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Off-road vehicle group aims to restore access to thousands of acres of land

Joe Baird The Salt Lake Tribune

An off-road vehicle advocacy group is appealing a court decision that has closed off thousands of acres in Box Elder and Grand counties to off-highway-vehicle use. The **Utah Shared Access Alliance** (USA-All), a coalition of OHV organizations, argues that the Bureau of Land Management closed about 250,000 acres in Grand County and 189,000 acres in Box Elder County without conducting any environmental analysis or allowing public comment.

The BLM, the Shared Access Alliance suit says, failed to perform required analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and ignored public comment requirements.

"NEPA regulations clearly require environmental analysis in the absence of any emergency," Mike Swenson, USA-All's executive director, said in a statement. "With more and more restrictions and road closings, agencies need to study and know what the effects of increasing restrictions and displacement of motorized users will be."

However, in his December decision, U.S. District Judge Bruce Jenkins ruled that the BLM took the required "hard look" at the environmental impacts on the 250,000 acres around Moab and the 189,000 acres in and around the Grouse Creek Mountains. "It only makes sense that the BLM shouldn't have to wait until the damage becomes irreparable to take the steps necessary to protect the environment, and that's what the judge did here," said Steve Bloch, an attorney with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

USA-All last month succeeded in reversing OHV restrictions in the Uinta National Forest because the U.S. Forest Service acted without imposing "site-specific" closures as part of a broad forest revision plan. But officials say they will continue to close certain routes because of OHV damage.

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