

## Technical Jeep-trail system proposed for Rim Butte area

By Dylan J. Darling / The Bulletin

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To learn more about the Rim Butte OHV Jeep Trails plan go online to [www.fs.fed.us/nepa/nepa\\_project\\_exp.php?project=39213](http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/nepa_project_exp.php?project=39213).

True to their name, the rugged routes the Deschutes National Forest is planning for the Rim Butte Off-Highway Vehicle Jeep Trails would require four-wheel drive and high clearance.

"These are very difficult trails that we are proposing," said Kevin Larkin, Bend-Fort Rock district ranger.

The district is close to finalizing plans for the off-highway vehicle trails, which wind through woods south of the Newberry National Volcanic Monument near Forest Road 22. The trail system would have more than 17 miles of trails in a series of loops, according to U.S. Forest Service documents. The plan also calls for two staging areas with 16 camping sites between them. The trails would be near but not connected to the East Fort Rock OHV Trail System.

Larkin said the trail system is planned to meet a demand for technical trails for four-wheel drive vehicles. The plan is up for objection into next month and if no objections arise, work could start next summer. Early this year, the Deschutes National Forest changed the rules for forest roads, creating a void for such trails by restricting where such vehicles could go.

Since then, the drivers of full-size four-wheel drives like Jeeps haven't had a place to challenge themselves and their rigs, said John Zigler, president of the Deschutes County 4-Wheelers. The Rim Butte trails will offer that and more.

"It is going to be all the way from easy to extreme," he said.

He said the trail system has been a long time coming.

Folks in the off-highway vehicle community have been working on this plan for about 15 years, said Randy Drake, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Four Wheel Drive Association.

The most technical of the trails will offer drivers the challenge of crawling their trucks over rocks and fallen trees.

“You are going to look at speeds of less than three miles per hour,” he said. “You are going to be able to walk faster than I can drive.”

The plans calls for 14 out of the more than 17 miles in the system to be technical. The trails will parallel existing roads so drivers may exit the trails early if they want.

In designing the trails, the ranger district considered a plan with 33 miles of trail, 11 of which would have been technical. But Larkin, the district ranger, opted for the smaller system with tighter loops. The trails in the alternate plan would have come within a half mile of 17 buttes, 15 of which have no roads or OHV trails on them. That would likely have resulted in more disturbance to wildlife and nonmotorized recreation, Larkin wrote in his decision.

While she was glad to see the ranger district chose the smaller trail system, Sarah Peters, legal and policy analyst for WildEarth Guardians, still questions the viability of the project. Peters works out of Eugene for the environmental advocacy organization and commented in earlier rounds of the trail system planning, so she is eligible to object to the project although she said she likely won't.

She said the project could exacerbate the larger problem of the Forest Service having trouble keeping up with the care on current trails.

“Adding more trails right now seems a little premature when they don't have enough money to maintain the trails they already have,” she said.

Zigler, leader of the Deschutes County 4-Wheelers, said his group is prepared to put in thousands of hours of volunteer work to build and mark the trails.

Larkin said grants, particularly funds from state gas taxes, will likely help cover the cost of building and maintaining the system.

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