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SUNDAY, July 22, 2007

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Salt Lake Tribune, The (UT)

Date: December 18, 2006

Section: Local

Emery officials join OHV worriers

Joe Baird The Salt Lake Tribune

Emery County has an off-highway vehicle problem. Federal agencies have said so. Environmental groups have, too. Now, the county itself has joined the chorus.

In what might mark a first in rural Utah, a group of Emery County officials - collectively the county's public lands council - has issued a statement expressing alarm at how growing OHV activity, both legal and illegal, is negatively "impacting the county's resources and other users."

The statement, which appeared Dec. 5 in the Emery County Progress, also says the county's patience is wearing thin, citing impacts ranging from trampled grazing fences to deeply rutted dirt roads and the creation of new, illegal trails. It calls for stiffer fines and penalties for violators, and increased funding from state and federal agencies to help beef up enforcement.

"It's not a new problem, but we're getting increased use all the time, especially from folks outside the area," says Ray Peterson, the county's public lands director and council chair. "With the increased moisture we got this fall during the hunting season, and the heavier and heavier use we're seeing in the summer, especially on the big holiday weekends, it has become real apparent there is a problem."

Certainly, the growing popularity of motorized recreation in Utah has played a role. Off-highway vehicle registrations have tripled since 1998 to over 200,000, putting increased pressure on the backcountry. As those numbers have expanded, so, correspondingly, have the number of scofflaws who ignore the rules.

Emery County also has become an increasingly popular destination for OHV enthusiasts, thanks to a diversity of terrain that includes the rugged desert canyons of the San Rafael Swell and the dense forests on the Wasatch Plateau.

But Emery County officials hasten to add that this isn't simply a problem of too many all-terrain vehicles, rock crawlers and dirt bikes on the trails. Energy exploration and development, and the large trucks and other equipment that accompany it, also have contributed to the problem.

Add it all up, Peterson says, and the county is faced with a serious management challenge. In that sense, he hopes the public lands council statement serves as a wake-up call.

"Our [county] general plan from the mid-'90s states that we desire adequate access on to the public lands. But that didn't mean unlimited access," he says. "This is an issue we have to address."

Environmental groups have lauded the county's approach, calling it a hopeful sign.

"They're breaking trail here, no pun intended, and I think it will have positive results," says Heidi McIntosh, conservation director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. "Other counties can't help but look at this as a good example to follow. They're all dealing with the same issues."

The county's proclamation also is getting support, if qualified, from OHV groups.

"Anytime a county or local agency recognizes that there's an issue that needs to be managed, we're generally in agreement," says Mike Swenson, executive director of the **Utah Shared Access Alliance**. "We support enforcement and reining in the few bad apples that are creating the problem. But we would also oppose solutions that are so restrictive that they impact other users."

Emery County is walking a fine line with its approach. It doesn't want to discourage lawful OHV use, because off-road enthusiasts pump vital dollars into the local economy. And the county has a huge economic stake in the ongoing search for natural gas and coalbed methane.

There also is some irony here. The county has joined the state in filing suit against the Bureau of Land Management over road closures it has imposed in the San Rafael Swell - closures the BLM imposed because of environmental impacts on the area.

But after a summer in which the Forest Service's Ferron Ranger District was overrun on the Memorial Day and Fourth of July weekends - "We have four-wheelers everywhere," Ranger Mesia Nyman told the council - and the muck created by the wet hunt, council members decided they had to act.

Concluding that the standard \$50 fines are of "no real consequence" to those who typically spend much more to travel to the area and fuel their OHVs, the council says much stiffer penalties - fines of hundreds, or even thousands of dollars - will be necessary "to deter unacceptable, unlawful behavior."

County officials also are encouraging expanded education efforts, and seek more money to hire more enforcement staff.

Peterson acknowledges that Emery County's proactive approach to the OHV issue may rub some the wrong way. He shrugs it off.

"We know there are counties that have really disagreed with what we've done, but that's all right. We've tried to stay on top of this and make wise decisions. And we've been pretty consistent in our position, though we haven't always communicated it as well as we could have," Peterson says.

"We want to see resource development. We welcome [OHV] users. But that doesn't mean we want unrestricted use."

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