

April 13, 2004

Mr. Dale Bosworth  
Chief  
U.S. Forest Service  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Chief Bosworth:

The undersigned organizations and the millions of Americans we represent are encouraged by the announcement that the Forest Service will develop new policies and regulations designed to address the growing negative impacts caused by unmanaged off-road vehicle use. We urge the agency to propose and implement aggressive reform that first and foremost safeguards natural resources and the many benefits that our National Forests provide to millions of Americans who use them for purposes other than off-road vehicle recreation.

You have acknowledged that unmanaged off-road vehicle use is one of the four greatest threats to the long-term health of our National Forests. In fact, the magnitude of this threat is even greater when one considers the role that dirt bikes, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and other off-road vehicles play in fragmenting wildlife habitat and spreading invasive weeds – two of the other threats you have identified. The agency is well aware of the wide range of impacts to the land, air and water quality, wildlife and habitat, and the experiences of millions of Americans who visit National Forests annually for nonmotorized recreation.

These problems are exacerbated by the fact that the agency has a woefully inadequate number of law enforcement officers to respond to burgeoning demands. The average law enforcement ranger is responsible for more than 460,000 acres – an area more than half the size of the State of Delaware (776,960 acres). Addressing this problem requires at least two steps. First, the agency must develop regulations that facilitate effective enforcement on the ground. Second, the Service must request additional funding from Congress to boost the number of full-time law enforcement officers nationwide.

Executive Orders (11644 and 11989) provide clear direction for public land management agencies to develop effective regulations for managing off-road vehicle use. While some of that direction has been incorporated in current regulations, those regulations have not been followed consistently from Forest to Forest and they are not comprehensive and strong enough to address growing off-road vehicle problems. With this regulatory change, the Forest Service has an opportunity to make off-road vehicle regulations more clear and explicit, and to provide a consistent set of rules that all Forests must meet.

Many of our organizations have long supported the broad policy changes outlined by the Forest Service to date. Strengthening current regulations to prohibit cross-country motorized travel and limit dirt bikes and ATVs to designated roads and off-road vehicle routes clearly marked as open for their use will address fundamental policy needs. Although these policy changes will be beneficial, it is critical that the Forest Service take additional steps to ensure basic protections for public land, wildlife and other users of these special places. These steps, many of which reflect requirements in the Executive Orders, include: