

Article by Don Amador, BRC

Nov. 5

Championing Trail Treasures in the High Sierra

As many new-to-the-game off-highway vehicle (OHV) advocates are learning, protecting access to our high quality trail systems on federal lands is a difficult process. It requires commitment, vision, and a lot of elbow grease.

In California for the last 5-7 years, many of our National Forests have seen a steady decline in both federally appropriated recreation dollars and state grant funds from the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation (OHMVR) Trust Fund. Historically when available, these monies had been used for trail-related on-the-ground public services.

When there is a deficit of the public component of volunteerism or the lack of funds or agency staff to maintain important trail recreation opportunities, the resource and users suffer.

On January 1, 2008, new legislation (SB742) will reenergize the OHMVR program. This passionately fought for ecologically balanced bill, with a 10 year sunset, provides substantive funding for trails and trail development. Using the promise of SB742 as a catalyst, I asked Lassen National Forest specialists to join the BlueRibbon Coalition and the Redding Outdoor Recreation Coalition for a tour of a popular high-Sierra OHV area.

Also attending this site case-study were trail professionals from the Plumas National Forest and the OHV program manager/trail builder from the BLM's Redding Field Office.

The High Lakes OHV Area was the site for review in September this year. It is located about 30 miles east of Chico, California and contains many extreme Rubicon-like 4x4 and ATV routes. This area also has numerous dispersed campsites located on scenic vistas or near several alpine lakes along the route network.

Public involvement at this time is critically important. The Lassen National Forest's route inventory and designation process is currently underway. In addition, the High Lakes region will be undergoing a separate recreation and management plan to address the following issues; establishing carry capacity levels, potential use fees, campsite locations, trail head developments, installation of sanitation facilities, trail designations, etc.

Using 4 wheel drive vehicles, ATVs, and our feet, the group journeyed to a number of sites to review issues such as proposed trail designations or recent interim closures, soil

erosion concerns, water crossings, signing, campsite locations, user-created routes, overall condition of the area, and long-term OHV recreation potential.

It was my impression from various group discussions that the High Lakes OHV Area could be one of the premier 4x4 and ATV destination touring sites in the Sierra. The review showed the need for the current planning process. Recently, a number of popular system OHV routes had been closed by an environmental analysis and subsequent Forest Order due to various unmitigated soil erosion and watershed concerns.

With the passage of SB742 and the progress being made at the federal level regarding a new fee-program with dedicated trail funds there is reason for optimism. Most of the group felt the current route system, including some of those trails under an interim closure order, could benefit from a rejuvenated recreation program at High Lakes.

I don't remember seeing any of the trail closures or concerns that could not be addressed with either trail maintenance, reroutes, or hardening of a water-crossing. The technical difficulty – or fun factor rating - of some of the routes should be embraced, managed, and championed by the users and agency.

The mountain-top vistas, lake side camping opportunities, and challenging 4x4 routes are what distinguish the spectacular High Lakes OHV Area as true off-road gem in this region of California.

While users often are focused on other tasks such as the route inventory and designation process on the Lassen National Forest and other units, it is important for local recreation groups specifically to laser in on unique planning opportunities such as the High Lakes OHV Area.

Nobody said promoting and protecting motorized trail opportunities is easy. Some of the best OHV programs on federal units are the result of a decade's long commitment by off-roaders to work in a pro-active way with the land manager.

SB742 and other new funding opportunities will allow the OHV community and those agency professionals with a vision to manage for, and develop, a high quality motorized trail and camping facility for future generations.

With volunteerism and elbow grease – and some funds - the High Lakes OHV Area will be a treasure that trail users seek.

#

