

## **Affected Environment**

### **Background**

The Gila National Forest is the sixth largest forest in the United States and offers spectacular scenery ranging from high cool mountains with Aspen and Douglas fir to warm semi-arid lowlands with juniper, oak and cactus. It remains one of the more remote and least developed National Forests in the southwest. The administrative boundary encompasses 3,392,519 acres. Nearly 23% of the forest's land mass is included in congressionally designated wilderness and is managed for primitive, non-motorized use. These wilderness areas are the Gila Wilderness (559,688 acres), Blue Range Wilderness (29,099 acres), and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness (203,797 acres).

Developed Recreation is defined as recreation that requires facilities that result in concentrated use of an area (Forest Plan, p.297). The Gila National Forest currently hosts 27 campgrounds (2 for groups), 7 picnic sites (3 for groups), a public shooting range, an observation site, and 4 interpretive sites. Developed sites and areas receive most use during the summer and fall seasons and holidays, although several facilities, primarily on the south end of the forest, remain open and receive use year round.

Other prominent or special features on the Forest that contribute to its recreational resource diversity is a 230 mile segment of the Continental Divide Scenic Trail, the Catwalk Recreation Area and National Recreation Trail, and the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument (a National Park Service area surrounded by lands managed by the Gila National Forest). Two scenic byways also travel through the forest; the Trail of the Mountain Spirits traces a circuit in the southern half of the Forest, while the Geronimo Trail creates a longer loop encompassing the northern and eastern sections of the forest.

Dispersed recreation activities occur in general forest areas outside of designated sites or developed facilities, and are practiced by motorized and non-motorized users alike. Dispersed Recreation activities many times involve a combination of motorized and non-motorized activities, and occur throughout the year.

Non-motorized opportunities include hiking, backpacking, mountain climbing, mountain biking, horseback riding, dispersed camping, fishing, hunting, boating, and viewing nature. Visitors seeking these forms of recreational experiences often use the Forest's single-track trail system. There are 1,577 miles of trail opportunities on the Forest, with 59% of these trails located within wilderness areas. There are currently few prohibitions on motorized use of the single-track system in the general forest area; however, evidence of motorized use of single-track trails is limited. This could be because most single-track trails are designed and maintained for hikers or pack and saddle stock. Many public comments on the matter expressed a desire to authorize motorcycle use of certain trails throughout the forest. Other comments recommended closing all single-track trails to motorized travel.

Horse riding and packing are also popular forms of non-motorized recreation on the Forest. This type of use is primarily observed within wilderness areas and areas adjacent to communities. Backcountry equestrians visiting wilderness areas use vehicles and stock trailers to access trailheads and areas throughout the forest. It is common for some of these users to pull stock trailers for 3 to 5 hours in order to reach a trailhead. Many of these trips are multi-day

backcountry trips utilizing pack and saddle stock. Day-trip equestrians more often use trails in areas of the forest immediately adjacent to local communities.

Although the Gila is relatively dry, fishing and water based recreation opportunities can be found on approximately 1,770 miles of perennial creeks and rivers as well as on 3 engineered lakes: Quemado Lake (112 acres), Lake Roberts (68 acres) and Snow Lake (72 acres). Some of the more common sport fish found in these waters include rainbow and brown trout, large and small mouth bass as well as channel and flathead catfish. Many native fish are also found in the streams on the Gila, several of these, such as the Gila trout are considered threatened or endangered. None of the streams or rivers on the Gila National Forest is designated as Wild and Scenic.

Motorized opportunities involve the use of both highway legal and non-highway legal vehicles such as motorcycles, ATVs, and four-wheel drives of all varieties. Hunters and people who practice motorized recreation such as fuel wood gathering and motorized dispersed camping are specific user groups who benefit greatly from the Gila National Forest's network of nearly 4,600 miles of open maintenance level 2-5 roads, since all motorized vehicle types, including non-highway legal OHVs, are allowed on them. Other motorized recreation activities include driving for pleasure, ATV, UTV, and motorcycle riding on roads and trails, and gathering forest products such as fuelwood.

The Gila's road system inventory includes an additional 1,194 miles of roads that are classified as either closed or decommissioned. Hunters are user groups that specifically benefit from closed and decommissioned roads since they allow for easier cross-country access to more remote areas of the forest from the open road system for hunting and big-game retrieval. There are approximately 2,213 segments of these roads throughout the forest, with an average length of about .54 miles.

### **Issues Identified Through Outreach Efforts**

Extensive public outreach concerning the motorized travel system occurred prior to publication of the Proposed Action. Outreach efforts consisted of open house meetings, workshops, and face-to-face meetings. Over 2,000 public comments were generated by these outreach efforts. These comments contributed to the development of the Proposed Action which was published on September 11, 2009. The Forest received almost 16,000 letters and emails in response to the Proposed Action. The content of the letters and emails formed the basis of the alternatives and environmental analysis. Four significant issues emerged as a result of scoping. These issues concern: motorized routes, motorized big game retrieval, motorized dispersed camping, and motorized areas. This report includes analysis each of these issues in relation to the changes described in Alternatives C-G. This report will also analyze effects of the Alternatives on the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum, Visual Quality Objectives, and Roadless Areas.

### **Motorized Routes**

Motorized routes in the Gila National Forest include 4,607.3 miles of maintenance level 2-5 NFS roads, and 15.8 miles of NFS trails. Nearly all forest visitors, regardless of the purpose for their visit, use the motorized transportation system to reach their destination. Recreation activities many times involve a combination of motorized and non-motorized activities; therefore, making changes to the existing motorized transportation system by adding and/or removing roads and

motorized trails, has the potential to affect the diversity of recreation opportunities for both motorized and non-motorized uses of the forest.

Many non-motorized activities such as picnicking, hiking, viewing wildlife, biking, and fishing depend on motorized routes to access areas in which to perform these primary activities. These same non-motorized activities, however, are among the most susceptible to the detrimental impacts of noise, emissions, and use conflicts associated with the proliferation of motorized routes. Public responses to scoping emphasize this dilemma. Many comments expressed a desire to protect and enhance opportunities for quiet recreation, while others expressed a desire for continued motorized access to special places in which to perform non-motorized forms of recreation.

### **Motorized Dispersed Camping**

Motorized dispersed camping occurs in undeveloped areas, usually adjacent to roads, trails, and water areas. Though not identified among the Gila National Forest's geospatial inventory of features, there are numerous locations throughout the transportation system where motorized dispersed camping traditionally occurs (i.e., camping within direct proximity of a motorized vehicle). Such practice typically takes place where terrain is flat, and obstacles created by vegetation and rock features are sparse or few, allowing motorized vehicles to effectively exit the road system and park where they can have privacy. Many public comments regarding motorized dispersed camping emphasize the importance of this type of dispersed recreation opportunity. Many comments expressed support for the continuation of motorized dispersed camping, but were also critical of the idea of having motorized dispersed camping corridors because of the possibility of increasing resource damage within the corridors. Other comments expressed concern that the corridors were too restrictive and would limit motorized camping opportunities on the forest.

Currently on the Gila, 2,441,804.3 acres are open to motorized dispersed camping; however, evidence of motorized dispersed camping, such as fire rings and ground disturbance, is rarely seen beyond 300 feet from the adjacent road. Use of most motorized dispersed camping areas is consistent and predictable. Many areas are used on an annual basis by large family gatherings and hunting parties. Rarely are new dispersed camping areas created, and when they are, they are likely to only be used once because the "good" spot was already taken.

### **Motorized Big Game Retrieval**

Of the 69 Game Management Areas administered by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, 11 are located within the administrative boundary of the Gila National Forest. Motorized Big Game Retrieval (MBGR) involves the use of full-size vehicles, ATVs, and UTVs and occurs throughout the non-wilderness portions of the forest. Motorized vehicles are used primarily to retrieve elk and deer, although some responses to scoping also express the desire to allow motorized retrieval of bear, mountain lion, and pronghorn. There is a wide diversity of opinion concerning MBGR within the sporting community, as well as in the public at large. Many scoping respondents report that MBGR is essential to retrieving big game and protects against wanton waste, while others object to the noise and potential effects to adjacent hunters and recreationists. A separate issue for some respondents was the potential for the proliferation of

unauthorized routes arising from motorized big game retrieval. Other comments emphasized the importance of MBGR for elderly hunters or the mobility impaired.

There are currently no restrictions on motorized big game retrieval in areas outside of designated wilderness. Under the current Forest Plan, 2,441,804.3 acres are open to MBGR. The actual number of acres used annually, or the total number of miles traveled, for MBGR is quantitatively unknown; however, empirical knowledge coupled with game department harvest information, points to a limited and dispersed practice of MBGR on the forest.

### **Motorized Areas**

The Forest is currently open to motorized cross-country travel, except in wilderness areas and where specified closed within certain management areas. Since there are currently no restrictions on motorized use within this area, the whole 2,441,804.3 acres of land can be considered a motorized area. Cross-country travel occurs on many parts of the forest; however, cross-country travel is rarely the primary activity for visitors. Cross country travel is predominantly observed in combination with one or more recreation activity. Big game hunting, for example, often includes elements of non-motorized and motorized activities, and sometimes includes cross-country travel for the retrieval of downed game. Route finding or “trail blazing” occurs in some areas, but often this is done in relation to fuelwood gathering or pinon picking. In limited areas of the forest, cross-country travel for its own sake has been observed. In most instances this cross-country travel is for the purpose of connecting existing routes or to access points of interest.

In some places on the forest, motorized cross-country travel has been observed to lead to the proliferation of unauthorized routes. Some unauthorized routes have become established on remnant logging roads or other formerly managed roads that are no longer part of the NFS, but were never obliterated and remain on the landscape. Some routes have developed as a result of fuelwood harvest, while others have developed through recurring use. The unplanned nature of many of these unauthorized routes makes it difficult to manage the transportation system and sometimes leads to resource damage and user conflicts.

### **Recreation Opportunity Spectrum**

The Forest Plan provides goals for the recreation resource and requires a broad range of developed and dispersed recreation opportunities in balance with existing and future demand. For management and conceptual convenience, possible mixes or combinations of activities, settings, and probable experience opportunities have been arranged along a spectrum, or continuum. This continuum is called the recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS), and planning for recreation opportunities using the ROS is conducted as part of land and resource management planning. The ROS provides a framework for defining the types of outdoor recreation experience the public can expect in a certain area. A recreation opportunity inventory and assessment was conducted in 1980 for the Gila National Forest. This assessment, incorporated into the 1986 Forest Plan, identifies five ROS classes: primitive, semi-primitive, semi-primitive motorized, roaded natural, and rural. The ROS as inventoried in 1980, forms the base for objectives in the Forest Plan. Guidelines for changes in inventory acreage throughout the ROS classes are included in the Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines, p. 26.

- *Primitive* classification characterized by an essentially unmodified environment, where trails may be present but structures are rare, and where the probability of isolation from the sights and sounds of man is extremely high. Primitive classification includes 526,611 acres, or 16% of the forest.
- *Semi-Primitive* classification describes an area characterized by moderate opportunity for solitude in a predominately unmodified natural environment, with a moderate degree of trail maintenance. Semi-primitive classification includes 787,063 acres, or 24% of the forest.
- *Semi-Primitive Motorized* describes an area characterized by moderately dominant alterations by man, with strong evidence of primitive roads and/or trails. Semi-primitive motorized classification includes 240,940 acres, or 7% of the forest.
- *Roaded Natural* describes areas characterized by a predominantly natural environment with evidence of moderate permanent alternate resources and resource utilization. Evidence of the sights and sound of man is moderate, but in harmony with the general environment. Opportunities exist for both social interaction and moderate isolation from sights and sounds of man. Roaded natural classification includes 1,768,071 acres, or 53% of the forest.
- *Rural* classification describes areas in which the sights and sound of man are prevalent and the landscape has been considerably altered by the works of people. The rural classification includes 5,083 acres, or less than 1% of the forest.

For each Management Area identified in the Forest Plan, categories of ROS and inventoried acres for it are listed under management emphasis. The Forest Plan prescribes the following levels of acceptable change for each of these ROS classes:

- *Primitive* – no change
- *Semi-Primitive* – no change in wilderness; change of plus or minus 10% in other areas
- *Semi-Primitive Motorized* – change of plus or minus 10%
- *Roaded Natural* – change of plus or minus 10%
- *Rural* – no change

### **Visual Quality Objectives**

The Forest Plan provides goals for visual quality and implements the Visual Management System as described on page 26 of the Forest Plan. Visual quality objectives were derived from a system that utilized a combination of land type, land characteristics, viewing distance, and viewer significance to arrive at a relative value scale. Like the recreation opportunity spectrum, visual quality objectives were inventoried in 1980, and serve as a base by which to compare the effects of management activities. The Gila National Forest Plan identifies five visual quality objectives for management areas: preservation, retention, partial retention, modification, and

maximum modification. The following descriptions of these Visual Quality Objectives were taken from USDA Agriculture Handbook number 462, Volume 2.

- *Preservation:* Only ecological changes to visual qualities are allowed. Management activities, except for very low visual-impact recreation facilities are prohibited. This objective applies to Wilderness areas, primitive areas, and some unique management units. Approximately 25% of inventoried areas on the forest are in this classification.
- *Retention:* Activities may only repeat form, line, color, and texture which are frequently found in the characteristic landscape. Changes in their qualities of size, amount, intensity, direction, pattern, etc., should not be evident. Approximately 1% of inventoried areas on the forest are in this classification.
- *Partial Retention:* Activities must remain visually subordinate to the characteristic landscape. Associated visual impacts in form, line, color, and texture must be reduced as soon after project completion as possible. Approximately 19% of inventoried areas on the forest are in this classification.
- *Modification:* Activities may visually dominate the characteristic landscape. However, landform and vegetative alterations must borrow from naturally established form, line, color, and texture so as to blend in with the surrounding landscape character. Approximately 41% of inventoried areas on the forest are in this classification.
- *Maximum Modification:* Activities may dominate the characteristic landscape. They may not appear to borrow from naturally established form, line, color, or texture. Approximately 14% of inventoried areas on the forest are in this classification.

The Forest Plan prescribes the following levels of acceptable change for each of these visual quality objectives.

- *Preservation* – no change.
- *Retention* – plus or minus 2% in foreground; plus or minus 5% in middle ground and background.
- *Partial Retention* – Plus or minus 5% in foreground; plus or minus 10% in middle ground and background.
- *Modification* – Plus or minus ten percent in all areas.
- *Maximum Modification* – The Forest Plan does not discuss limits of acceptable change for maximum modification.

### **Inventoried Roadless Areas**

Inventoried Roadless Areas were authorized by the 2001 Special Areas; Roadless Area Conservation Final Rule, 36 CFR Part 294. An inventoried roadless area (IRA) is a large tract of land that has characteristics similar to wilderness, but is usually not as pristine as wilderness, and may include existing roads and motorized trails. The “inventoried” part of the name comes from the fact that all national forests conducted an inventory in the 1970s and 1980s to find lands that could potentially be recommended as wilderness. The characteristics that follow describe attributes that were considered when areas were inventoried for roadless area designation:

- Natural, being substantially free from the effect of modern civilization.
- Undeveloped, having little or no permanent improvements or human habitation.
- Outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation.
- Special features and values, or the potential to contribute to unique fish, wildlife and plant species and communities, outstanding landscape features, and significant cultural resource sites.
- Manageability, meaning the area is at least 5,000 acres in size.

Approximately 22% of the forest's land mass is located within inventoried roadless areas. Of the 4,619.5 miles of motorized routes (roads and trails) open to the public, 375.5 miles lie within these roadless areas. A few segments of county roads and state highways are also located within roadless areas; however, they are not included in this analysis. Of the 375.5 miles of roads and motorized trails currently open within roadless, 93% is low volume, maintenance level 2 roads.

## Environmental Consequences

**Short-term Timeframe:** 1 year

**Long-term Timeframe:** 20 years

**Spatial Boundary:** The administrative forest boundary is the unit of spatial analysis when considering effects associated with changes in the NFS or season of use.

### Motorized Routes

#### *Effects Common to All Action Alternatives Regarding Motorized Routes*

- The prohibition on cross-country travel will be in place for all action alternatives. The effects of the prohibition on cross-country travel in the short and long term are expected to be the same for each action alternative. The perceived effects of motorized use such as noise, emissions, user conflicts, and impacts to wilderness, roadless areas, and private lands, will remain in predictable locations (within ½ mile of open roads), and will be minimized in areas beyond this ½ mile buffer. Unplanned proliferation of motorized routes resulting from unrestricted motorized access will be eliminated.
- Overall, user conflict on motorized routes is expected to be minimized by implementing the travel management rule under all action alternatives. Roads and motorized trails would be administratively defined and published on the motor vehicle use map (MVUM). This would offer the public a means to better plan their recreational pursuits based on the

unique expectations of the individual. As a result, frequency of conflicts between non-motorized and motorized recreation users should decrease in the short and long terms.

### **Alternative B – No Action**

The following are the direct and indirect effect of proposed actions that relate to the issues presented by motorized routes. This includes the breakdown of any additions and/or changes to the NFS road and trail system for each alternative.

The effects of motorized routes in terms of noise, emissions, and user conflicts that could be experienced by people located within a ½ mile from populated areas, neighboring private land, roadless areas, wilderness boundaries, developed recreation sites, and non-motorized trails will remain unchanged in the short term. With no prohibition on cross country travel, people around these boundaries can expect to experience an increase in motor vehicle related noise and emissions, along with a correlated increase in user conflict as the proliferation of unauthorized routes continues on its current, unpredictable, upward trend in the long term.

The number of NFS motorized routes (roads and trails) and their mileage will remain unchanged. While there are 15.8 miles of National Forest System Trails for ATVs and motorcycles, use of motor vehicles is essentially unrestricted outside of designated wilderness and areas closed by forest order, since the forest would continue to be open to motorized cross country travel.

There would be no restrictions on motor vehicle use under this alternative (outside of designated wilderness and other areas closed by forest orders). Users who practice non-motorized activities will continue to come into contact with those who are using motorized vehicles for recreation. To some non-motorized users, such contact is not an issue, but for those seeking solitude for a variety of reasons (i.e., hunting, wildlife viewing, etc.) it can be an important issue. As a result, such user conflict is expected to increase over time under Alternative B.

As mentioned in the Visual Quality section, the proliferation of unauthorized routes, particularly in sparsely covered landscapes, has the potential to adversely affect the forest's visual resources. In the long term, areas that have a more sensitive Visual Quality Object (i.e., retention or partial retention) may take on characteristics of a more modified landscape and exceed their prescribed VQO. The same is true regarding the effects to prescribed ROS classifications.

### **Alternative C**

The effects of motorized routes in terms of noise, emissions, and user conflicts that could be experienced by people located within a ½ mile from populated areas, neighboring private land, roadless areas, wilderness boundaries, developed recreation sites, and non-motorized trails will be reduced by 19.3% when compared to the no-action alternative. Alternative C ranks last in this regard among the 5 action alternatives proposed, offering the lowest reduction in miles for the elements this indicator measures for.

Alternative C proposes 4,265.6 miles of roads open to the public, 11.7 miles are a result of additions or re-opening of previously closed or decommissioned routes. The number of road mileage will be reduced by 7.34% or 338.1 miles from the current mileage displayed under

Alternative B due to closure or change to periodic administrative use or by written authorization only (i.e., not open to the public for general use).

Under this alternative, the miles of road designated for motor vehicle use would be reduced by 7.34% compared with Alternative B. This Alternative would result in the highest number of miles of road designated for motor vehicle use when compared to the other action alternatives.

National Forest System Trails designated for motor vehicle use would increase from 15.8 miles to 203.9 miles. However, since motorized cross-country travel is eliminated, this represents a substantial decrease in the amount of motorized access that would be available under Alternative B. Alternative C would provide more motorized trail opportunities than the other action alternatives.

NFS motorized trails mileage will experience an increase of 1,190.51%, up from its current level of 15.8 miles to 203.9. The opportunity provided by this approximately 188.1 mile increase to the NFS trail inventory is still a substantial decrease from the amount of opportunity provided under open cross country travel. However, Alternative C. ranks 1st in most opportunity for motorized trail access among action alternatives proposed. Refer to the measurement indicator table for vehicle classes that apply.

Motorized users who will benefit most under Alternative C are single track motorcycle riders since it is the only alternative that considers this use exclusive of other motorized vehicles. However, of the 63.5 miles of single track trail proposed, 50.6 miles are located on an existing non motorized trail, shared by both hikers and equestrian riders. User conflicts are not anticipated in the short run because the 50.6 mile trail section in question is considered remote, lightly used, and deemed suitable for motorcycles and non-motorized uses.

## **Alternative D**

The effects of motorized routes in terms of noise, emissions, and user conflicts that could be experienced by people located within a ½ mile from populated areas, neighboring private land, roadless areas, wilderness boundaries, developed recreation sites, and non-motorized trails will be reduced by 48.2% when compared to the no-action alternative. Alternative D offers the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest reduction in miles for the elements this indicator measures for among the five action alternatives.

Alternative D proposes 2,977.2 miles of roads open to the public, 6.5 miles are a result of unauthorized route additions or re-opening of previously closed or decommissioned routes. The number of road mileage will be reduced by 34.9% or 1,626.5 miles from the current mileage displayed under Alternative B. due to closure or change to periodic administrative use or by written authorization only (i.e., not open to the public for general use).

The short and long term affects regarding motorized access to opportunities on the general forest when compared to Alternative B is that motorized and non-motorized users alike (those who drive to the place of their non motorized activity) will experience a corresponding 34.9% reduction in road access. Of the five action alternatives proposed, Alternative D ranks 4th in road miles available.

NFS motorized trails mileage will experience an increase of 692.41%, up from its current level of 15.8 miles to 125.2. As in Alternative C, the opportunity provided by this approximately 109.3 mile increase to the NFS trail inventory is still a substantial decrease from the amount of opportunity provided under open cross-country travel. Alternative D. ranks number 4 in opportunity for motorized trail access among action alternatives proposed. Motorcycles and ATVs would share the same designated motorized trail segments. None of the proposed segments are on non-motorized shared use segments either, so potential user conflicts among these groups are avoided in most cases.

### **Alternative E**

The effects of motorized routes in terms of noise, emissions, and user conflicts that could be experienced by people located within a ½ mile from populated areas, neighboring private land, roadless areas, wilderness boundaries, developed recreation sites, and non-motorized trails will be reduced by 59.2% miles when compared to the no-action alternative. Alternative E offers the largest reduction in miles among the other action alternatives for the elements this indicator measures for.

Alternative E proposes 2,331.8 miles of roads open to the public. No additions or re-opening of closed or decommissioned roads are proposed. The number of road mileage will be reduced by 49.35% or 2,271.9 miles from the current mileage displayed under Alternative B due to closure or change to periodic administrative use or by written authorization only (i.e., not open to the public for general use).

The short and long term affects regarding motorized access to opportunities on the general forest when compared to Alternative B is that, more than any alternative, motorized and non motorized users alike (those who drive to the place of their non motorized activity) will experience the most effects, a corresponding 49.35% reduction in road access. Of the five action alternatives proposed, Alternative E ranks the lowest in road miles available.

NFS motorized trails mileage will experience a decrease of 100%. All existing system motorized trails (15.8 miles) will be converted to non-motorized trails, and no additional are proposed for use by the general public. Unlike any of the alternative proposed, users of ATV's and motorcycles will be restricted to those NFS roads designated open to all vehicles. This alternative offers the least opportunity for motorized users, and conversely, offers the least chance of user conflict between motorized and non-motorized users. User conflict could increase, however, among motorized users of different vehicle classes sharing the same roads.

### **Alternative F**

The effects of motorized routes in terms of noise, emissions, and user conflicts that could be experienced by people located within a ½ mile from populated areas, neighboring private land, roadless areas, wilderness boundaries, developed recreation sites, and non-motorized trails will

be reduced by 43% miles when compared to the no-action alternative. Alternative F offers the 3rd largest reduction in miles for the elements this indicator measures for among the action alternatives.

Alternative F proposes 3,343.1 miles of roads open to the public, 6.7 miles are a result of unauthorized route additions or re-opening of previously closed or decommissioned routes. The number of road mileage will be reduced by 27.38% or 1,260.6 miles from the current mileage displayed under Alternative B. due to closure or change to periodic administrative use or by written authorization only (i.e., not open to the public for general use).

The short and long term affects regarding motorized access to opportunities on the general forest when compared to Alternative B is that motorized and non-motorized users alike (those who drive to the place of their non motorized activity) will experience a corresponding 27.38% reduction in road access. Of the five action alternatives proposed, Alternative F ranks 2nd in road miles available.

NFS motorized trails mileage will experience an increase of 1,048.73%, up from its current level of 15.8 miles to 181.5. The opportunity provided by this approximately 165.7 mile increase to the NFS trail inventory is still a substantial decrease from the amount of opportunity provided under open cross-country travel. Alternative F ranks 2nd in opportunity for motorized trail access among action alternatives proposed. None of the proposed segments are on non-motorized shared use segments, so potential user conflicts among these groups are avoided in most cases.

### **Alternative G**

The effects of motorized routes in terms of noise, emissions, and user conflicts that could be experienced by people located within a ½ mile from populated areas, neighboring private land, roadless areas, wilderness boundaries, developed recreation sites, and non-motorized trails will be reduced by 42.9% when compared to the no-action alternative. Alternative G offers the 4th largest reduction in miles for the elements this indicator measures for among the action alternatives..

Alternative G proposes 3,332.9 miles of roads open to the public, wherein 7.5 miles are a result of unauthorized route additions or re-opening of previously closed or decommissioned routes. The number of road mileage will be reduced by 27.82% or 1,280.8 miles from the current mileage displayed under Alternative B due to closure or change to periodic administrative use or by written authorization only (i.e., not open to the public for general use).

The short and long term affects regarding motorized access to opportunities on the general forest when compared to Alternative B is that motorized and non-motorized users alike (those who drive to the place of their non motorized activity) will experience a corresponding 27.82% reduction in road access. Of the five action alternatives proposed, Alternative G ranks 3rd in road miles available.

NFS motorized trails mileage will experience an increase of 1,047.73%, up from its current level of 15.8 miles to 181.3. The opportunity provided by this approximately 165.5 mile increase to the NFS trail inventory is still a substantial decrease from the amount of opportunity provided

under open cross country travel. Alternative G ranks 3rd in opportunity for motorized trail access among action alternatives proposed, but only 0.2 miles behind Alternative F. None of the proposed segments are on non-motorized shared use segments, so potential user conflicts among these groups are avoided in most cases.

## **Motorized Dispersed Camping**

### *Effects Common to All Action Alternatives Regarding Motorized Dispersed Camping*

- Implementing the travel management rule only affects motorized dispersed camping (i.e., travelling off the designated NFS road system with a vehicle to camp). Dispersed camping by any other non motorized means, such as by parking alongside an open road and walking in to a dispersed camp site, is not affected.
- To accommodate motorized dispersed camping, all action alternatives consider designation of a motorized dispersed camping corridor that would include 300-feet along both sides of all designated roads, and would be identified on the Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM). Corridors were identified to incorporate areas where dispersed camping is currently occurring to the extent possible.

The following are the direct and indirect effect of proposed actions that relate to the issues presented by motorized dispersed camping.

### **Alternative B**

Under Alternative B, all 4,603.7 miles of NFS roads are open to the public; people may park alongside any system road where it is safe to do so and walk in to a dispersed camp site. In addition, because the forest is open to motorized cross-country travel (except for in Wilderness and other areas closed by forest order) people may also drive off road for any distance and set up a campsite. This alternative affords the greatest opportunity for motorized dispersed camping and benefits those who use motor vehicles to access a camping spot that provides the desired level of privacy and solitude. Without restrictions on where and how far to travel off the roadway to motorize disperse camp, the range of camp distribution has potential to be greatest, and unintended contact among others is anticipated to be less; however, without the ability to predict where people may be, contact between user groups still has the potential to occur. Unintended consequences of this alternative include the proliferation of unauthorized routes through the establishment of new dispersed camping areas. This is due to the unrestricted cross-country travel associated with this alternative.

Though the public has the opportunity to practice motorized dispersed camping anywhere under Alternative B, the reality is, they typically do not. Most motorized dispersed camp sites on the forest have already been established due to terrain features such as gentle slopes, flat surfaces, and sparse vegetation types that provide for cover, all within proximity to places of interest like hunting grounds or natural features. Such favorable conditions do not exist along all 4,603.7 miles of roads on the Gila National Forest. With these considerations, use levels of motorized dispersed camping are expected to remain level in the short term and long term.

## **Alternative C**

This alternative would result in 1,538.1 miles of NFS roads designated for motorized dispersed camping, which represents a 67% reduction from what currently exists.

The effect of this reduction in opportunity is not likely to be significant. Most campers will not notice the change because corridors were identified to incorporate areas where dispersed camping is currently occurring to the extent possible. This alternative ranks 1<sup>st</sup> among the five action alternatives in terms of motorized dispersed camping opportunities. However, the change from open, cross-country travel to the use of designated motorized camping corridors has the potential to exclude limited places and areas where motorized dispersed camping has previously occurred.

Conflicts between non-motorized and motorized campers are not anticipated to increase under this alternative. Roads and motorized dispersed camping corridors would be defined and published on the motor vehicle use map (MVUM). This would offer the public a means to better plan their recreational pursuits based on the unique expectations of the individual. As a result, frequency of conflicts between non motorized and motorized campers should decrease in the short and long terms.

Areas (as opposed to corridors) proposed for dispersed camping are analyzed under the Motorized Areas issue.

## **Alternative D**

Under this alternative, 1,182.8 miles of NFS roads with corridors are available to the public for motorized dispersed camping - a 74% reduction in opportunity from what currently exists. The effect of this reduction in opportunity is not likely to be significant. Most campers will not notice the change because corridors were identified to incorporate areas where dispersed camping is currently occurring to the extent possible. However, this alternative ranks 4<sup>th</sup> among the five action alternatives in terms of motorized dispersed camping opportunity, and it is possible that some traditional motorized dispersed camping areas will no longer be available for public use. This could result in a concentration of use at desired camping areas within designated corridors, which could lead to user conflicts.

