

**OFF-ROAD VEHICLE STRATEGY TASK FORCE**  
**FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS**  
**May 25, 2006**

The Off-Road Vehicle Strategy Task Force (Task Force) was assigned to develop a strategy to significantly reduce or eliminate the unacceptable amount of environmental damage being caused by illegal Off Road Vehicle (ORV) use. The Forest Certification Audit revealed that illegal ORV use was causing unacceptable levels of environmental damage to public lands. This is a major finding in the Audit and if not significantly reduced could result in de-certification of Michigan's State Forests. The Department of Natural Resources (Department), through the Task Force, has developed specific strategies in three areas: User Education, Enforcement and Restoration/Maintenance. Each of these three areas must be utilized in order to effectively address this problem. The following is a discussion of these three areas:

**USER EDUCATION**

It is understood that staff of the Department cannot improve on this situation without the support and understanding of the ORV community as well as the general public. The Department's mission includes providing outdoor recreation opportunities such as ORV use while also being charged with properly managing and protecting the state's natural resources. The benefits to the ORV user community that would result from the elimination of illegal use are significant including an improved public image.

The following are recommendations from the Task Force on how the Department can successfully educate ORV users and the general public on the negative impacts of illegal ORV use and the potential loss of ORV riding opportunities if the problem is not addressed:

1. The Department should adopt a catch phrase campaign or theme that would last 12 to 24 months. This theme could be developed either in-house, through an advertising company, a university or the Department could utilize an existing theme such as "Tread Lightly". Some members of the Task Force indicated they did not believe the Tread Lightly theme was forceful enough and suggested a theme such as "Stray and Pay!" or "Abuse it and Lose It!".
2. Whichever theme is used, the Department should utilize various magazines such as those associated with MUCC, Hunting, 4-wheel drive, etc. This is one opportunity to reach various user groups to get the message out.
3. The Department has an ORV Education video tape that should be reviewed, updated and made available in both VHS and DVD formats. This video should be distributed and be highly recommended for use at Hunter Education courses, etc.

4. While draft Department policy prohibits the use of billboards by the Department, the Task Force recommends working with ORV manufacturers and dealers as a partner in this effort and would request that these entities utilize billboards promoting the theme. The use of billboards in strategic locations is another important opportunity to get the message out to the public.
5. The Department's Web Page must be utilized by promotion of the theme and by providing information on the damage caused by illegal ORV use.
6. Public Service Announcements (PSA's) should be utilized as yet another opportunity to promote the theme. These announcements can be created in-house, through an advertising company, university or utilize existing PSA's such as those that exist through Tread Lightly.
7. The Department's ORV Handbook should be utilized to promote legal use of ORV's and to explain the negative impacts of illegal use.
8. The Department's ORV Youth Education/Certification Program should be mandatory and must emphasize the importance of legally operating ORV's. The program should also emphasize the environmental damage that results from illegal ORV use. This is an opportunity to teach our youth about riding only on designated trails/areas.
9. The Department should display the theme at all Operation Service Centers and field offices and request that the Michigan Department of Transportation display the theme at all Welcome Centers and Rest Areas. Outdoor banners, placed in highly visible areas, should be utilized at these locations. Posters should also be placed indoors in high traffic areas.
10. Department staff should have a presence at outdoor shows such as Outdoorama, ORV shows, hunting shows, where they can make the public aware of this theme and be able to answer questions related to legal ORV use.
11. The Department should develop and distribute posters related to the theme. These posters should be distributed to dealers, manufacturers, license distributors, etc. to be displayed in high traffic areas.
12. The Department should partner with ORV dealers/manufacturers to promote the theme. Dealers and manufacturers have much to gain by increasing public acceptance of the use of ORV's by significantly reducing the amount of environmental damage on public lands.

13. All Department guidebooks such as the Hunting Guidebook, Fishing Guidebook, Firewood Guidelines, Recreation and Camping Guidebook, etc., should be revised to include the theme and to emphasize the legal use of ORV's, the environmental damage caused by illegal ORV use, the consequence of being ticketed for illegal use and the potential loss of ORV riding opportunities if illegal use continues.
14. The Department should consider partnering with surrounding states, such as Wisconsin and Minnesota, to learn how they are managing illegal ORV use.
15. The Department must network with the trail riding community (clubs) for support of the campaign. The Department can not achieve success in this initiative without the support of the riding community.

### **LAW ENFORCEMENT**

In order to be successful in significantly reducing illegal ORV use and the associated unacceptable level of environmental damage, the Department must increase its law enforcement efforts. Similarly to the area of user education, the Department can not be successful in this initiative without the support of the ORV riding community. The following are recommendations of the Task Force related to law enforcement that should assist the Department in significantly reducing illegal ORV use:

1. Increase enforcement through priority violations such as emphasizing law enforcement initiatives for violations that occur off-trail, in wetlands, in streams, and along lakeshores.
2. The Department should increase the use of Conservation Officer (CO) group patrols to deal with illegal high environmental damage/high use sites.
3. The Department needs to increase the number of CO's in order to have adequate staffing levels to effectively enforce this initiative.
4. An increase in ORV law enforcement funding is necessary in order to fund additional law enforcement activities.
5. The Department should utilize 1-800 number for reporting illegal ORV use similar to the Report All Poaching (RAP) line. The Task Force recommends using the same 1-800 number and same operators as the current RAP line. The new reporting number could be called the RED line (Report Environmental Damage) as an example. The 1-800 number should be incorporated into the theme and be prominent in all publications, the Department web site, video, billboards, etc.

