



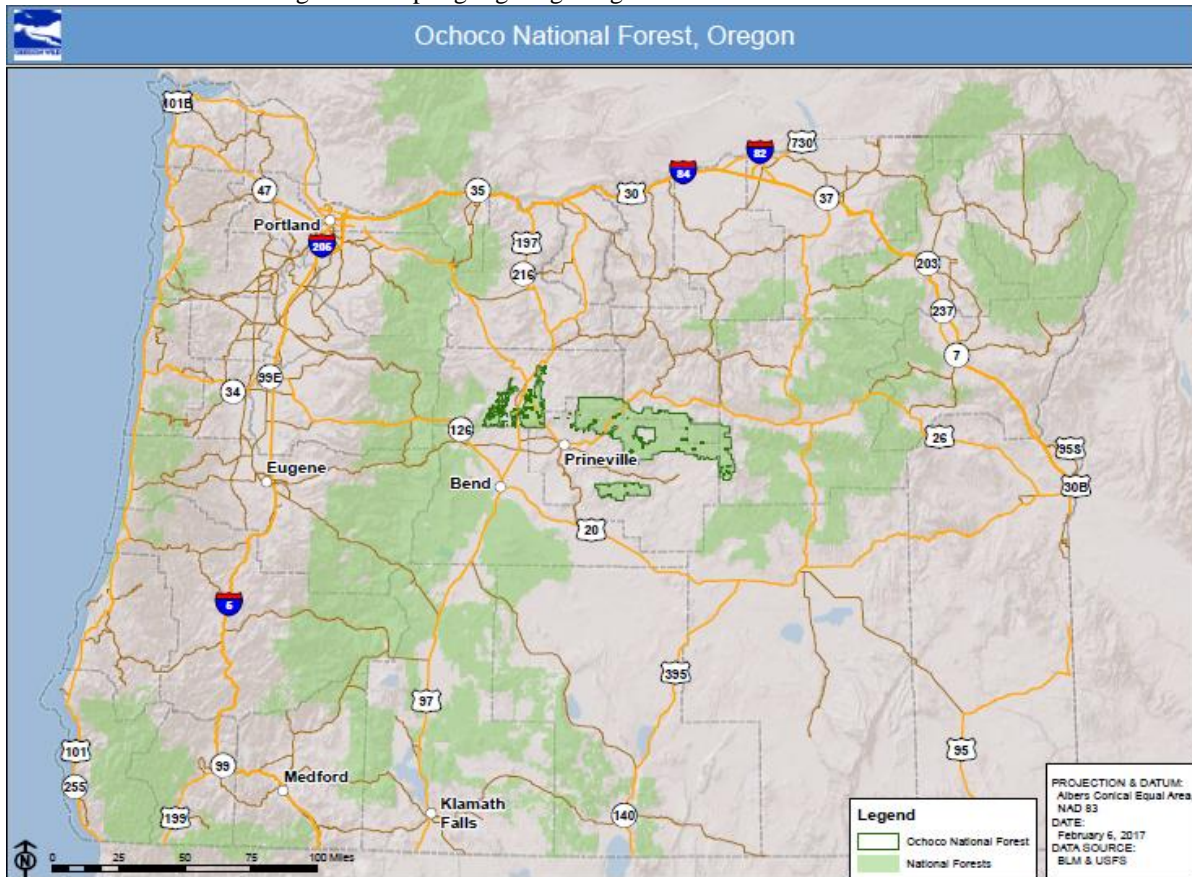
**OFF-HIGHWAY  
VEHICLES (OHV) AND  
THE OCHOCO NATIONAL  
FOREST  
VALUES AT RISK**



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Figure 1: Map highlighting Oregon's Ochoco National Forest.



# SUMMARY

Tucked away in a quiet pocket of central Oregon, the Ochoco National Forest has long been considered an undiscovered gem. Its landscape includes stands of towering old growth ponderosa pine, sparkling streams, and abundant wildlife habitat. Imagine sitting beneath one of these ancient swaying pines in the summer sun and taking in the ubiquitous forest sounds; chirping birds, the breeze blowing, babbling creeks. Unfortunately, the beauty and solitude that are some of the more unique attributes of this treasured place are threatened. This secluded mecca does not always have the calm and peaceful stillness of a distant wilderness, as the occasional yap of a motor will punctuate the forest sounds.

