

# QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE NEW FOREST SERVICE ROADS POLICY AND THE SAN JUAN NATIONAL FOREST



## 1. What is the new Forest Service roads policy?

The Forest Service Roads Policy seeks to better manage those National Forest System roads that are needed, and to decommission and rehabilitate those that are not. The agency has 380,000 miles of classified roads across the country, many of which were constructed half a century ago, yet the agency receives funding to maintain only about 20 percent of those roads. From 1990 to 1998, about 10,000 miles of National Forest System roads were lost to use by passenger cars because of lack of maintenance. The maintenance backlog nationally on these roads is estimated at \$8.4 billion. This does not even take into account some 60,000

miles of unauthorized, unplanned, and temporary roads that exist on National Forests nationally.

Nationally, most of the agency's system of classified roads was built for timber harvest; 22 percent serves passenger car use, 55 percent is maintained for high-clearance vehicles, and 23 percent is closed to motorized use by the public. While logging traffic has declined with reduced timber harvest, driving for pleasure has become the single largest recreational use of National Forests. More than 35 percent of all 1996 use was recreational. Recreational driving during the summer accounts for 13.6 million vehicle-miles per day. The recreational outlook is for an additional 64 percent increase by the year 2045.

## 2. How will the new national policy affect management of San Juan National Forest (SJNF) roads?

The new national policy establishes a uniform roads-analysis framework for all National Forests to use when implementing road projects, both construction and decommissioning, at the landscape or Forest Planning level. (Decommissioning a road entails returning the roadbed to a natural state by constructing water bars for drainage, ripping the surface and covering it with debris, then seeding.)

The decision to decommission a road will remain a local National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) decision. The time it will take to complete a roads analysis to determine whether to build, reconstruct, or decommission roads will depend on the scale of the analysis (individual-project level or Forestwide planning decision), the number of factors related to the decision, the level of public interest surrounding the decision, and available funding.

## 3. How much of the SJNF is accessible by roads?

About one-half of the 1.9-million-acre SJNF is accessible by roads. Another one-quarter is designated Wilderness, where motorized and mechanized traffic is not allowed. Another one-quarter is “roadless in character.”

## 4. How many miles of road are there on the SJNF?

The San Juan maintains 2,686 miles of “classified” National Forest System roads that are inventoried by the agency for maintenance (See #5).

About 1,033 miles of “unclassified” roads, which are inventoried to a lesser degree, receive no maintenance (See #6).

## 5. How are “classified” Forest roads managed?

- About 780 miles of classified SJNF roads are maintained regularly, to accommodate passenger cars during snow-free months. (The Forest Service does not plow any of its roads for snow removal; local counties, however, plow some Forest roads to enable access to residential areas). Most are single-lane and gravel-surfaced, with turnouts. Some are double-lane roads that are maintained to a higher standard, and a few are paved. These roads cost about \$850 per mile to maintain, because they are graded to accommodate passenger vehicles, and are heavily trafficked. These roads typically receive maintenance three times a year (some with the assistance of counties).
- About 1,015 miles of classified SJNF roads are open to motorized traffic in warm months, but are closed seasonally for public

safety, wildlife protection, or erosion control. Temporary closures typically occur in early spring or late fall. These roads normally receive maintenance once every five years, to accommodate high-clearance vehicles during snow-free months. These roads cost about \$550 per mile to maintain, because they are maintained less frequently and not to as high a standard as the former category.

- Another 890 miles of classified SJNF roads were constructed for specific resource-management activities, such as timber sales, and then closed permanently, to protect natural resources. These roads still exist, however, and are available to the agency for administrative purposes. The public may use them for nonmotorized recreation, such as horseback riding, hiking, and mountain biking. Some are also open to ATV or snowmobile use, when these uses do not conflict with wildlife habitat needs or other environmental or cultural concerns.

## 6. What about unclassified roads?

Above and beyond the classified-road inventory discussed above, roughly 1,033 miles of temporary roads and roads created by non-authorized use have been inventoried but are not

part of the SJNF official road system. These unclassified roads may be overgrown, almost impassable two-tracks.

## 7. How many miles of roads are decommissioned annually on the SJNF?

Decommissioning a road (returning it to a natural state) usually entails constructing water bars for drainage, ripping the surface and covering it with debris, then seeding the road-bed. For the past three years, the SJNF has decommissioned about 20 miles of unclassified roads per year (about two percent of the Forest's total road system).

## 8. How many miles of road are constructed annually?

From 1986 to 1999, about 263 miles of roads were constructed or reconstructed on the SJNF. More than 75 percent of these were reconstructions or upgrades of existing roads. The majority of road construction and reconstruction is for timber-management purposes.

The SJNF also reconstructs roads for administrative or recreational purposes, such as the upgrading of campground roads. Cost varies significantly, depending on terrain, clearing, and design standards.

**9. What is the annual road budget for the SJNF?**

The SJNF receives about \$800,000 for its annual road-maintenance budget. In addition to regular maintenance (surfacing, grading, installation, and maintenance of culverts and other erosion-control devices), these funds must also cover road improvements and maintenance of 40 bridges.

**10. How are travel–management issues decided on the SJNF?**

The SJNF addresses access issues associated with on- and off-road motorized travel on the SJNF at both the Forest Planning level and the individual-project planning level. Travel management is one of many issues that will be addressed in the Revision of the San Juan National Forest Management Plan in the coming years.

