



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## Officials say forest travel decision seeks balance amid heated debate

By J.R. Logan

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Twenty years ago, Garrett VeneKlasen spent a lot of time ripping through the Carson National Forest on a motorcycle with a chainsaw strapped to the front so he could cut new trails to get to his favorite hunting spots.

“I was the dude on the bike when paradise was still there,” VeneKlasen says, “and I ruined it.”

VeneKlasen, an avid hunter and fisherman, said it took decades to realize his cross-country jaunts through the forest were actually hurting what he loved most about the forest. Wildlife would scatter at the sound of his bike, and erosion from his trail cutting was impacting water quality and fish habitat.

While VeneKlasen has converted from off-road outlaw to controlled-travel evangelist, plenty of Taos County residents and visitors consider off-road access an inherent right on public lands. Estimates from the Carson using 2008 data suggest that less than 3 percent of forest-users specifically come to the Camino Real to ride dirt bikes and ATVs, but any attempts by forest managers to limit off-road travel usually prompts a backlash.

Conversely, the forest usually draws plenty of criticism from environmental groups when it tries to keep areas open to mechanized travel because of the damage uncontrolled travel can cause.

That’s why officials at the Camino Real Ranger District are eager to call a decision on travel management set to be released Thursday (Oct. 31) a “common sense” approach that strikes a fair balance for all forest users.

Under the decision, the Forest Service will:

- \* Close 100,000 acres on the district to cross-country motor vehicle use. The closures will affect the Warm Springs, Entre-as, Alamitos East and West Fork of Luna Creek areas.
- \* Close 32 miles of road to the public around La Jara, Valle Escondido, Bear Wallow Ridge, La Presa, Maestas Ridge, Hondo Canyon and parts of the Camino Real around Ojo Sarco, Entre-as and the Upper Alamitos area.
- \* Adopt a total of 1.1 miles of illegally cut road segments — each less than 300 feet long — as official Forest Service roads.
- \* Remove 16 miles of existing “corridor” (area within 300 feet of a designated road now open to

camping, parking and firewood gathering) along 16 miles of road and 6 miles of trail.

\* Limit approved use of corridors to dispersed camping and the retrieval of big game.

\* Close motor vehicle use on approved roads across the entire district between December 31 and May 1.

The new decision does not affect existing rules for horseriding, biking or snowmobiling in the district. The decision also does not impact existing access to private properties inside the national forest.

To download a complete copy of the decision, as well as a map showing changes, find this story at [taosnews.com](http://taosnews.com).

The new rules could go into effect within two months, though forest officials say they will be working on educating the public and installing signs before ramping up enforcement sometime next year.

### 'Not tearing it up'

As is typical in forests across the country, the development of the Camino Real plan drew equally passionate pleas from off-road enthusiasts and environmentalists seeking to keep areas closed or open.

The New Mexico Off Highway Vehicle Alliance turned in more than 20 separate comments with co-signers from Taos County accusing the Forest Service of various administrative errors and asserting that none of the agency's options considered the public's "true need."

Several businesses that rely on visitors coming to play in the forest argue that any restrictions to off-road vehicle use would be bad for business. Sipapu Ski and Summer Resort estimates that one-third of its summer traffic are visitors coming for motorized recreation. In comments on the proposed plan, the resort said limiting off-road vehicle use could have a big impact on Sipapu's success, especially since non-official trails that are regularly used by Sipapu visitors were excluded from the Forest Service list of approved roads.

Sipapu founder Lloyd Bolander, an avid motorcyclist, wrote in a comment that he has "worked, lived and recreated" in the Camino Real District since 1930 and feared some of his favorite rides would now be off limits.

"It sure saddens me, an 85-year-old, to be effectively shut out in the short time I may have left on this earth," Bolander wrote.

Jo Lynn Finley of Angel Fire Excursions contends that her company follows the Forest Service's existing rules when doing guided trips, but that private off-road drivers do not. She worries that off-road vehicle riders are unfairly lumped into a single group and that "one bad apple can spoil the bunch" and lead to over-reaching closures.

"My tourists aren't out there tearing it up," Finley said.

Finley said the limited number of approved trails means she's having trouble booking trips because her repeat customers aren't interested in doing the same ride every year. Further

limiting travel on the Camino Real will likely hurt her business, Finley said.

By contrast, a coalition of environmental groups including Taos County-based Amigos Bravos and Carson Forest Watch said in a joint comment they were disappointed that the Forest Service was “turning a blind eye” to the way some existing trails and roads were affecting watersheds. The groups noted erosion caused by off-road vehicle use affects water quality and wildlife habitat. They added that even if a road is closed, it can continue to cause environmental issues if damage isn’t fixed.

The environmental commentators noted even if a road or trail is officially “closed,” limited enforcement means problems would continue or possibly get worse.

In addition to business and environmental concerns, the limitation of access for firewood collecting is likely to draw especially strong opinions from locals who are used to having easy access to felled logs. The agency’s decision would officially make it illegal for trucks to drive within 300 feet of certain roads in order to gather wood.

Forest officials say they are sensitive to the needs of locals who rely on the forest for wood to heat homes and, in some cases, cook. They say designated firewood collecting areas will be established to ensure that residents still have easy access to logs, but they acknowledge that the new rules will probably be unpopular in many small communities and may be difficult to enforce.