

*Opening Statement
Subcommittee Chairman Raúl Grijalva
Off-Road Vehicle Hearing
March 13, 2008*

The Subcommittee will come to order.

I am pleased today to welcome you all to this timely oversight hearing on the impact of off-road vehicles on our nation's public lands system. I would like to thank all our witnesses for being here today and look forward to hearing their testimony.

I say timely because it seems that we are more frequently seeing media reporting that the use of ORVs on public lands is growing rampantly, as are the impacts of their unchecked use on both federal lands and private lands. We are hearing concerns from citizens across the spectrum, including ranchers, sportsmen, law enforcement agents, emergency room doctors, property

owners, tribal leaders, archeologists, and wildlife biologists, as well as environmental advocates.

News reports from the Christian Science Monitor, to the New York Times, to my own Tucson Citizen are reporting what many of these stakeholders already know -- that the unmanaged use of off-road vehicles is a crisis that federal land management agencies are failing to address.

While many Americans enjoy using ORVs responsibly, the negligent use of ORVs is rising rapidly with troubling results: damaged cultural sites, disturbed wildlife habitat, and destroyed private property.

Many ORV riders -- knowingly and unknowingly -- zoom off designated trails and run over fragile areas,

harming resources, and threatening public safety. Some ORV users are spilling out beyond boundaries of federal lands onto nearby private property or tribal lands. The rapid growth of this recreational activity has resulted in use that overburdens law enforcement and local communities and tarnishes the recreational experience for those off-road users who respect the land.

Although ORV use on federal lands is legal on designated roads and trails, it has increased so dramatically that federal managers seem unable to keep up. A recent poll of federal land enforcement agents reveals that they view off-road vehicles use as one of the biggest threats facing our public lands.

According to one report, ORV use has increased as much as 147% since 1993. One BLM official in Utah has stated that in order for the agency to address the

impacts of ORVs on public lands, “you would have to have Patton’s army”.

As funds for federal land management agencies have been cut year after year, staffing has dwindled and resources have been stretched thin, leaving our cultural and natural resources unmonitored and unprotected.

Agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service cannot adequately enforce existing regulations or provide for public safety.

In those cases where regulations can be enforced, penalties are too weak to be an effective deterrent for those irresponsible off-road vehicle users who damage resources.

Closure of public access is obviously the issue that polarizes this debate. One side thinks that their right to

ride is being infringed, while the other side wants to close areas to ORVs, but this is not what this hearing is about. While that debate is important, this is about the agencies' inability to manage the areas that are being overrun. This is about managing the legal use of ORVs. This is about creating a culture of responsible recreational use.

With such a boom in the use of ORVs, I would be derelict in my duties if I did not hold this hearing. ORV users are flocking in record numbers to federal lands, and addressing the impacts of the ORVs across the west goes to the heart of the sound stewardship of our public lands and the public trust. This is a problem that is need of an urgent attention and long term solutions.

I'd now like to turn to Ranking Member Bishop for any opening statement he may have.