Conflicts between non-motorized and motorized campers are not anticipated to increase under this alternative. Roads and motorized dispersed camping corridors would be defined and published on the motor vehicle use map (MVUM). This would offer the public a means to better plan their recreational pursuits based on the unique expectations of the individual. As a result, frequency of conflicts between non motorized and motorized campers should decrease in the short and long terms.

### **Alternative E**

No motorized dispersed camping corridors are designated in this alternative – a 100% reduction in opportunity from what currently exists. Alternative E ranks last among the five action alternatives in terms of motorized dispersed camping opportunities.

The public will be restricted to parking within one vehicle length of either side of the road where it is safe and feasible to do so, and then walk in to find a place to camp. Non-motorized dispersed campers are not likely to be affected since this is reflecting their current use. People who rely on the comfort and convenience of their motor vehicle, but still seek privacy or added safety gained by parking off the roadway, will be most affected by this alternative. Some campers may leave the Gila to find motorized dispersed camping opportunities elsewhere. A few campers may be displaced to developed campgrounds. Using developed campgrounds, however, would not provide the same opportunity since fees are often charged, campgrounds may not be in desired locations, and camp site availability may be limited. Equally, using developed campgrounds does not provide for the privacy and solitude important to many motorized dispersed campers.

### **Alternative F**

Under this alternative, 1,446.8 miles of NFS roads are available to public from which to practice the activity of motorized dispersed camping - a 69% reduction in opportunity from what currently exists.

The effect of this reduction in opportunity is not likely to be significant. Most campers will not notice the change because corridors were identified to incorporate areas where dispersed camping is currently occurring to the extent possible. This alternative ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> among the five action alternatives in terms of motorized dispersed camping opportunities. It is anticipated that most motorized campers will be accommodated by this alternative; however, the change from open, cross-country travel to the use of designated motorized camping corridors has the potential to exclude places and areas where motorized dispersed camping has previously occurred.

Conflicts between non-motorized and motorized campers are not anticipated to increase under this alternative. Roads and motorized dispersed camping corridors would be defined and published on the motor vehicle use map (MVUM). This would offer the public a means to better plan their recreational pursuits based on the unique expectations of the individual. As a result, frequency of conflicts between non motorized and motorized campers should decrease in the short and long terms.

### **Alternative G**

Under this alternative, 1,326.8 miles of NFS roads with corridors are available to the public for motorized dispersed camping - a 71% reduction in opportunity from what currently exists.

The effect of this reduction in opportunity is not likely to be significant. Most campers will not notice the change because corridors were identified to incorporate areas where dispersed camping is currently occurring to the extent possible. This alternative ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> among the five action alternatives in terms of motorized dispersed camping opportunities. It is anticipated that most motorized campers will be accommodated by this alternative; however, the reduction in

designated corridors in relation to the other action alternatives coupled with the restrictions on cross-country travel, have the potential to affect motorized camping experiences and opportunities for some campers by limiting choice and concentrating use.

Conflicts between non-motorized and motorized campers are not anticipated to increase under this alternative. Roads and motorized dispersed camping corridors would be defined and published on the motor vehicle use map (MVUM). This would offer the public a means to better plan their recreational pursuits based on the unique expectations of the individual. As a result, frequency of conflicts between non motorized and motorized campers should decrease in the short and long terms.

## **Motorized Big Game Retrieval**

The following are the direct and indirect effect of proposed actions that relate to the issues presented by motorized big game retrieval. The measurement indicator table may be referred to by the reader regarding specifics or details not mentioned in the discussion.

### **Alternative B**

Under this alternative, 2,441,804.3 acres of forest lands are open to the public and available for all game retrieval by motorized means (designated wilderness and areas closed by forest order excluded). Access to these acres is from any road open to the public in the NFS roads inventory. Because of the open cross country travel policy currently in place, distance from the roadway for hunters to retrieve legally downed animals is unrestricted.

Without restrictions on how far one can travel off the roadway for these purposes, there exists the potential for conflict between hunters who prefer solitude and an uninterrupted experience, and those for which the assistance and convenience afforded by motor vehicles is of more value. Non-hunters who practice non-motorized activities will continue to come into contact with those who are using motorized vehicles to retrieve game. To some non-motorized users, such contact is not an issue, but for those seeking solitude for a variety of reasons (i.e., hunting, wildlife viewing, etc.) it can be an important issue. As a result, such user conflict is expected to increase over time under Alternative B.

The proliferation of unauthorized routes is also a possible effect of this alternative. Cross-country travel to retrieve game has the possibility of creating travel ways, especially in cases where multiple trips are used to retrieve downed game. In the long term, the proliferation of these routes, particularly in sparsely covered landscapes, has the potential to adversely affect the forest's visual resources. Areas that have a more sensitive Visual Quality Object (VQO) (i.e., retention or partial retention) may take on characteristics of a more modified landscape and could exceed their prescribed VQO.

### **Alternative C**

Under this alternative, a one-mile wide corridor solely for the purpose of big game retrieval would be designated along both sides of 4,265.6 miles of road. This would amount to 2,076,413.63 acres, representing a 14.96% reduction from what currently exists. Roads from which the public can access these open acres for this purpose would be from NFS roads open to the public under this alternative. Motorized trails are not included. Alternative C ranks 1<sup>st</sup> among the five action alternatives in terms of providing acreage available for motorized big game retrieval. Alternative C allows for retrieval of multiple game species identified through public scoping, and represents the most number of species among the action alternatives proposed. Species include elk, deer, pronghorn, bear, javelina, and mountain lion.

The 14.9% reduction in motorized big game retrieval opportunities from what currently exists is not likely to significantly impact hunters who retrieve big game with vehicles. It is anticipated that most hunters will not notice the change because most motorized game retrieval, and hunting in general, occurs within 1 mile of existing roads. This alternative ranks 1<sup>st</sup> among the five action alternatives in terms of motorized big game retrieval opportunities. The change from open, cross-country travel to the use of one-mile wide corridors represents a fundamental change in policy, but it is unlikely to have a significant effect on hunters who retrieve big game with vehicles.

Use conflict is expected to be minimal as hunters and other non-motorized users will still have the ability to disperse along the 4,265.6 miles of roads open to the public under Alternative C, and the only time a vehicle will enter the forest is to retrieve game.

