

Vickie Christiansen
Chief Forester
U.S. Forest Service
201 14th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20024
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cc Amy and Laura Jo

Re: Funding National Forest Law Enforcement

Chief Forester Christiansen,

I live in Yavapai County in Northern Arizona, in the Red Rock Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest (CNF). The area has been a world-class tourist destination for years. It's in the top ten most-aspired destinations for US residents, and attracts 3-4 million visitors each year. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an astronomical increase in visitors seeking refuge in the outdoors from the high density Phoenix area and other cities in the West.

Many residents are concerned over the severe reduction in their quality of life because of the unauthorized and uncontrolled abuse of the National Forest we all love. I am writing you to express my concerns about two specific issues: 1) lack of enforcement to control illegal camping, and 2) dangerous and destructive Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) use.

Even before the pandemic the growth in outdoor recreation, OHV adventures in particular, had overwhelmed the management capacity of the CNF. COVID-19 has also significantly increased camping in the CNF. An increasing homeless population contributes to the increase, as does the trend for retirees to exchange their fixed houses for smaller mobile RVs and vans.

The CNF has a 14-day limit for camping, but little enforcement. It does not require registration upon arrival. There is no tag on the vehicle or campsite that identifies the owner or occupant and arrival or the required departure date. Even if tags were used, the CNF does not have sufficient law enforcement personnel to patrol the area and enforce evictions or issue fines for illegal camping or illegal campfires.

Campfires are a major concern, especially for residents of private inholdings of the CNF. Arizona is severely impacted by climate change and undergoing a mega-drought with above 100F temperatures and no precipitation for months on end. Monsoon rains did not come at all this summer. Thus, the grasslands and juniper chaparral of the greater Sedona area are tinder dry and at high risk for wildfires.

Dust from OHVs traveling at high speed on the motor-vehicle designated Forest Service roads imperils the health of people living along those roads and kills trees and other vegetation alongside the roads. (Even though CNF holds adult juniper trees as not belonging in the grasslands area, they act as an important shield for dust spreading beyond them – as long as they are alive.) Loss of visibility from dust was so severe one day that all traffic stopped until the dust settled. Because of excessive speed, ATV drivers are a public safety threat not only because of the dust clouds they raise, but because the thick layer of fine dust on the road makes them lose control over their vehicles and causes rollovers, often with severe injuries.

I ask that you as Chief Forester:

- (1) Request Congress to appropriate more funds for National Forests and establish a separate budget item for law enforcement in the National Forests. A separate budget has been proposed and approved by Congress for wildfire fighting on public lands.
- (2) Allow National Forest Districts to set speed at 25 MPH limit for public safety and public health reasons in the high-traffic unpaved roads at the interface of urban and suburban human activity and National Forest, particularly when the road passes residential areas, where a 15 MPH speed limit is appropriate.
- (3) Institute a no-fee permit system for camping in high-use areas, with fines for illegal overstay, illegal location, illegal campfires, and/or leaving trash behind. The fines could help finance remediation of environmental damage.
- (4) Require 3-year renewable permits for ATV/OHV rental businesses for their rented vehicles to be operated on motor-vehicle designated National Forest roads. Require public input for renewal of the permits. Permits must require the rental business to educate drivers of rental vehicles on safety and proper use.
- (5) To reduce wildfire risk, allow National Forest Districts to prohibit campfires at dispersed camping sites year round. Allow fires at National Forest campgrounds only in provided containers. (A well-meaning resident asked an illegal camper in the Sedona area to extinguish his fire because there was a fire ban. The camper pulled a gun and ordered the person to mind his own business.)

If citizens can help with obtaining the law-enforcement appropriation and other requested regulations, please let me know. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely

Bill Pumphrey
President, Keep Sedona Beautiful