

Debate continues over off-road vehicle use

Growth of motorized recreation spurs funding questions

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FRISCO — Depending on who's talking, off-road vehicle use in Colorado is either part of a multi-use utopia on public lands, or a looming disaster for wildlife and other natural resources.

The Colorado State Parks board will try to sort through divergent testimony offered Friday at a hearing in Frisco as it tries to decide whether to revamp the way it allocates funds from off-highway vehicle registrations.

A coalition of conservation and outdoor user groups wants to earmark specific portions of the \$3.2 million pot for restoration and law enforcement, but some regional public land administrators, along with representatives of motorized groups, advocated the status quo.

According to Glen Graham, president of the Colorado Off-Highway Vehicle coalition, the entire discussion is framed by "a subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle bias" against motorized users.

"There are problems and issues that need to be addressed. But the reality is not as bad as the perception," he said. Broad-based, sweeping allegations against motorized users are unfounded, he added.

Nearly everyone at the hearing agreed the majority of off-road users are responsible citizens who follow the rules. The problem is a small percentage of renegade riders who willfully create illegal trails.

San Miguel County Commissioner Pete McKay acknowledged the economic importance of off-roading in his county, but asked the board to redirect some of the funds to help restore fragile alpine tundra that's been damaged by illegal off-road use.

McKay said a locally funded ranger and outreach program has helped reduce violations. More state funding for similar efforts could pay off statewide, he said.

Speaking on behalf of Colorado Trout Unlimited, Dave Peterson said enforcement and restoration efforts haven't come close to keeping pace with the growth in off-road use in recent years. As a result, hunters and anglers have taken a big hit from motorized impacts, he said.

"We are getting lost in the shuffle. We're not trying to take anything away from anyone. We're just trying to protect our piece of the pie ... There are legions of studies showing the impacts of motorized use," he said. Directing some of the off-highway vehicle funds toward enforcement and restoration would help ensure motorized users pay their fair share of managing public resources, he said.

Economic driver

Regional U.S. Forest Service recreation director Steve Sherwood emphasized the importance of motorized recreation as an economic driver in Colorado's outdoor recreation industry, and warned against demonizing motorized users.

"We are truly moving toward sustainable motorized recreation use," Sherwood said, outlining Forest Service planning efforts to manage trail use. "Locking in the funds would reduce the resources for maintenance. Trails would deteriorate and some would even have to be closed."

Sherwood said he supports funding for enforcement and restoration projects, but said the board should retain the flexibility to award grants based on specific needs in local areas.

Other regional Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management officials presented similar testimony illustrating

the success of collaborative management efforts.

But a recently retired Colorado Division of Wildlife official said the situation on the ground is quite different from the images in glossy Forest Service brochures.

The growth of motorized use has outstripped the ability of land managers to keep pace, said Rob Firth, formerly the chief law enforcement official with the state wildlife agency. In reality, illegal trail systems continue to expand in some areas, Firth said, making the case for more enforcement and restoration funding.

The off-highway funds are distributed under a complex points system, with each grant proposal being evaluated on a variety of criteria. Critics of the current system said it favors proposals for building and maintaining trails over funding for enforcement and restoration projects.

The U.S. Forest Service in Boulder, for example, was denied funding for a restoration project because it didn't meet the points criteria. The proposal didn't include trail building or maintenance, so the review committee turned down the project, according to Aaron Clark, recreation director with the Southern Rockies Conservation Alliance.

The state parks board didn't make a decision Friday, but asked for more information, including statistics on violations of off-road rules.

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