

Teanaway group lobbies for restriction of off-road vehicles in community forest

by Jim Fossett | jim@nkctribune.com

CLE ELUM – Thursday, Nov. 13, an official representing Friends of Teanaway (FOT) presented a position paper to the Teanaway Community Forest Citizens Advisory Committee aimed at restricting the use of Wheeled Off-road Vehicles (WORV) in the community forest.

The statement aired as the committee approaches the first deadline for a draft forest management plan, likely on or before the first of March next year, insiders say. The final draft is due in Olympia in June.

"Historically," the position paper reads, "there had been environmental damage in the Teanaway from illegal WORV motorized access in spite of Boise Cascade, and later American Forest Land Company, posting their land, prohibiting motorized travel access and attempting to enforce against trespass.

"We have watched with great concern the alarming increase in WORV travel on the new community forest and the resulting damage to the land which has occurred since the land was purchased by Washington state.

"It is essential that this issue be addressed and corrected.

"In our opinion there are numerous examples throughout the state where WORV access travel, legal or otherwise, clearly results in significant environmental damage.

"Although it is probably true the majority of those operating WORVs on public land do so in a responsible way, it is also true that a great deal of significant and lasting damage occurs when a small minority do not behave responsibly."

To be clear, the group also indicated it was not in favor of a comprehensive ban, and that it would be beneficial to "provide a WORV corridor from the Cle Elum valley to trails approved for motorized use in national forest land adjacent to the community forest."

Reaction

The WORV issue is one of many associated with the advisory committee's task to iron out high-level regulations for recreation in the community forest.

With that in mind, insiders say some of the issues regarding recreation still appear to be locked in the evaluation cycle and that the committee needs a road map with which to settle recurring disagreements.

Mike Livingston, South-Central Regional Director for the Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife and advisory committee facilitator, commented on FOT's position paper and announced what he believes may be a workable solution to gridlock.

He began by saying the committee encourages suggestions from special interest groups.

"It's important the committee and the general public have the opportunity to express opinions, bring values to the table and into the process we're working through.

"We are listening and providing the framework to work through discussions on various issues such as the use of off-road vehicles.

"At some point the two governing agencies, ours and the Department of Natural Resources will have to make a decision on what the committee proposes.

"To help committee members get to that point we're drawing up a list of criteria for the next meeting to make it easier for them to evaluate any type of recreational activity, based on priorities established by legislators. That's the right way to go."

WORV Special Interest Weighs In

Said Mike Reimer, a Teanaway Community Forest Advisory Committee appointee who represents the interests of the WORV community at large, "We should abide by interim restrictions pertaining to WORV use in the community forest, but our goal is to expand recreational opportunities.

"In my circles the majority of us are abiding by the interim rules and, I would say, WORV use has actually decreased since the state bought the land.

"Overall, I'm cautiously optimistic that in the final management plan we propose to the state we can present the WORV community with some access, much more than what FOT suggests."

About Friends of the Teanaway (FOT)

FOT organized about five years ago in response to the American Forest Land Company's move to establish a self-contained community in the Teanaway River Valley, but that project fizzled and within a couple of years the company's 50,000 acres was purchased by the state and transformed into Washington's first community forest.

"After that happened," said FOT board member Pico Cantieni, "we had to ask ourselves what our focus would be and what our usefulness could be, so we decided to remain organized as a sort of watchdog for the Teanaway River Valley in general.

"I would caution that none of us are looking for a fight. We're not that kind of group. Politically our membership is all over the board and it was only recently we decided the WORV issue is just something on which we should come to a consensus."

Cantieni said FOT is comprised of less than a dozen active members serving a group of 75 area stakeholders. It is that group he and the board surveyed before crafting the position paper presented to the community forest advisory committee last week.

"Out of the 75 surveyed, 69 responded. Two-thirds of those who responded opposed any WORV use in the community forest at all, but the remaining third thought it proper to allow some WORV use.

"So our position is that we don't want to see any WORV use in the forest but we would be willing to designate a corridor for WORVs to get to the three trailheads on the national forest that allow motorized use. Those would be the Middle Fork, West Fork and Yellow Hill trails."

New Player

On December 15 the Nature Conservancy signs on a dotted line that will give them ownership of land that plays into the trail-access equation for the community forest and the Teanaway River Valley at large.

The buy package comprises nearly 75 square miles of forestland between Snoqualmie Pass and Cle Elum.

Because the land purchase is not yet finalized, a Nature Conservancy official involved with the transaction has simply said the Conservancy would approach the issue of land use for outdoor recreation via a public process that engages the community. More on that story as it develops.