## **Alternative D**

Under this alternative, a 300-foot wide corridor for the purpose of big game retrieval would be designated along both sides of 1,182.8 miles of road. This would amount to 86,023 acres, representing a 96.48% reduction from what currently exists. The corridors proposed under this alternative correspond to the motorized dispersed camping corridors in the alternative. In response to the travel management rule, motorized cross country travel would be prohibited, and these corridors would represent the only opportunity for motorized big game retrieval. Motorized trails are not included. Alternative D ranks 4th among the five action alternatives in terms of providing acreage available for motorized big game retrieval. Alternative D allows for the retrieval of elk and deer species only.

Users affected by the prohibition on cross-country travel element of the travel management rule are the same stated in Alternative C. However, those with a desire or need for using motorized vehicles to retrieve big game are restricted to the 1,182.8 miles of roads designated for motorized dispersed camping under this alternative.

The measures (Recreation Specialist Report) used to analyze effects of motorized big game retrieval offers evidence to support that hunters typically travel within 0.28 – 0.35 miles from a road when hunting in a non-motorized manner (excluding horses and pack animals). The 300 ft motorized camping corridor distance limit allowed for motorized big game retrieval under this alternative falls short of this range, so it is expected that hunters will not have the ability in most cases to travel the distance required to retrieve game. With this in mind, it is expected that other alternative or traditional non-motorized methods such as the use of horses and pack animals can be expected to rise. In very limited cases, a hunter's inability to use motor vehicles to retrieve big game may lead to wanton waste of the animal.

## **Alternative E**

No motorized big game retrieval would be allowed in this alternative – a 100% reduction from what currently exists. In response to the travel management rule, motorized cross country travel would be prohibited for all activities. Alternative E ranks last among the five action alternatives in terms of providing acreage or opportunity for motorized big game retrieval.

User conflict in general is expected to be minimal as the public will still have the ability to disperse along the 2,331.8 miles of roads open to the public under Alternative E. However, those with a desire or need for using motorized vehicles to retrieve big game will not have that ability under this alternative. Because non-motorized big game retrieval is an inherently physical activity, even by with aid of pack and saddle stock, this alternative has the most potential to impact elderly and mobility impaired hunters.

## **Alternative F**

Under this alternative, a ½ mile wide corridor solely for the purpose of big game retrieval would be designated along both sides of 3,343.1 miles of road. This would amount to 1,501,870.25 acres, representing a 38.49% reduction from what currently exists. In response to the travel management rule, motorized cross country travel would be prohibited, and these open acres would represent opportunity for motorized big game retrieval purposes only, restricted to a ½ mile travel distance. Roads from which the public can access these open acres for this purpose would be from NFS road open to the public under this alternative. Motorized trails are not included. Alternative F ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> among the five action alternatives in terms of providing acreage available for motorized big game retrieval, but allows for the retrieval of only elk.

The measures (Recreation Specialist Report) used to analyze effect of motorized big game retrieval offer evidence to support that hunters typically travel within 0.28 – 0.35 miles from a road when hunting in a non-motorized manner (excluding horses and pack animals). Similar to Alternative C, the distance given for big game retrieval under this alternative (1/2 mile) still exceeds this range, so it is expected that hunters will have the ability in most cases to travel the distance required to retrieve the game they take. As in Alternative C, adopting alternative, non-motorized means of big game retrieval is not anticipated for most hunters under this alternative.

## **Alternative G**

Under this alternative, a 300-foot wide corridor for the purpose of big game retrieval would be designated along both sides of 1,326.8 miles of road. This would amount to 96,492.3 acres, representing a 96.05% reduction from what currently exists. The corridors proposed under this alternative correspond to the motorized dispersed camping corridors in the alternative. In response to the travel management rule, motorized cross country travel would be prohibited, and these corridors would represent the only opportunity for motorized big game retrieval. Motorized trails are not included. Alternative G ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> among the five action alternatives in terms of providing acreage available for motorized big game retrieval, and allows for the retrieval of elk and deer species only.

Users affected by the prohibition on cross country travel element of the travel management rule are the same stated in Alternative C. Use conflict for hunting in general is expected to be

minimal as the public will still have the ability to disperse along the 3322.9 miles of roads open to the public under Alternative G. However, those with a desire or need for using motorized vehicles to retrieve big game, are restricted to the 1,326.8 miles of roads designated for motorized dispersed camping under this alternative/

The measures (Recreation Specialist Report) used to analyze effect of motorized big game retrieval offer evidence to support that hunters typically travel within 0.28 – 0.35 miles from a road when hunting in a non-motorized manner (excluding horses and pack animals). The 300 ft motorized camping corridor distance limit allowed for motorized big game retrieval under this alternative fall short of this range, so it is expected that hunters will not have the ability in most cases to travel the distance required to retrieve the game they take. With this in mind, it is expected that other alternative or traditional non-motorized methods such as the use of horses and pack animals can be expected to rise. In very limited cases, a hunter's inability to use motor vehicles to retrieve big game may lead to wanton waste of the animal.

## **Motorized Areas**

The following are the direct and indirect effect of proposed actions that relate to the issues presented by added motorized areas. The measurement indicator table may be referred to by the reader regarding specifics or details not mentioned in the discussion.

### **Alternative B**

Under this alternative, 2,441,804.3 acres of land on the Forest would remain open to motorized cross-country travel. Without restrictions, opportunities for motorized use are greatest, and benefit those who rely on or prefer to use motorized vehicles; however, no restriction on vehicle use has the most potential to create conflict between motorized and non-motorized user groups.

Under this alternative, non-motorized and motorized places of opportunity overlap (outside of designated wilderness and study areas) so users who prefer quieter non-motorized activities will continue to come into contact, with those who are using motorized vehicles. To some non-motorized users, such contact is not an issue, but for those seeking solitude for a variety of reasons (i.e., hunting, wildlife viewing, etc.) it can be. As a result, such user conflict is expected to increase over time under Alternative B.

In the long term, the proliferation of unauthorized routes, particularly in sparsely covered landscapes, has the potential to adversely affect the forest's visual resources. Areas that have a more sensitive Visual Quality Object (i.e., retention or partial retention) may take on characteristics of a more modified landscape and exceed their prescribed VQO.