The US Forest Service has recently finalized a proposal that would designate a new Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) system through the Ochoco National Forest. Illegal off road use is prevalent across central Oregon. This new OHV trail system has been proposed as a way to decrease illegal trail abuses, based on the assumption that illegal activity is expected to decrease in the presence of an official trail system. However a further analysis of similar situations across the West, as well as local evidence, proves this assumption is unsubstantiated. A 135 mile OHV trail system will further spread the ecological impact across the forest adversely impacting fish, wildlife, and other recreational uses.

“Off-Highway Vehicles (OHV) and the Ochoco National Forest; Values at Risk” highlights the importance of the Ochoco Mountains and the ramification of motorized recreation that face this oasis in the high desert. This report explores the unique nature of the Ochoco Mountains, their value, and the problems they face with the proposed 135 miles of motorized trails known as the Ochoco Summit OHV Trails system.

# THE OCHOCO MOUNTAINS

Situated near the geographic center of Oregon, the Ochoco National Forest encompasses 845,498 acres. Picturesque landmarks such as Lookout Mountain, the North Fork Crooked River, Steins Pillar and more are scattered throughout this remote and scenic pocket of Oregon.

Over the last century much of the forest has been logged, with associated roads crisscrossing much of the forest. Despite this history, the Ochocos are still home to several intact roadless areas and core habitat. There are three congressionally-designated wilderness areas within the forest that total approximately 36,000 acres or 4.28% of the total forest. Black Canyon, Mill Creek and Bridge Creek Wilderness areas provide unparalleled wildlife habitat, free of roads and motorized activity that can fragment and stress wildlife.

The Ochoco Mountains serve as a wildlife corridor from the Blue Mountains to the Cascades, and are home to over 375 different species of animals and at least 28 different native plant communities. This area provides essential habitat for Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer, and redband trout. In addition, the forest hosts a number of sensitive species such as the peregrine falcon, Swainson's hawk, bald eagle, western sage grouse, greater sandhill crane, long-billed curlew, common loon, Malheur spotted sculpin, and wolverine.

The Ochoco National Forest is also home to the stunning Wild and Scenic North Fork Crooked River. The North Fork, its associated tributaries, and other creeks across the forest boast 15 species of game fish and numerous non-game species. A few of the creeks in the forest have anadromous steelhead spawning.

The predominant forest type across the landscape is dry ponderosa pine forestland with lush grassy understories. Pockets of open meadows and higher elevation mixed conifer forests are intermixed across the forest depending on the elevation. Lower elevations are vegetated with juniper, sagebrush, and grasses, while the higher elevation stands contain a mix of douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, white fir, and western larch.



# THE VALUES AT RISK: OHV USE AND ABUSE

Roadless and Wilderness areas provide high ecological and social values both locally and nationally. They support unfragmented areas of habitat and act as an essential refuge for wildlife across the landscape. They safeguard clean water supplies and provide access for more traditional modes of recreation. Unfortunately, protected Wilderness areas comprise only 4% of the Oregon landscape.

Intact healthy landscapes across the state are key to the long term survival of our native wildlife and provide outstanding recreational opportunities. Continued population growth and expanding urban growth boundaries have slowly encroached into forested lands that have historically served as habitat. As more subdivisions and commercial strips are pushed outwards, we further fragment and stress wildlife.

The management of OHV's is becoming increasingly difficult as it conflicts with both wildlife and other recreational activities. OHV's have a disproportionate impact on the environment compared to other low impact forms of recreation as they are able to cover significantly more ground per day than a hiker, equestrian, or mountain biker.

