year for

the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. He said he's asked to have those dead-end roads designated "open" on the travel map, but doesn't know whether they will be. Meanwhile, he said, other volunteers and forest users are probably unaware of impending reduction in their access.

At the end of one recently-trenched dead-end road, Cape said, "there's a hunting camp site that's been there for 20-30 years ... I know that when those guys try to get up there this coming season, they're going to be really pissed."

About 8 percent of the 6,500 miles of forest road in the Willamette Forest have been closed for what the Forest Service describes as "resource protection" reasons — anything from protecting wildlife habitat to trying to thwart garbage dumping or off-roading in fragile meadows.

The latter prompted several "road closed" signs and lock gates erected about a mile east of Oakridge in the Salmon Creek drainage.

Herb Hilton, an Oakridge resident since 1952, says damage done by a few users isn't a legitimate reason to deny access to everyone.

"I don't think there is any real off-road damage, and if it is, it'll all recover," he said. "It'll all recover."

Trail bike rider Alyn McClurg said the road closures "are not fair ... I've rode in this area for 39 years, ever since I was 16 years old, and now the only way I can get back up there is to walk," McClurg said.

"I wish I could have had a little more to say about it," said Doug Devorak, a member of the Emerald Trail Riders. "They brought this all on and they didn't ask the public what we really thought about it."

Devorak said off-road trail systems approved by the Forest Service from inclusion on its travel maps are "too small — so many (riders) come they just beat it to death." More trails would help disperse the pressure, he said.

Many of the roads at issue were "closed through past project decisions" and are not part of the current NEPA process, according to Brian McGinley of the Middle Fork Ranger District. In addition, the Willamette Forest's Travel Management website states that the forest is not "closing roads through this process" and that any "new proposals for road closures will continue to be analyzed under separate environmental analysis."

The distinction between processes, however, needn't keep people from commenting.

"We don't ever tell people they can't comment on things that are important to them, so they have the opportunity to make their views known," McGinley said.











And not all views expressed Thursday were in opposition to the plan.

“We have more roads per square mile here than anywhere I’ve even been,” said Benjamin Beamer, who grew up in Oakridge and is a member of a group of local trail advocates, “Even after all the closures, there’s still 4,300 miles of road. You can drive a lot of places in this forest, and being able to drive to every nook and cranny I don’t think is a priority.”

Details about the Willamette National Forest’s Travel Management plan, as well as information on how to comment, are available at www.fs.fed.us/r6/willamette/manage/travel-mgmt/index.html.

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