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## Global warming concerns may tighten OHV rules

**Senator tells BLM, USFS to explain how off-road activities regulated**

By Steve Tetreault  
 Stephens Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Here's another impact of climate change.

Prolonged drought coupled with the growing use of public lands by offroaders means that soil erosion and dust pollution will only grow worse to threaten water supplies in the West, a federal expert said Thursday.

Trail use by dirt bikers and drivers of all-terrain vehicles "is having a much more profound impact than it did 10 years ago, and with future conditions predicted it is going to be worse," research ecologist Jayne Belnap told the Senate Natural Resources Committee at a hearing.

"We have drought and we are predicted for drought for the next 30 years. We have to really think ahead about something that might not have been such a problem 10 years ago," said Belnap, who works for the U.S. Geological Survey.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, the committee chairman, called on leaders of the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service to explain how federal lands are being managed where it comes to off-roaders, a population estimated to have quadrupled in the past 25 years.

"It appears questionable to me whether either the BLM or the Forest Service has been able to keep up with the challenge of properly managing this use," said Bingaman, D-N.M.

"In some cases it appears laws are not being enforced while in others it appears the agencies are ignoring unregulated use of public lands with significant consequences for the health of public lands and communities," Bingaman said.

The BLM is mapping and designating proper trails for off-road use in districts across the West but it will take another 10 years to finish the job, agency deputy director Henri Bisson said.

"It is a very long time but we are doing the best we can with the resources we have," Bisson said. "We are going as fast as we can.

"We are moving to a place where 99 percent of lands are designated so people know where they can travel," Bisson said.

"Ten years is a long time and I would like the schedule to be moved forward," Belnap said after being asked by Bingaman to weigh in on the matter.

Off-road vehicles "do increase soil erosion and this can compromise air and water quality which is a major issue especially in the West, Belnap said.



Further, dust accelerates snowpack melt, and reduces the delivery of late season water into rivers and streams.

"The dust issue really is going to be a major, major issue," Belnap said. "We are going to have profound impacts on water delivery."

"Just the presence of the roads themselves produce dust, you don't have to drive on them," she said. "But when they are driven on, we literally see many billions of pounds of dust a year coming off these trails."

"People can be responsible users and and still be doing some severe impacts," Belnap said.

Frank Adams of Mesquite, executive director of the Nevada Sheriffs' and Chiefs' Association, testified that local law enforcers are overwhelmed by needs created by off-roaders, particularly in large rural counties.

"With such great land masses and so few enforcement officers, it does not take a large group of individuals disobeying federal land and local laws to cause a problem," he said.

The problems are created only by small numbers of riders who are reckless and ignore instructions to stay off sensitive lands.

"We have seen pristine areas disturbed by (off highway vehicle) riders for the thrill of an exciting ride," Adams said.

Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, cautioned against restricting public land access to offroaders, of which only a minority could be considered bad apples.

"We have those lands also for the purpose of recreating on them and enjoying them, not just to view them from afar as if they were a museum piece to be constantly coddled and protected," Craig said.

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