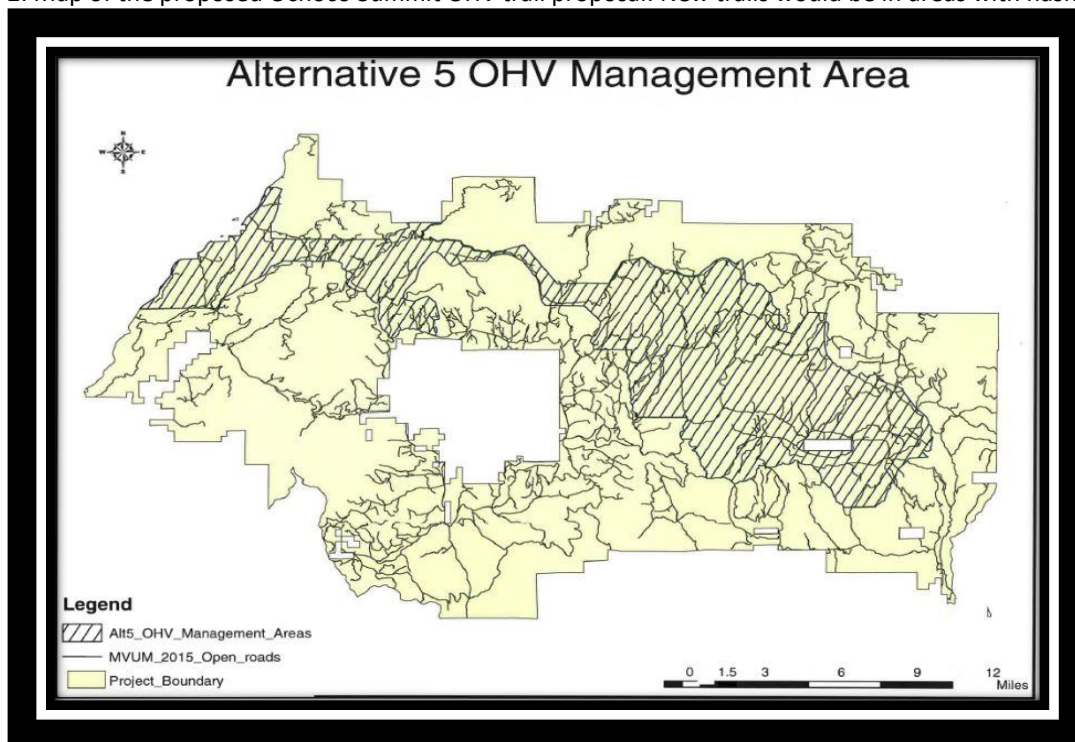
Recent technological advancements have enabled OHVs to access more remote tracts of forests. This increase in technology has resulted in more motorized activity in wildlife habitat and sensitive ecosystems. The ecological impacts of OHV use includes soil erosion and increased sedimentation in streams, cultural site damages, watershed and wildlife habitat destruction, safety issues such as vandalism and private property trespassing, and more.

Not only has OHV use increased the impact across the landscape, but it has also increased conflicts between motorized and nonmotorized users.

# OFF ROAD VEHICLES IN THE OCHOCO NATIONAL FOREST

The Forest Service has proposed the “Ochoco Summit Trails” project that consists of 135 miles of new Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) trails. With a project area of over 300,000 acres in the heart of the Ochoco Mountains, this proposal has generated an unprecedented amount of diverse opposition from across the state. Local citizens, equestrians, hunting groups, state agencies and conservation groups are working together in opposition, citing numerous violations of environmental and administrative laws and regulations.

Figure 2: Map of the proposed Ochoco Summit OHV trail proposal. New trails would be in areas with hashed lines



The Ochoco Mountains have experienced rampant illegal ‘user-created’ trails across the forest in recent years, with the Forest Service finding nearly 700 illegal trail miles within the project area itself (SFEIS, 79). Based on the false assumption that a designated trail system will decrease illegal trails and the associated ecological impact, the Forest Service has stated that the proposed action to designate 135 miles of trails has the least amount of environmental impact. The proposed motorized trails include 79 stream crossings, bisects miles of old growth ponderosa pine forests, and cuts through important Rocky Mountain elk calving grounds. The Ochoco Summit OHV trail system is intended to decrease illegal ‘user-created’ motorized trails across the forest. Based on the track record of other trail systems in Oregon and throughout the west the opposite is likely to occur; further impacting fish, wildlife and recreation.

