

To ORV or NOT to ORV, that is the Question!

Reducing Impacts from Off-Road Vehicles

Introduction

“Serious erosion problems” was what a concerned citizen reported observing, associated with the use of off road vehicles (ORV) near the town of Index in Snohomish County, Washington. Unmanaged ORV use was causing too much sediment to enter Deer Creek, a tributary to the Skykomish River. The report ended up on the desk of Bob Penhale, water quality inspector for Department of Ecology’s Northwest Regional Office in Bellevue. Concurrently, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) was wrestling with the same issue as landowner and manager of the site. DNR was midway through a public planning process to establish the Reiter Foothills Recreation Area for ORVs and other uses.

Deciding what level of ORV use and where on the landscape the use was appropriate was the primary task at hand.

Problem

“The level of erosion impacts was significant,” Bob Penhale observed. “Unfortunately, it resembled what was commonplace in the ‘70s, but they are making quite an effort to straighten things out.” At present, this kind of activity is regulated as a “nonpoint” water quality issue. This means that a specific permit from Ecology is not required and that best management practices (BMPs) are the primary tool to prevent and minimize impacts. Years of unregulated misuse have severely degraded some of the watercourses in the area, but DNR was determined to “make it right.”

The metropolitan Seattle area contains tens of thousands of licensed ORVs and certainly many others that are unlicensed. The geographic opportunities for ORV use in this heavily populated area are limited and becoming more so because of prohibition of use on private land due to issues such as resource damage, risk, and liability concerns. Access for all kinds of outside recreation is being squeezed into a shrinking land base, causing heavy pressure and increasing environmental impacts on areas like the Reiter Foothills.

Fortunately, as with most recreational user groups, there is an active minority of dedicated and concerned individuals and organizations.

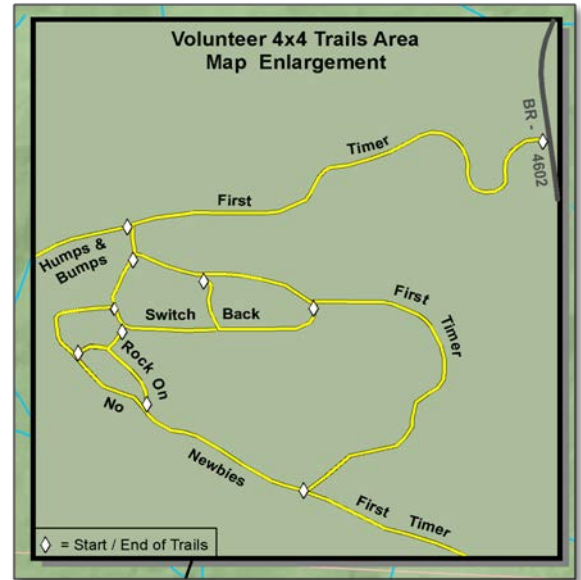


Massive boulders provide one of many challenges on a new trail at Reiter Foothills.

These folks came forward with thousands of hours of volunteer time, donated heavy equipment, and expertise to improve and maintain miles of authorized ORV trails. DNR has a legal mandate to provide recreational opportunities on publicly-owned state land, and is responsible for a number of designated areas where ORV use is widespread.

Project or Event Goals

The Reiter Hills Management Plan was developed to guide DNR’s management of recreation and public access in the area, while maintaining the timber harvest priority of providing funding for schools. The Plan prioritizes safe, sustainable recreation activities - both motorized and non-motorized. A well designed and maintained ORV trail can be no more damaging than a heavily used hiking trail. Funding for the management of ORV trails has been significantly reduced while ORV use is increasing and concentrating in smaller areas. Fewer locations, coupled with increasing activity, can lead to increased potential for environmental degradation, especially water quality.



A new ORV facility provides the opportunity to design and construct the trail system to function properly and safely while protecting public resources, even under heavy use. A concerted effort is being made to avoid water crossings and -- where necessary -- to approach streams using bridges or other water conveyance features in order to protect the water quality and stream life.



Volunteers provided thousands of hours of labor and the machinery necessary for trail construction.

Milestones and Outcomes

DNR made an exhaustive effort to build consensus among diverse recreational user groups. The Reiter Hills Focus Group has been meeting monthly since 2009, gathering input from the participants for design and implementation. DNR has forged through and will ultimately provide for ORV, equestrian, hiking, mountain biking, fishing and camping opportunities at Reiter Foothills. DNR developed the Reiter Foothills Management Plan, performed the required environmental review process, and began the implementation of new trails in 2013.

To date, about five and a half miles of motorized trails, two parking lots, and restoration of previously impacted areas have been completed. “Some of the trails are amazing in their design and complexity...,” stated Penhale, “and it’s hard to believe a wheeled vehicle can even make it over those obstacles...PLUS they completely avoid streams and wetlands; providing volumes better water quality protection.”

Project highlights

DNR facilitated a monthly meeting with the Reiter Focus Group and public stakeholders who provided diverse views and needs to DNR for design consideration. The input during these monthly meetings resulted in key design elements which provided that extra margin of fun for the trail riders. After the public meetings, Bob Penhale stated, “I marvel at the level of collaboration DNR has nurtured from such wide ranging user groups. The methods used by DNR management and staff are worth study and utilizing elsewhere. I think the fact they delivered a quality project to date has generated expectations that all groups will get a superior product.” This is not to minimize the difference of opinions and ideas held by the various user groups. Environmental review documents generated more than 800 written comments.

Partners

This was a co-operative effort with many hours contributed by a wide range of partners including Department of Natural Resources, Dept of Fish & Wildlife, US Forest Service, Department of Ecology, Tulalip Tribes, Snohomish County, Snohomish County Sheriff’s Office, Washington State Parks, and Snohomish County Parks. Numerous ORV and other recreational user groups were involved including motorcycle, ATV, and 4x4 User Groups; Hiking/Conservation Groups (WTA, The Mountaineers, Sierra Club, and various wilderness groups); Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance, Trout Unlimited, Back Country Horsemen, and the cities of Gold Bar, Sultan, Index, and Monroe.

Funding

Funding for this project and ORV projects statewide is provided primarily through Non-highway Off-road Vehicle Account (NOVA) Grants. These grant funds are generated through 2 cents per gallon gasoline tax and by ORV license fees. The public process and planning were funded with a \$600,000 grant from the Legislature, shared between Reiter and Ahtanum ORV study areas. Implementation is through a 1.2 million dollar grant from NOVA and Washington Jobs funding.

For more information

For more information on this article contact Bob Penhale – Ecology at 425-649-7000. For updated information and details on the Reiter Hills use areas, contact Department of Natural Resources, Northwest Region at (360) 856-5600.

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