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Lawsuit seeks scientific and public review of stealth effort to significantly expand off-road vehicle use on Colville National Forest

SPOKANE—Conservation groups [sued the U.S. Forest Service](#) today for dramatically expanding off-road or all-terrain vehicle (ATV) use in northeast Washington without proper public input or required consideration for fish, wildlife and sensitive habitats.

“We support legal, responsible ATV use on the Colville National Forest and the opportunity for users to ride in appropriate areas and visit beautiful vistas,” said **Tiana Luke, Colville Forest Lead for Conservation Northwest**. “However, opening new motorized routes requires thorough public vetting and environmental review to avoid impacts on sensitive wildlife and habitat, consider other recreation values, and ensure enforcement and accountability for illegal behavior.”

Conservation Northwest has long been collaboratively engaged on [off-road vehicle use](#) and [other issues](#) on the Colville National Forest (the Forest).

Earlier this year, the Forest modified its [2020 Motor Vehicle Use Map](#) to change designations on 26 road segments totaling 117 miles to open to all vehicle types, including ATVs, without any formal process for public input or environmental scrutiny. The lawsuit filed today asks the U.S. District Court for Eastern Washington to invalidate the Forest Service’s decision.

“We would have preferred to address motorized vehicle use on the Forest through continued collaboration with other local stakeholders, but the Forest’s failure to incorporate sufficient public and environmental review leads us to challenge this decision in court,” said Luke.

Though the Forest’s proposal focuses on road usage, ATVs and other off-road motorized vehicles are designed, marketed, and sold for off-road use—it’s right in the name. Potential impacts from motorized users straying off-road must be considered by the agency. The designated routes newly opened to ATVs on the Colville National Forest cut through undeveloped lands, habitat supporting imperiled fish and wildlife, and other sensitive areas.

In addition to cutting out the public voice, the Forest Service’s decision failed to account for increased ATV use, impacts to other forest users and inhabitants, and the high likelihood that some ATV operators will illegally ride off-road into sensitive habitat and cause significant damage. The Forest has a long history of [significant ATV abuse](#) that [persists](#) today.

“The Colville National Forest completely side-stepped its duty to protect fish and wildlife, or involve the public in any meaningful way,” says **Adam Rissien, ReWilding Advocate at WildEarth Guardians**. “The result will be more noise, dust and damage in areas that make the Colville National Forest so amazing.”

Located between the North Cascades and the Rocky Mountains, the Forest contains the Kettle River and Selkirk mountain ranges, which provide habitat for a broad diversity of fish and wildlife, including Canada lynx, grizzly bear, elk, moose, mule deer, bighorn sheep, bull trout, western yellow-bellied cuckoo, and dozens of other species. Its vast tracts of wildland provide all kinds of recreation opportunities for hunters, anglers, hikers, mountain bikers and others.

Increased and especially under-regulated ATV use can disturb and displace wildlife and degrade habitat values as well as the outdoor experiences of other recreationists. Riding off-road causes soil compaction, stream bed and wetland degradation, and destruction of fish and wildlife habitat. Meadows, bogs, and other sensitive areas can take years to recover from just a few minutes of “mudding.”

The conservation groups are represented by Paul Kampmeier of Kampmeier & Knutsen PLLC and Marla Fox of WildEarth Guardians.

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