There are over 700 miles of illegal OHV trails within a 300,000 acre project area. For reference you can drive from Prineville to Portland, down to Medford, over to Klamath Falls and back to Bend and clock 700 miles on your odometer. Below is a sample map of 700 miles of Oregon roads. The same mileage of illegal trails exist within a small piece of the Ochoco National Forest, yet this proposal adds an additional 135 OHV miles in an already densely roaded area.

Figure 3: Sample map of 700 miles of roads in Oregon shown next to project area where 700 illegal OHV trails exist.



*The route in red on the map shows just how far a hypothetical 700 miles is.*

The Forest Service has insufficient data to support the claim that providing an OHV trail system will change illegal behavior. The evidence they have to support their assumption is based on references to field notes from local patrols. To date, these field notes have not been supplied to the public and are at best anecdotal. Designated OHV trail systems across the state may have a higher compliance rate with other regulations, such as permits, or wearing helmets, but there is little evidence to support the claim that it generates compliance with staying on regulated trails. A significant number of OHV riders have a proven predilection to travel cross-country and ride off of legal routes, with no local evidence to support claims to the contrary, the user-created trails that plague the Ochoco National Forest will continue regardless of the presence of a designated trail system. Enforcement is the missing ingredient needing more resources and attention.





Figure 5: Motorized tracks leaving the Millican OHV trail system and entering the Badlands Wilderness area



Figure 6: Illegal OHV trail on the Crooked River National Grasslands, adjacent to the Henderson Flat OHV area.



Figure 7: Illegal OHV trail on the Crooked River National Grasslands, adjacent to the Henderson Flat OHV area.



Figure 8: Illegal OHV trail on the Crooked River National Grasslands, adjacent to the Henderson Flat OHV area.



The Forest Service believes that barring access with either signage or physical barriers would effectively limit illegal trails and thus offset the development of new designated trails (SFEIS, 343). However, much of the proposed project area on the Ochoco National Forest is open scablands and prairies, which are very difficult, if not impossible, to effectively physically block access to. Photos below document such illegal activity within the proposal area on open prairies and scablands. Despite roads being technically closed on paper, easy access remains in the prairies and scablands if the rider so chooses.

Figure 9: OHV tracks mowing down balsamroot wildflowers near Indian Creek in the Ochoco National Forest.



