

Draft ORV Policy

Introduction, Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this document is to establish an agency policy regarding the use of off-road vehicles on public lands where the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is the landowner or lead manager. These public lands generally are areas established as Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) or Wildlife and Environmental Areas (WEAs). For the purpose of this policy, the term "off-road vehicle" (ORV) will be defined as swamp buggies, tracked vehicles, and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs). The policy does not include off-highway motorcycles or licensed vehicles.

Background

The use of ORVs has traditionally been allowed on certain WMAs/WEAs during hunting seasons to provide the hunting public greater access to remote portions of management areas and to better disperse hunters. Where ORV use is currently allowed by FWC rules, it is normally limited to operating ORVs on designated roads and trails during managed hunts or by special permit for those persons with severe mobility impairments. There are management areas, where cross-country use of ORVs has traditionally been allowed, due to the relatively large size of the areas, limited road systems, and wet conditions that make non-vehicular access difficult.

The popularity of ATVs for hunting purposes has increased dramatically in recent years. This trend will likely continue in the future. At the same time, recreational riding of ATVs has increased steadily and sales are projected to remain strong in the future. These trends will place further demands on FWC to provide for both hunting and non-hunting ORV use within the WMA system.

The increase in sales and use, limited number of recreational riding areas, and the lack of mandatory rider education and safety programs have led to a number of management challenges on public lands, statewide. These challenges include preventing resource degradation resulting from the inappropriate operation of ORVs in environmentally sensitive areas, avoiding user conflicts, and preventing ORV accidents that result in injuries and fatalities on FWC-managed properties.

FWC Mission and Management Responsibilities

FWC's mission is to manage fish and wildlife resources for their long-term well-being and the benefit of people. It is the goal of FWC to provide wildlife-oriented recreation opportunities that are consistent with this mission and the directives set forth by the Commission and pertinent State/Federal agencies regarding acquisition of public lands for conservation purposes. Title to the majority of FWC-managed lands is vested in the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund (Board of Trustees) and is held in trust for the people of the State of Florida. These lands are managed by FWC through the authority of lease agreements. Management directives for these properties include conserving and protecting environmentally sensitive lands and wildlife populations, as well as providing wildlife-oriented recreation, provided such use is compatible with the conservation purposes for acquisition.

For these reasons, FWC recognizes the need to establish a comprehensive policy to guide ORV use on FWC-managed lands to ensure such uses comply with FWC's mission and responsibilities.

Policy Statement

It is the policy of the FWC to only allow ORV use on public conservation lands managed by FWC when such use complies with all of the following criteria:

- 1) ORV use is for nature-based recreation compatible with the FWC mission including hunting and wildlife viewing.**
- 2) ORV use will not irreparably degrade or damage habitats.**
- 3) ORV use will not diminish the populations or diversity of wildlife or the plant communities they depend upon.**
- 4) ORV use is compatible with land management activities.**
- 5) ORV use will not diminish existing outdoor recreation experiences.**
- 6) ORV use is conducted in a manner consistent with purposes for acquisition.**
- 7) ORV use can be conducted safely and responsibly, to preclude activities such as riding at unsafe speeds, jumping obstacles or**

operating the vehicle in a manner that creates “mud bogs” or damages roads and trails beyond normal wear.

8) Users with severe mobility impairments are provided special permits in accordance with agency rule.

ORV use may be recommended when such use complies with the FWC ORV Policy criteria listed above, when ORV use is authorized in the approved Conceptual Management Plan governing the respective management area and is supported by the FWC ORV site evaluation process.

Where new ORV use is allowed it will be exclusively road/trail-based. Where off-road use is currently allowed, it may be continued subject to regulations designed to ensure compatibility with this policy: for example, periods of use, numbers of vehicles, types of vehicles, and portions of areas where ORVs are necessary and appropriate.

Implementation

Implementing this policy will require a variety of FWC resources as well as cooperative efforts between FWC, other public and private entities, and stakeholder groups. Each WMA/WEA where FWC has primary management authority will be evaluated for ORV use on a case-by-case basis using approved evaluation criteria (attached). On WMAs/WEAs where ORV use is currently allowed, existing rules and regulations will be re-evaluated to ensure current ORV uses are appropriate and compatible with this policy. Any regulatory changes necessary to remain compliant with this policy would be proposed through the normal FWC rule making process to provide ample opportunity for stakeholder involvement.

