

HOW TO WRITE TO THE FOREST SERVICE (OR BLM, PARK SERVICE, OR OTHER PUBLIC LANDS AGENCY) IN A WAY THAT MAKES THEM PAY ATTENTION

Note: this was written for Forest Service Travel Management Plans, but most of the tips will fit other projects

The BIG PICTURE. All federal agency actions that might affect the environment are regulated by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). However, NEPA doesn't **stop** the government from doing things that damage the environment. NEPA's purpose is to ensure that the environmental effects of any action will at least be analyzed and acknowledged, and minimized if possible. NEPA also is supposed to make sure the government involves the public when gathering information and making a decision.

Therefore, while undergoing a NEPA-mandated process (like an Environmental Impact Statement for a Travel Management Plan), the Forest Service (FS) has to accept public comments. If any citizen submits a comment with relevant information or concerns, the FS has to respond directly to those concerns in their written analysis. So, in addition to making sure that the FS writes the best possible plan, submitting extensive comments can be used as a legal strategy. If the FS doesn't sufficiently address a legitimate concern in their report, then the person that wrote in about that concern has standing in court to appeal or sue the plan, and stop or change the project.

FORMAT FOR A GOOD LETTER

First, put your **name**, the **date**, how to **contact** you, and whether you wish to get on the Forest Service **mailing list** for updates on this project. Briefly explain who you are—a local resident, business owner, outfitter, visitor etc. If you have a relevant interest or area of expertise, like biology or recreation planning or a long experience of the land, note it. Note why you have an interest in the area covered by the project—do you just like to visit? Are you an adjacent property owner? Do you have a special use permit, or run a commercial activity in the area?

WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION IS CONSIDERED RELEVANT?

Relate your experiences and observations in the geographic area covered by the project (or in comparable areas if the information is relevant to the matter at hand):

User conflict. As a quiet user, where has your experience been disturbed by motorized vehicles, or evidence thereof?

Ecological damage. Have you noticed an ORV trail with repeated stream crossings? Trash consistently thrown into a creek section? A lot of noise near a bird nesting area? A meadow or wetland that should be fenced off because there are a bunch of tracks going through it? Have you seen ATVs scaring elk?

Safety issues. Is there a blind curve or a narrow section near a drop-off on a road? Are there fast-moving ORVs startling horses on a particular trail? Is a certain road or trail section about to drop off a cliff?

Illegal use. Are ATVs extending a trail past a "closed" sign? Are dirt bikes using a hiking-only trail? Will the FS have a hard time enforcing restrictions on a particular road or area? Why?

Social/economic. How has ORV use affected your town or lifestyle? What do you think the Forest Service should consider about the economy or culture of your area when they make planning decisions?

Observations about the agency's proposed or draft plan. According to your experience, are there some specific roads that should be closed or rerouted? Why? (Anything in the sections above is a good reason to list). Is the system enforceable? Does it include areas where a hiker can get away from the sound of roads?

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Do proposed roads go through critical habitat or other sensitive areas? Is the agency taking into account the increased numbers of ORVs that will go to a whole trail system if small access roads are added? (The NEPA process requires the FS to come up with a range of alternative plans in their draft analysis. However, one will almost always be designated the “preferred alternative.” Focus your observations for this section on that alternative).

Constructive suggestions. Do you have a good idea of how to fix any of the problems you listed? If ORVs are illegally using an area, would a fence or gate help? Where and what kind? Would a short reroute help iron out a dangerous spot in a road? Should an ORV route through a creek be limited to one creek crossing? It’s not necessary to suggest solutions, sometimes you will know a particular area better than the agency does, and can provide them with helpful information.

GENERAL TIPS:

- Location. Be as specific as you can. What road or trail were you on? Which part? What time of year or day?
- Circumstances of the event. Again, be specific. What did you see or experience? Include all details.
- Limit emotion. Public land managers can’t use them, and aren’t required to respond. Many don’t like getting emotional letters, because they aren’t practical and often feel like a personal attack.
- Put your anecdotes in context. If you are talking about dirt bikes riding in a creek, note if this is a major creek, holds perennial or seasonal flows, heavily damaged or relatively pristine, a popular hiking spot, a place where you often see raptors, or anything else that might be relevant. Any helpful remarks about the user history of the area can also be helpful--whether this has always been a hiking trail, used to be a cattle trail, was a favorite fishing spot twenty years ago, etc.
- Photos are helpful. It’s hard to argue with a photo. GPS coordinates to go with it are great, but not necessary—you just need a good description of where it was taken.

Conclusion. Thank them for their attention to your comments, and indicate if you can be contacted for further information, or if you would like to get more deeply involved, and how. Sign your name, and you’re done!

If you are willing, please send a copy of your comments to your local conservation group so they can keep track of what people are saying.

For the Ashley, Dixie, Glen Canyon and Manti-La Sal travel plans, this girl would also like a copy of your comments:

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