6. The Department should reformat the ORV license to include a readily identifiable number for law enforcement use.
7. The Department must continue to improve its partnership with local law enforcement officials through improved coordination in the field. The Department must also communicate its enforcement priorities to local law enforcement agencies. The Department should consider increased funding for local law enforcement officials for ORV enforcement and also develop an improved evaluation process of how these funds are utilized. Finally, the Department should develop an ORV Enforcement Program for local enforcement officials to allow enforcement by part time Officers similar to the snowmobile program.
8. The Task Force considered recommending increased utilization of Forest Officers in ORV enforcement. After much discussion, the Task Force does not recommend an increased role for Forest Officers in ORV enforcement. Forest Officers do not have the training necessary to increase their role in this area and there are liability and safety issues as well. This issue has also been evaluated several times by the Forest, Mineral and Fire Management (FMFM) Law Team and the results have been not to increase the role of Forest Officers in ORV enforcement. The Task Force acknowledged the current role of Forest Officers in enforcing the Land Use Rules related to ORV use and recommends this role be continued.
9. The Department should seek an increase in penalties for illegal ORV use. Currently, when a user is fined for illegal ORV use, the penalty may be so insignificant as to not be a deterrent to a user to stop that illegal use. This would likely involve educating local prosecuting attorneys and judges as well as legislative action. The Department (possibly the CO's) should make presentations to Prosecutors Association and Magistrate meetings conveying these recommendations.

#### **RESTORATION/MAINTENANCE**

The Department currently spends approximately \$320,000 annually on restoring environmental damage caused by illegal ORV use. While this program has been effective, there is an opportunity for improvement.

The Department also spends approximately \$1,600,000 annually on maintenance of existing designated ORV trails. The proper maintenance of designated ORV trails is an important component of the overall ORV program. The better trails are maintained the less likely illegal use will occur. Maintaining trails through adequate signage, trail grading, blocking illegal "spur" trails, etc. will reduce environmental damage. The following are recommendations for improvement of the restoration/maintenance of designated trails and environmental damage caused by illegal ORV use:

### **Restoration**

1. The Department needs to improve documentation of existing environmental damage areas caused by illegal ORV use. The Department must finalize the development of an environmental damage database that can be used for prioritizing restoration projects. The database can also be used for determining the overall scope of this problem on a statewide basis.
2. In addition to contracting, the Department should use non-profit groups (such as ORV clubs, environmental groups, soil conservation agencies, etc.) to complete restoration projects. The Department does not have enough staff to complete all restoration projects with existing staff. In order to make significant progress in restoring damaged sites the Department must rely on and work with outside interests.
3. The Department must improve accountability regarding who is responsible for project management. There have been some communication breakdowns between the restoration grant requestor, grant management and the project manager. It must be made clear on every project who the responsible party is for assuring the project is completed.
4. The Department should either hire additional staff or receive assistance in completing projects the Department identifies by contracting the project oversight, including project development and completion.
5. The Department should consider contracting a significant number of outstanding restoration projects to a single contractor. The contract should include project oversight.
6. Restoration projects must include a management plan to correct initial cause of problem. There have been examples of restoration projects that have been completed successfully, only to be damaged again by illegal ORV use. A management plan must be developed to evaluate and resolve the initial cause of the damage. A Land Use Order by the Director may be necessary to prevent a reoccurrence of the problem during and after restoration work. A Land Use Order by the Director is necessary to close forest roads.

### **Maintenance**

1. All designated trails must be brought up to the "good" rating level as indicated in the Draft Off-Road Vehicle Management Plan produced by Chuck Nelson. This can be accomplished by improved maintenance work including brushing, signing and grading.
2. Currently, ORV clubs complete trail maintenance through a grant program with the Department. Penalties for unacceptable trail maintenance should be strictly enforced

and the penalties increased in order to improve trail maintenance completed by these clubs.

3. The Department should consider increasing the trail maintenance reimbursement rate paid to non-profit organizations in an attempt to improve trail maintenance. If increased reimbursement does not result in improved trail maintenance, the Department should consider contracting trail maintenance work as opposed to the current method of working with non-profit organizations. A pilot project of contracting one or two trails may be a good way of evaluating this method.
4. The Department must maintain obvious trail corridors through proper brushing, signing and grading. The better maintained a trail is the less chance trail users will mistakenly leave the designated trail and venture into an area that is not designated for use. The Task Force recommends using the yellow backers (placed behind the ORV sign) on a statewide basis to assist in delineating ORV trails. These yellow backers were used in the Au Sable Pilot Project with very positive results. Illegal spur trails must be blocked as soon as they are found.
5. The Department must provide a better mapping system and make accurate maps available to the public. This mapping system should be updated frequently as trails are changed and made available on-line to prospective trail users.

**ORV STRATEGY TASK FORCE MEMBERS:**

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