### **Alternatives C, F, and G**

Alternative C proposes to designate 38 areas totaling 28.3 acres for use by all motor vehicle classes, and one 7.8 acre area restricted to only ATV and motorcycle use.

The 38 areas proposed for use by all vehicle classes are comprised of traditional motorized recreation areas throughout the forest. These are typically areas that have already been disturbed

and receive predictable use by forest visitors. These areas were also identified through public input.

The prohibition on cross-country motorized travel included in all action alternatives has the potential to significantly impact many motor vehicle users. The 38 motorized areas proposed in this alternative will do little to address this change; however, motorized designation of these areas may fulfill needs and desires of a limited number of motorized users.

The 7.8 acre area proposed for ATV and motorcycle use under this alternative is located in a previously disturbed area that currently receives substantial motorized use. User conflicts associated with this area are currently few, and are not expected to rise as a result of designation as a motorized area.

In addition, Motorized and non motorized users alike will benefit from the published MVUM that will display the locations of these motorized areas so that they may plan their recreational pursuits appropriately.

### **Alternative D and E**

No areas are proposed. Non motorized users benefit the most, and the least amount of user conflict is expected.

## **Recreation Opportunity Spectrum**

Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) class settings were determined using management prescriptions in the Gila National Forest Plan. The action alternatives do not propose motorized route additions in primitive or semi-primitive recreation (non-motorized) settings, where such use is not compatible with the ROS setting. Route additions are proposed only in semi-primitive motorized and roaded natural settings where such use is characteristic. Therefore, the range of available ROS settings would remain the same in each alternative and no ROS plan amendments would be needed for any alternatives. ROS requirements are described on page 26 of the Gila National Forest Plan, Standards and Guidelines.

Listed below are descriptions of the ROS classifications for areas where proposed motorized routes are located. The definitions given are from the Glossary of the Gila National Forest Plan.

- **Semi-Primitive Motorized (SPM):** A classification of ROS characterized by moderately dominant alterations by man with strong evidence of primitive roads and/or trails..
- **Roaded Natural (RN):** A classification of ROS characterizes a predominantly natural environment with evidence of moderate, permanent alteration resources and resource utilization. Evidence of sights and sounds of man is moderate, but in harmony with the general environment. Opportunities exist for social interaction and moderate isolation from sights and sounds of man.

Unauthorized routes proposed for addition to the transportation system under any action alternative meets these expectations; therefore, it is concluded that there are no effects to the ROS settings and effects to ROS are not discussed in any of the action alternatives.

## **Visual Quality Objectives**

The compatibility of proposed changes to the forest transportation system with forest plan standards and guidelines for Visual Quality Objectives.

Concern for visual quality impacts of National Forest transportation system type road and trail features is generally low since such features are small in scale when compared to the overall landscape scenes they exist in, and when aspects of roads are seen, they generally do not visually dominate it to a degree that invokes a Maximum Modification VQO. Forest road and trail features typically consist of more natural surface materials, are narrower in widths, and exist with much less frequency or concentration than related highway or urban roadways that have fewer natural characteristics. When forest system roads and trails are seen, they typically result in landscapes that meet the conditions of Partial Retention to Modification VQO, both acceptable in areas where route additions are planned for.

As described on page 26 of the Gila Forest Plan, the deviation of a certain percentage of an area's VQO and/or a change from a higher VQO to a lower, is acceptable. None of the routes or areas under any of the proposed actions are expected to exceed partial retention to modification VQO where planned.

According to the Gila Forest Plan, the only VQO that cannot experience change is preservation; however, no routes or areas are planned where the preservation VQO is managed.

As with ROS, it is concluded that no effects to VQO's are anticipated under any of the action alternatives, and the subject will not be discussed in them.

## **Inventoried Roadless Areas**

The Gila National Forest's GIS inventory shows that there are 734,380 acres of inventoried roadless area on the Forest. Of the 4,619.5 miles of motorized routes (roads and trails) open to the public, 375.5 miles are within boundaries of these roadless areas. Each action alternative proposes a combination of changes to the motorized route system that results in a net reduction of mileage in these roadless areas.

The following list depicts the resulting reduction of miles per alternative:

- Alt C: Reduction of 64 miles (-7.16%)
- Alt D: Reduction of 311 miles (-34.79%)
- Alt E: Reduction of 445 miles (-49.78%)
- Alt F: Reduction of 219 miles (-24.50%)
- Alt G: Reduction of 217 miles. (-24.27%)

It is concluded that the reduction of overall motorized route mileage as proposed under any action alternative only serves to benefit or increase the quality of the roadless characteristics of

the inventoried roadless areas managed by the Gila National Forest. Therefore, the direct impact or effects of this will not be discussed further in this document. Indirect effects of motorized use, that is, motorized associated impacts adjacent to roadless areas, are described, analyzed, and disclosed under Measurement Indicator 1.

No alternative proposes the addition of new road segments to the system in these areas, but some motorized trails are added. The following lists the number of miles of motorized trails proposed under each alternative:

- Alt B: 11 (existing)
- Alt C: 79
- Alt D: 22
- Alt E: 0
- Alt F: 51
- Alt G: 53

Possible effects of adding motorized trails to the system in any of the action alternatives include increased conflicts between non-motorized and motorized users and decreased capacity for quiet recreation opportunities. The dispersed and remote nature of these trails, however, could mitigate some of these possible effects.

## **Cumulative Effects**

All National Forests in the Southwestern Region are either in the process of travel management planning or implementing existing Travel Management Plans. The Bureau of Land Management has also made decisions to designate routes for OHV use. All of the new decisions and the implementation of past land use and travel management decisions are generally resulting in fewer opportunities for cross-country OHV uses and fewer open routes for OHV use. These past decisions include the establishment of wilderness areas and other areas that prohibit motor vehicle recreation, reducing the motor vehicle access to the Forest. Although these past decisions are not part of current planning for the Gila NF Travel Management Plan, they are relevant because they are part of the cumulative effects of the Travel Management Plan. The selection of any of the action alternatives reduces cross-country access (as required by the Travel Management Rule). However, the range of alternatives provides a varying array of motorized recreation opportunities.

