

California Native Plant Society

Off-Road Vehicle Sign Policy

Adopted September 10, 2005 by CNPS Chapter Council

Policy Statement:

The California Native Plant Society supports the land management option of designating areas and routes as “closed to ORV use unless designated and signed open”, which mandates that only areas and routes that are both signed as open and designated as open on agency maps are available for off-road vehicle (ORV) use; all other lands and potential routes are unequivocally closed to ORV use.

Background

CNPS recognizes that off road/highway vehicle use is a popular and legally permitted use on certain areas of California public lands, including lands owned by federal, state, and local governments. However, on many public lands inadequate law enforcement, insufficient signage, absence of maps, and conflicting or unclear rules facilitate trespass, often unintentional, into prohibited areas and consequent damage to sensitive areas and species.

CNPS uses many of our existing policies to advocate for the protection of sensitive plant resources in the road designation process.

Several land management agencies (Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, etc.) are currently embarking on road designation processes, which evaluate the effects of routes on rare plants, plant communities and other resources. The efficacy of such road designations is largely dependent on



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keeping vehicular recreation limited to the designated routes, in particular by the use of consistent signs stating where ORV use is allowed.

Two basic approaches to route designation are used by land management agencies: "Closed unless signed open" and "Open unless signed closed". CNPS considers the "Closed unless signed open" management option to be the more effective and less costly method of keeping vehicles on designated routes.

Allowing vehicles only on trails identified as "open" can minimize the common and costly problem of having closure signs removed or vandalized. When a trail is designated closed unless there is an official sign opening it, the incentive to remove or damage signs, effectively opening an area to vehicular use, is removed. This has the benefit of reducing demands on law enforcement, reducing replacement and maintenance costs, and eliminating visual impacts of extensive signage on public lands. Consistent use of this management option throughout the state would eliminate confusion regarding areas where off-road use is permitted.

While the CNPS recognizes that sign vandalism and disappearance can occur to any type of designation sign, we support the conservative approach that relies upon route designation, accurate maps and consistent signs stating where ORV use is allowed. This approach minimizes potential impacts to native plants and habitats and ensures that the outcome of the route designation process is not compromised in instances where signs disappear and need to be re-installed. Any other approach allows for native plants and habitats to potentially be impacted until signs are re-installed.

ORV Impacts on Native Plants

ORV's impact native plants and habitats in a number of ways:

- Cause significant soil erosion, sedimentation of streams (which destroys critical habitat for other rare species) and damage to fragile ecosystems.

- Spread invasive weeds that out-compete native plants, alter natural habitat and cause harm to farmers and ranchers. One dirt bike or ORV can spread 2,000 invasive plant seeds over a 10-mile radius (Wilshire et al. 1978)
- Spread certain plant-focused pathogens such as Port Orford Cedar root disease (*Phytophthora lateralis*) and sudden oak death by dispersing spores on tires and through runoff into riparian systems off of routes and trails. These organisms can cause serious ecological harm to our State's native plant resources.
- Directly damage plants, trees and animals. More than one-quarter of saplings run over by a snowmobile just once will likely die as a result (Neumann and Merriam 1972).
- Generate emissions containing toxic chemicals, including benzene and methyl tertiary butyl ether (MTBE), that pollute the air and water, and injure or kill plants, animals, fish and microscopic aquatic life. Most off-road vehicles use inefficient two-stroke engines that burn a combination of oil and gas. These engines emit 25% - 30% of the oil-gas mixture back into the environment (US EPA 1991)

Goal/Purpose

A “closed to ORV use unless designated and signed open” policy allows CNPS chapters/members to advocate an effective, easily implementable, economical, and enforceable land management option for keeping vehicles on designated routes and minimizing impacts to native plants from ORV recreation.

This signage policy reduces confusion and makes it easier for riders to avoid damaging protected areas and the native plant species they contain. It also makes it easier for other users of public lands to continue to enjoy California’s native plants and natural communities while avoiding the dangers, ecological damage, noise, and dust associated with ORV use.

Guidelines/Recommendations:

The Off-Road Vehicle Sign Policy is a simple position statement that chapters/members can use as part of a comprehensive strategy to minimize conflicts between native plants and ORV recreation. This policy can be used in scoping comments, comments on environmental documents, and as part of

protest comments. This policy can be used at the federal, state or local jurisdictional level.

Standards

In this case, minimum standards are not necessary. The Off-Road Vehicle Sign Policy is simply an advocacy tool, based on conservation of resources – not only protecting native plants and plant communities, but agencies' educational and enforcement resources.

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