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Bureau of Land Management

BLM Partners With Off-Highway Vehicle Ambassador Program to Promote Responsible Recreation Ethics in Arizona

By Alexandra Ritchie, Public Affairs Specialist, Bureau of Land Management

Off-highway vehicle drivers and other public-land users in Arizona now have an opportunity to learn and teach responsible recreation ethics through the new OHV Ambassador program. This one-year pilot program, launched in September, is a partnership effort among Arizona State Parks, Arizona Game and Fish, Bureau of Land Management, USDA Forest Service, Arizona County Sheriffs, organized OHV groups and volunteers.

“OHV use around the state has really exploded in the last several years, and the BLM, along with our fellow land-management agencies, is struggling to keep up with this demand,” BLM Arizona State Director Elaine Zielinski said. “This OHV Ambassador program will be invaluable to our organization, because it relies on peers to provide information on responsible use of the lands and to help coordinate volunteers willing to identify hazards and clean up trash within these areas used for OHV recreation.”

Within Arizona, BLM oversees four districts, eight field offices, five national monuments, and three national conservation areas. The public lands the agency manages cover more than 12 million surface acres and include approximately 26,000 miles of roads, primitive roads and trails. Recreation is just one of the many uses for which BLM manages these public lands.

Target Market for the Program

Several OHV organizations already engage their members in proactive efforts to maintain recreation areas that they frequent throughout Arizona and to provide a positive image for the activity. However, the partner agencies thought an ambassador program could educate a wider range of recreational users of the public, state and private lands about safety issues and natural-resource values. These motorized vehicle enthusiasts have a vested interest in preserving these recreational areas. Yet they are often unaware of the designated routes and other regulations and may not consider how their actions are impacting the environment. Bill Gibson, BLM Arizona’s travel-management coordinator, said that when resource damage occurs, BLM is occasionally compelled to close roads. He added that the partnership program is an incentive for OHV dealers to promote recreational ethics with their customers, because “fewer trails mean fewer sales.”

Recruitment and Training

Arizona State Parks, through its recreational trails program, recruits motivated ambassadors to “maintain motorized areas, roads, trails and facilities; provide a recognizable presence on public and state lands; model appropriate riding behavior; and provide educational and informative materials to the public.” Partner agencies help prepare ambassadors for scenarios they are likely to encounter while patrolling and monitoring the public lands, through classes and field exercises on the following topics;

- Defensive driving
- Safety
- Hazardous materials;
- Bloodborne pathogens

- Communication (including radio operations)
- Visitor contact procedures
- Working with land managers and law enforcement officers
- All-terrain vehicle and utility-vehicle safety
- Dirt-bike training

Pilot Program Locations and Initial Volunteer Events

Arizona State Parks accepted applications from the public to serve as ambassadors for the first patrol season (September through December). The volunteers trained Sept. 14 through Sept. 16 are already completing assignments to make visitor contacts, conduct resource monitoring patrols, participate in site cleanups, engage in special on-site maintenance projects among the three pilot areas. Events completed include:

- Sept. 29 site cleanup and visitor contact patrol —Desert Wells Multi-Use Area
- Oct. 20 site cleanup and visitor contact patrol —BLM portions of the Table Mesa Road corridor, west of the I-17 freeway
- Nov 12 orientation and introduction to resource monitoring patrols – BLM portion of the Lake Pleasant Area north of Hwy 74
- Oct. 6,8,14, 20,27, 28, and Nov. 3, 10, 17-18 visitor-contact patrols and special work projects on the Tonto National Forest-Cave Creek District and the Granite Mountain Multi-Use Area in North Scottsdale.
- Dec. 1 resource-monitoring and visitor-contact patrols —BLM portion of the Middle Gila Canyons area

Francisco Mendoza, an outdoor recreation planner with BLM's Tucson Field Office who helped coordinate the Nov. 10 cleanup event in the Middle Gila Canyons area, said the program helps BLM and other agencies focus their resources on the lands most at risk from this growth in recreational use. "Volunteer ambassadors will be patrolling these areas and promoting the visitors' responsibility for taking care of the land, while identifying hazards such as open mine shafts, dumps, burnt vehicles, and broken fences — a laundry list of conditions that need management attention," Mendoza said. "The BLM can then turn this list into small projects that will enable the agency to improve conditions and enhance the enjoyment of the area."

The one-year pilot program is divided into three seasons (September through December, January through April, and May through August.) BLM is participating through an agreement with Arizona State Parks that allows BLM to recruit and mobilize volunteers on BLM-managed lands, while other volunteers work on projects on state lands. This year, OHV ambassadors will also help BLM install or replace signs that mark designated OHV routes.

While many outdoor-recreation organizations are eager to participate, the OHV Ambassador training stresses the importance of keeping visitors and volunteers safe. Whenever possible, the program partner agencies provide a ranger or other law enforcement officer to patrol the area for criminal activity during a sponsored event. In addition, the agencies train ambassadors to use a non-confrontational approach when speaking to public-land visitors. Volunteers bring their own tools. However, the agency or landowner on whose land a cleanup event is taking place provides maps and instructions on whom to contact about hazards or violations of OHV-use regulations. Private recreation organizations such as RideNow Powersports, which participated in the first cleanup event on Sept. 29 in the Desert Wells Multi-Use Area, will often provide food and water.

Future Expansion of Ambassador Program

To date, 13 events have been planned in the pilot program locations, three of which encompass BLM areas. BLM leaders and staff are optimistic about the program's potential to grow. Sixty people applied in September, and 27 signed up for the program, which is nearly three times as many as Arizona State Parks was expecting. The state agency is accepting applications on an ongoing basis, and is planning a second training session in March depending on the demand and the schedules of the partner agencies. In the interim, agency partners will use the OHV Ambassador trailer as a traveling kiosk to promote the program during these scheduled events and

perhaps at related cleanups around the state. If this program continues to grow, BLM Arizona hopes to hire a volunteer coordinator to manage the projects on BLM-managed land in the state so that volunteer resources do not go untapped.

For more information about the program and upcoming events, please visit:

<http://www.azstateparks.gov/partnerships/ohv/OHVindex.html> or contact Troy Waskey, OHV planner at Arizona State Parks, at (602) 542-1665 or twaskey@azstateparks.gov.

Contact Bill Gibson, travel-management coordinator at BLM-Arizona State Office, at (602) 417-9425 or Bill_Gibson@blm.gov about the BLM's participation in the program