Figure 10: Illegal OHV tracks on Lookout Mountain in the Ochoco National Forest



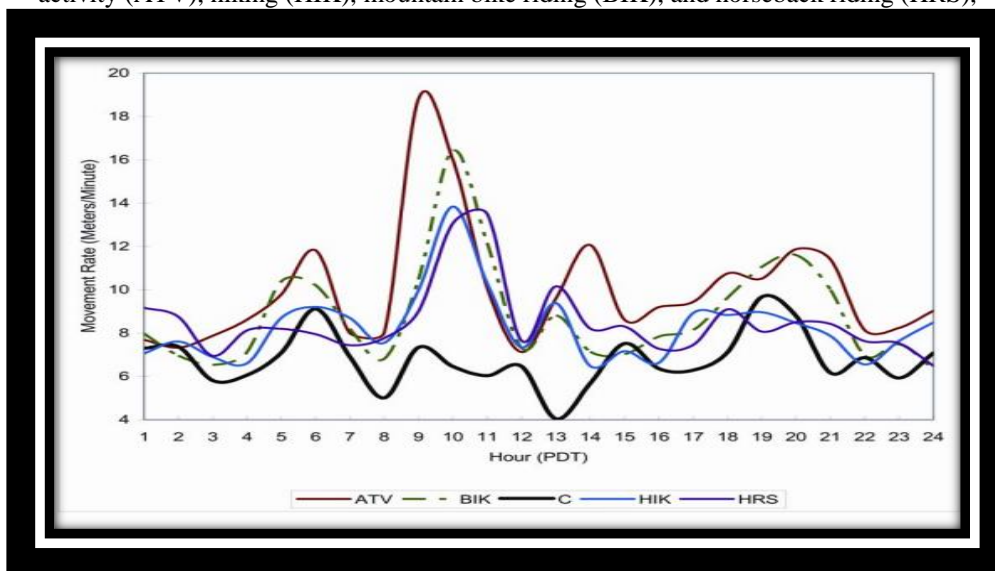
# IMPERILED PLANTS AND ANIMALS

The physical and ecological impacts of OHV trails cause damage to streams, riparian areas, fish, wildlife and other natural resources. The 375 species of animals, 28 different native plant communities, and much more are imperiled by off road motorized activity. The Ochoco Summit OHV proposal includes four Forest Plan Amendments to allow motorized trails through Old Growth Management Areas and one Forest Plan Amendment to build in Scabland Forest (SFEIS, p. 438-39). These designated areas were intended to be protected from most motorized disturbance. In addition, there are 79 stream crossings within the proposal, many of which cross through sensitive redband trout habitat (SFEIS, xiv).

[The Starkey Experimental Forest](#) in Northeastern Oregon is a research area managed by both the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) and the Forest Service. Researchers from the Starkey Experimental Forest studied the effects of motorized activity on elk and mule deer and determined that motorized off-road vehicle activities cause significant disturbance and stress.

*“Movement rates and probabilities of flight response for elk were substantially higher during all four off-road activities compared to control periods of no human activity. Consequently, off-road recreational activities like those evaluated in our study appear to have a substantial effect on elk behavior.” (Wisdom, 6)*

Figure 11: Graph showing mean movement of elk during periods of no human activity (C) periods of ATV activity (ATV), hiking (HIK), mountain bike riding (BIK), and horseback riding (HRS),



Source: (Wisdom, 6)

As shown above, the noise associated with motorized recreation is known to cause dispersal of animals such as Rocky Mountain elk. Depending on the season, these dispersal behaviors can impact the reproductive process and place them under additional and unnecessary stress.



# A NATIONAL PROBLEM

OHV management issues are not just a problem for the Ochoco National Forest, in fact forests across the west are dealing with the ramifications of illegal motorized trails. In one survey conducted across many western states, over 91% of Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service rangers agreed that off road vehicles present “a significant law enforcement problem” in their jurisdiction (Rangers for Responsible Recreation, 1).

Several studies from around the West indicate that illegal OHV trail use does not decrease in the presence of a designated system. In 2002, a Utah report was published that surveyed 50,676 OHV users. Their survey showed that 49.4% of ATV riders surveyed prefer to ride off established trails, and 39% of those users rode off trail on their most recent trip. This same survey found that 38.1% of motorized dirt bike riders prefer to ride off established trails, and 50% rode off established trails on their most recent trip (Fisher, 20). In 2006, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks surveyed 446 OHV users and found 23% of respondents said that they “always or sometimes” ride cross-country even though off route riding is against the rules. Over 28% “sometimes or never” avoid riparian areas and wetlands (Lewis and Paige, 2).

