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## 'Off-Road Rage' Climbs as Trails Get More Crowded

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FARMINGTON, N.M. -- As more and more Americans light out for backcountry trails, officials are seeing a parallel rise in episodes of "off-road rage": unpleasant, even violent encounters between drivers of all-terrain vehicles and hikers, mountain bikers and others.

"Move your bike or I'll run over it," the driver of a four-wheel all-terrain vehicle warned Bill Connelly, who had laid his mountain bike across a trail in the Glade Run Recreation Area, just outside Farmington. Signs were posted banning motorized vehicles from the stony track, and in the summer of 2006 Connelly was tired of ATVs going wherever they wanted.

"Go ahead," he said, according to Dan Dunn, his riding partner that day.

The ATV then crushed the bike, Dunn said, and Connelly grabbed the four-wheeler's handlebars, which brought the driver, a high school wrestler, off the machine, announcing, "I'll show you, old man."

Dunn and Connelly limped home with broken ribs.

"I hate these things. They're loud. They're obnoxious," said Bill Burgund, 61, an amputee with one leg who was walking on a Bitterroot National Forest trail in Montana last year when an ATV careened around a corner, snagging his crutch, wrenching his shoulder and knocking him to the ground.

"If I'd had my druthers I'd have shot the guy," said Burgund, a retired police officer who packs a sidearm on his daily walks. "It's a good thing my arm was so screwed up or I might have."

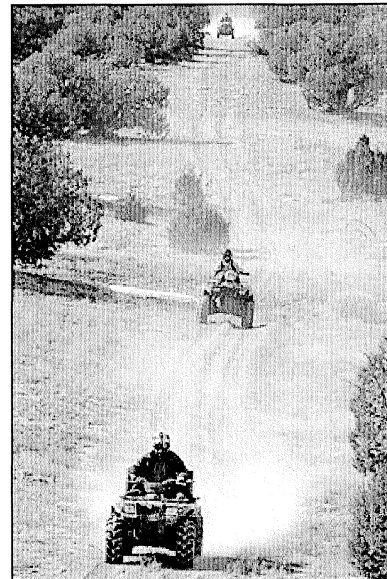
Federal officials charged with administering public lands say confrontations that erupt into violence on crowded trails in the West remain rare, but they warn that resentful frictions are rising. The region is the fastest-growing in the United States, driven largely by residents' desire to live near scenic public lands that, on weekends near urban areas, can be downright crowded.

The West is just filling up, and more people are going out to use public lands than ever before," said Heather Feeney, spokesperson for the Bureau of Land Management, the Interior Department agency that oversees 258 million acres, or about 13 percent of the land surface of the United States.

"So conflict management is probably something that's here to stay," she said.

Like the U.S. Forest Service, the region's other major landlord, the BLM is soliciting public involvement in "travel plans," deciding which trails will be reserved for hikers, which for horses, which for ATVs and which everyone must try to share.

The task has gained urgency with the surging popularity of off-road vehicles. Since President Richard M. Nixon issued a 1972 executive order directing federal agencies to protect public lands from ATVs, the number of people riding the machines has grown tenfold, to perhaps 50 million, according to a federal survey.



*ATV enthusiasts use the Buckhorn Rim Trail in Utah. How the vehicles share public land with hikers, bicyclists and horses has become a thorny issue. (By Whitney Curtis -- Ogden Standard-examiner Via Associated Press)*

And the appeal of the fat-tired four-wheelers offers a direct challenge to rulemakers: Many of the 750,000 ATVs sold each year are marketed expressly for their ability to take riders anywhere they want to go.

"We absolutely do not support that. We support designated route systems," said Greg Mumm, executive director of the BlueRibbon Coalition, which lobbies for riders and manufacturers of ATVs, also known as off-highway vehicles or off-road vehicles. "And frankly the OHV community is sick and tired of the black eye we get from those who think they can go wherever and whenever and however they darn well please."

Mumm points to West Virginia's Hatfield McCoy Trails and Utah's Paiute ATV Trail System as providing off-roaders "the quality of the experience they are seeking" and discouraging "excursions" that carve tracks into landscapes that can take decades to recover.

At the same time, the coalition argues against banning ATVs from large tracts of public land; that approach, Mumm said, "ends up stuffing increasing numbers of people onto a decreasing area, and that creates issues."

There appears to be no shortage of issues now. Critics point out that ATV riders account for 10 percent of visitors to public land, at most. Yet their impact -- whining engine noise, dust clouds visible for miles and nuisance driving, especially by young operators -- profoundly affects the other 90 percent.

"You can't recreate with these machines around. It will ruin your day," said Bob Clark, a Sierra Club regional official who was knocked to the ground by a dirt bike in the Great Burn Roadless Area in eastern Idaho two summers ago.

Clark declined to discuss the episode after the biker was penalized with only a misdemeanor \$72 fine. But according to witness accounts, the dirt bike's front wheel was in line to come down on Clark's head when Clark deflected it, spilling the rider atop another hiker. Clark had been trying to get a photo of the biker, who was on a trail barred to motorized vehicles.

"If you're out there, just about every time you'll run into off-road vehicle conflict," said Mike Eisenfeld, a Farmington environmental activist who often mountain bikes in nearby Glade Run, the sort of demi-urban recreation zone under the most pressure.

"It's the norm, not the exception," he added.

Trail tensions are not driven exclusively by ATVs. Hikers are irked at having their solitude broken by careening mountain bikes. And everyone has to get off the trail to let horses pass. But along with their noise, recreational off-roaders often are preceded by their reputation.

"It's totally about culture," said Bethanie Walder of Wildlands CPR, which opposes off-roading. "I think that's where the problem derives. They prefer to ride off-trail. They want to blaze their own trail. The culture's one of 'I can do whatever I want.'"

"I think the Forest Service is afraid of them," Walder added. "I wouldn't confront an ORV rider."

Officials are more inclined to blame lean budgets: The average BLM law enforcement agent must patrol 1.5 million acres.

But they acknowledge off-roaders' reputation for rambunctious behavior.

"I won't discount the yahoo factor -- anything goes out there," said Steve Henke, the BLM district manager in Farmington. "We've had Boy Scouts put up signs, and they don't last a week out there."

In Idaho, a Payette taxidermist was found guilty in 2005 of punching and threatening the life of a hunter who confronted him for driving an ATV on a national forest trail closed to motors.

"Put a bullet in her head," a man called out in Darby, Mont., in January, as a woman spoke against ATVs at a profanity-laced public meeting the Forest Service had convened.

ATV advocates offer no excuses for such behavior. But many are irritated at being forced to scramble to retain access to land supported by their taxes.

"I expect to drive my RV pulling my motorcycles up to the gates of Yellowstone, and I expect that park to be open," said Bob McCarty, 61, in a Farmington Harley-Davidson showroom crowded with shining four-wheelers. "I work so I can play, and I do expect to play."

In fast-growing Arizona, where two-thirds of residents describe themselves as "trail-users," according to a BLM official, Cyndi Tuell of the Center for Biological Diversity works to restrict off-roaders. All four of her brothers own ATVs.

"Two of them are adamant you should use them on trails, and the other two believe they should be driven anywhere," she said. "Two of them won't talk to me. I guess I'm glad that they all still talk to each other."

Even when there's no hint of violence, the conflict isn't pretty. The granola-crunchy county government in Boulder County, Colo., this year enforced a ban on ATVs, shuttering Jeff and Vicki Mead's off-road rental business. In revenge, they plan to reopen it as a pornography retailer.

"Clearly we're the subject of abuse in this county," Jeff Mead said.