Implementation Procedures:

Regional Evaluation Teams consisting of representatives from the Division of Habitat and Species Conservation, Division of Hunting and Game Management, Division of Law Enforcement, and the Office of Recreation Services will evaluate each lead area, calculate a total score for each area, and submit their findings and recommendations to the ORV Issue Team.

The ORV Issue Team will review all evaluation results and recommendations for statewide consistency. The ORV Issue Team will coordinate with the Regional Evaluation Teams as necessary to resolve questions or inconsistencies and to develop recommendations for each WMA. The ORV

Issue Team will then meet with the Stakeholder Team composed of representatives of conservation and recreation groups, including hunting, wildlife viewing, hiking, off-road vehicles, and a representative from the Division of Forestry Off-highway Vehicle program, to review the results of the statewide evaluation and finalize recommendations.

The following measures will apply when the evaluation process ultimately results in a recommendation that ORV use is not suitable for the WMA:

If recreational ORV use currently is not allowed on the WMA, this type of use will not be recommended.

If ORV use for hunting currently is not allowed on the WMA, this type of use will not be recommended.

If recreational ORV use currently is allowed on the WMA, FWC will review current WMA regulations and develop rule change proposals as necessary to align existing uses with the ORV policy following the guidelines for managing ORV use that follow in this document.

If ORV use for hunting currently is allowed on the WMA, FWC will review existing WMA regulations and develop rule change proposals as necessary to align existing uses with the ORV policy following the guidelines for managing ORV use that follow in this document.

The following measures will apply when the evaluation process ultimately results in a recommendation that ORV use may be feasible on a WMA.

If recreational ORV use currently is not allowed on the WMA, the ORV Issue Team will further evaluate the area to determine what use is feasible. If it is determined that that ORV use is feasible, it will be considered following the guidelines for managing ORV use.

If ORV use for hunting currently is not allowed on the WMA, it will be further evaluated to determine if such use is feasible.

If it is determined that this type of use is feasible, it will be considered following the guidelines for managing ORV use.

If recreational ORV use currently is allowed on the WMA, FWC will recommend continuing such uses following the guidelines for managing ORV use.

If ORV use for hunting currently is allowed on the WMA, FWC will recommend continuing such uses following the guidelines for managing ORV use.

Guidelines for managing ORV use

1. Provide for recreational ORV use only on designated roads and trails and use best management practices to design and manage ORV trails.
2. Provide for tiered system of ORV use, if appropriate for the property. A tiered system would provide for access to a core system of roads/trails that can expand for limited periods during hunts. Where off-road use is currently allowed, defined periods of off-road use may be maintained to address special access needs during established hunting seasons.
3. Involve a broad range of stakeholder groups in the road/trail designation process and in developing ORV rules through the FWC rule development process.
4. Determine an ORV carrying capacity for the property and limit the maximum number of ORVs allowed on the property at any one time. During established hunt seasons, the quota system may be used for this purpose. The operation of ORVs may be limited to only hunting related purposes during hunting seasons.
5. Establish a revocable ORV user permit to manage use and assist in enforcing ORV regulations.
6. If necessary, establish specific hours of operation for ORV use during hunting seasons to avoid possible user conflicts between the hunting public and users engaged in ORV trail riding.
7. Develop standards and indicators to monitor ORV resource impacts, wildlife disturbance and user conflicts. Implement appropriate management actions that may include a range of options from least to most restrictive, including education, signs and maps, road maintenance and trail hardening, seasonal restrictions, temporary closures, or eliminating ORV use if indicators exceed standards.

8. Establish baseline and on-going monitoring to evaluate compatibility of ORV use with resource management objectives and other public use activities.

9. Coordinate with the Florida Off-highway Vehicle Advisory Council to identify recreational riding opportunities in high need areas and to encourage and support mandatory rider education and safety programs.

10. Use volunteers and partnerships to the greatest extent feasible.

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