



Highlights of [GAO-09-509](#), a report to the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Off-highway vehicle (OHV) use on lands managed by the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service and the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and National Park Service (Park Service) has become popular over the past few decades. Some critics have asserted that OHV use causes adverse environmental, social, and safety impacts, while proponents have voiced concerns about retaining access to federal lands. GAO examined the (1) trends in and status of OHV use on federal lands, as well as reported environmental, social, and safety impacts; (2) agencies' strategic planning for managing OHV use; (3) actions taken by agency field units to manage OHV use; and (4) current OHV management challenges.

GAO collected and analyzed related executive orders and agency OHV plans, regulations, and guidance; interviewed agency and interest group officials; and conducted a Web-based survey of all three agencies' field unit officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Forest Service and BLM improve their strategic planning and take other actions to help provide quality OHV opportunities while protecting federal lands and resources. The agencies generally concurred with GAO's findings and recommendations.

View [GAO-09-509](#) or [key components](#). To view survey results, click on [GAO-09-547SP](#). For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or [nazzaror@gao.gov](mailto:nazzaror@gao.gov).

## FEDERAL LANDS

### Enhanced Planning Could Assist Agencies in Managing Increased Use of Off-Highway Vehicles

#### What GAO Found

OHV use on federal lands—both authorized and unauthorized—increased from fiscal year 2004 through fiscal year 2008, with varying environmental, social, and safety impacts, according to officials from all three agencies. All three agencies reported that OHVs are predominantly used on their lands for OHV recreation, such as trail and open-area riding. Most Park Service officials said that OHV use constitutes less than 10 percent of the recreation on their lands. Most officials from all three agencies also said that OHV-related environmental impacts occur on less than 20 percent of their lands, although a few said that such impacts occur on 80 percent or more of their lands. Most officials said that social and safety impacts, such as conflicts with nonmotorized users, occasionally or rarely occurred.

Forest Service and BLM plans for OHV management are missing key elements of strategic planning, such as results-oriented goals, strategies to achieve the goals, time frames for implementing strategies, or performance measures to monitor incremental progress. For example, the Forest Service's strategic plan has no strategies to address key aspects of OHV management, such as communicating with the public or enforcing OHV regulations. Similarly, while BLM's recreation plan contains strategies addressing key aspects of OHV management, the agency has not identified time frames for implementing these strategies or performance measures for monitoring progress. The Park Service has no extensive planning for managing OHV use, but this absence seems reasonable given that its regulations limit OHV use to only a few units and OHV use is not a predominant recreational activity on its lands.

While agencies' field units have taken many actions to manage OHV use, additional efforts could improve communication and enforcement. In particular, units have taken actions such as supplementing federal funds with outside resources like state grants, communicating with the public by posting signs and maps, and enforcing OHV regulations by occasionally patrolling OHV areas and writing citations for OHV violations. Few officials, however, indicated that their unit had signs and maps for nearly all of their OHV areas. Additionally, while most field unit officials said that they conduct enforcement activities, such as writing citations, about half indicated that fines are insufficient to deter illegal or unsafe OHV use. In addition, a majority of officials reported they cannot sustainably manage their existing OHV use areas; sustainable management would include having the necessary human and financial resources to ensure compliance with regulations, educate users, maintain OHV use areas, and evaluate the OHV program.

Officials identified numerous challenges in managing OHV use, of which the most widely identified were insufficient financial resources, as well as staff for OHV management and enforcement. In addition, most officials cited enforcement of OHV regulations as a great challenge. Other challenges were maintaining signs, managing the public's varied expectations about how federal lands should be used, and changing long-established OHV use patterns.