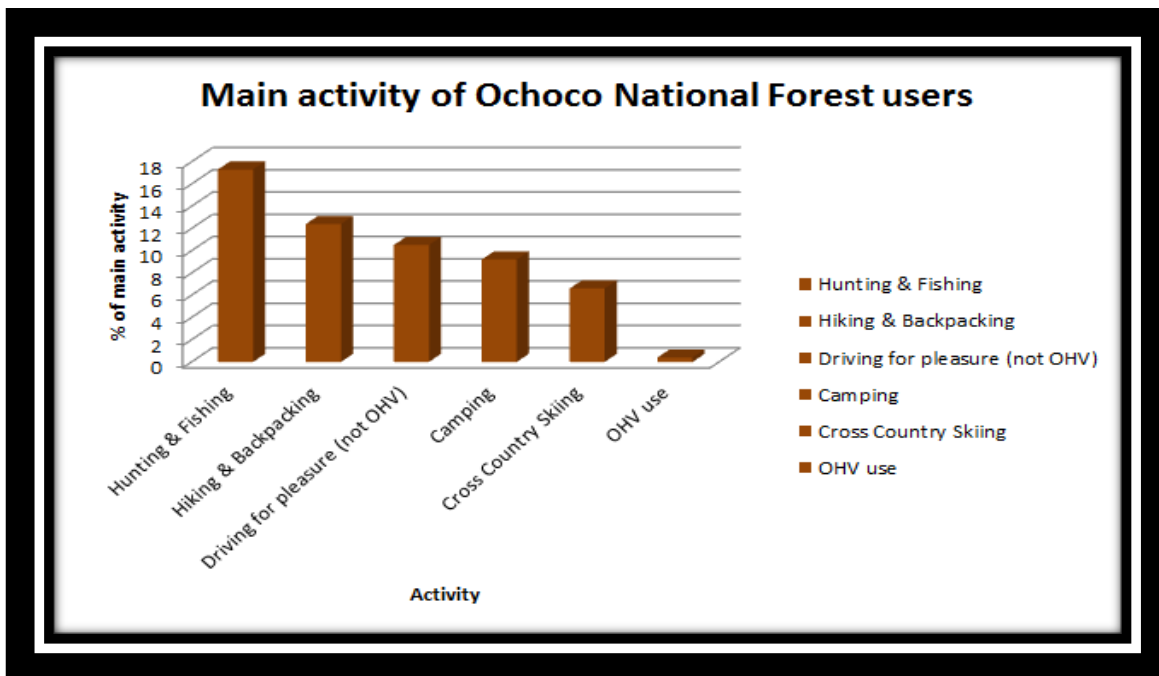
*“Many public land managers assume that designating additional off-road vehicle routes will lead directly to greater compliance, less cross-country travel and, as a result, less resource damage and fewer conflicts among incompatible uses. Some believe that off-road vehicle riders will quit creating renegade routes once more routes are designated “open” and riders are educated as to where they are and are not allowed to ride... The findings of these studies suggest that even if the “demand” for more off-road vehicle riding opportunities is met, riders will continue to fulfill their preferences by riding off legal routes” (Kiely and Kassar, 3).*

# A PATH FORWARD FOR THE OCHOCO MOUNTAINS

The assumption that the Ochoco National Forest must provide additional opportunities for OHV riders is unsupported by the detailed estimates of OHV use on the forest. Figure 12 below demonstrates that OHV users represent a very small percentage of the recreational users on the Ochoco National Forest.

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) program provides a detailed analysis of the volume and characteristics of recreational users of the National Forest System. According to their survey, OHV use represents less than 1% of the user activity on the Ochoco National Forest, whereas hiking, hunting and fishing and camping account for over 25% of the main activity (USFS. NVUM). While small in numbers, their impacts on streams (water quality/erosion) and wildlife (disturbance) are disproportionately larger.

Figure 12: Percent of main user activity on the Ochoco National Forest: Data Collected FY 2013



Source: (USFS. NVUM)

Motorized roads and trails in central Oregon well exceed 10,000 miles. It was recognized as “one of the most extensive networks of roads and trails in the state, if not the nation” by the Forest Service (USFS, *Traveling in Central Oregon National Forests and Grassland*). OHV users represent a small user group and have an arguably disproportionate amount of access compared to other recreation users. The largest unmet demand in trail-based recreation in central Oregon is for hiking, biking, backpacking, horseback riding and walking/running. OHV use is not listed among the priority needs. (OPRD, table 3.10)

*Locally, as well as regionally and nationally, unmanaged OHV use on federal lands has resulted in unplanned roads and trails, soil erosion, watershed and wildlife habitat damage, impacts to cultural sites, safety concerns, trespass and vandalism on adjacent private land and increased conflict between motorized and non-motorized recreational experiences (SFEIS, 1).*

Adding more OHV access to central Oregon’s National Forest landscape will only exacerbate the current negative impacts to wildlife and water quality. The proposed Summit OHV Trails project would not reduce the current problem of illegal OHV trails in the region. Additional law enforcement presence, citations and higher fines are more likely to be effective in solving this problem. It would be more equitable to place more emphasis on recreational development for the majority of low impact users, and not for a minority user group that produces the highest ecological impact.

Local evidence and studies from across the west indicate that designated OHV trail systems do not translate to a decrease in illegal trails activity. By implementing the Ochoco Summit Trails system, illegal trails will continue to negatively impact the landscape, and the character of the Ochocos National Forest will be irrevocably changed with permanent impact to fish, wildlife, and other recreational users.

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# PHOTOS

**Cover Photo: Ponderosa Pines by Jim Davis**

**Summary Page: Sundown in the Ochocos by Andrew Newcomb**

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