FLORIDA
FOUR WHEEL DRIVE ASSOCIATION
www.FL4WDA.com
Education • Conservation • Recreation

August 22, 2007

RE: Environmental Assessment: Apalachicola National Forest Route

Dear Marcus Beard,

The Florida Four Wheel Drive Association (FL4WDA) and its members wish to offer our comments in support of the Forest Service preferred alternative D for route designation contained within the Apalachicola National Forest. It is our hope that a partnership can be arranged between the land managers and our user group to ensure a sustainable, ecologically harmonious and recreational satisfying travel way system for licensed 4X4 vehicles such as Jeeps and Trucks.

Four Wheel Drive Recreation Allowance

With a route designation that does not include a specific inclusion of a recreation that is being provided for many conflicts will arise. The preferred route system contains numerous dead end trails that are likely to be confusing without proper signage and maintenance. These dead end trails provide little recreation or interpretation potential, as the route in is the same route out. Furthermore it may be needed to turn around before you reach the end due to congestion or other related issues and this imposes a problem of where turning around is permitted. In short, it is not public friendly. Connecting loops that will eventually lead back to a main road will promote compliance and satisfy the public in being able to recreate on an intuitively designed route system—long term compliance and good management policies require this.

What appears to be missing is the Environmental Assessment is the understanding and allowance for responsible Four Wheel Drive recreation either on all public access routes or within specified trails/areas. By not specifying some sort of Four Wheel Drive recreation within the access plan it leaves the public without an outlet for their desired recreation and results in confusion, false assumptions, fines and unnecessary resource impact. It is our hope that this can be avoided through a designation or allowance for our recreation where it is reasonable and in harmony with the local ecosystem.

Designation of Four Wheel Drive Recreational Trails

Maintaining a desirable and sustainable public access roadway system for licensed vehicles will provide opportunities for enjoying the natural environment in terms of interpretative trails, wildlife viewing, hunting and other family related activities such as camping. Other forms of recreation such as ATV, OHM and Jeep/4X4 trail riding requires specific designation that accounts for their respective interest and sustainability if the Access Designation is to be successful, managed appropriately and address the public's concern of desirable recreation.

By providing a specific route for Four Wheel Drive vehicles land managers will be able to focus this motorized recreation to desired areas of the Forest and lesson any impact on the remaining public access travel way system.

Design of Four Wheel Drive Recreational Trails

Various loops (entrance and exit is same point) off a main road that take the Four Wheel Drive user to different areas of the Forest is preferred as this will provide a good sample of the local environment to enjoy for interpretation in addition to providing a safe route for those not familiar with the Forest. The trails main roads are a means of connecting loops to ensure user compliance of staying on designated routes. Trailhead markers at each loop indicating the designation of the trail will provide the motorist a notice of the recreational opportunity that is available and optionally the name of Recreation Club/Association assisting in maintenance of the trail. Other markers along the travel way such as an interpretive sign or marking of an obstacle will assist the traveler of this trail to remain in compliance while enjoying the recreation opportunities.

Areas along the trail that are designated as an obstacle or four-wheel drive opportunity should be adjacent to the trail as to permit unobstructed travel for those who prefer to traverse the direct route. Signage near this area should indicate the recreation that is being offered and optionally offer a measure of difficulty. Either on one side or the other of the obstacle and adjacent to the trail there should exist an area for parking vehicles safely without the need of driving over established brush. It is typical near an obstacle for there to be a slight buildup of traffic either waiting for a vehicle to pass over the obstacle or when vehicle recovery is required. Exact location and size of these areas will depend on surrounding habitat and proximity to road intersections should there be any nearby.

Items used to establish and/or border the obstacle should be those found directly near the challenge area such as downed trees. These items should be arranged and appropriated as it best fits the area designated as to maintain the flow of unobstructed travel, for example downed trees would need to be cut to length and positioned (possibly fastened with soil or other means) along the obstacle area. Where it is appropriate or sustainable another form of obstacle provided would be alternating grade changes that provide a technical challenge when the "up and downs" are positioned close to each other—this can be

formed with the native soil from surrounding area and secured from erosion by means of downed trees cut to length.

Use and Maintenance of Four Wheel Drive Recreational Trails

The FL4WDA will produce maps of the Four Wheel Drive trails designated and include details such as GPS coordinates, rating of obstacles, sponsorship of trails, points of interests for interpretation or other recreation as well as Tread Lightly and basic FS rules/regulations for motorized recreation. They will be distributed within our Association to member clubs and available online. By no means would this map be a replacement for or an official supplement to the Motor Vehicle Use Map however it will serve the Four Wheel Drive Community with some assistance in locating and properly using the Trail Designation.

A FL4WDA Member Club would be assigned specific loop(s) to organized and oversee maintenance schedules to assist in keeping trails clean from trash and repairing any obstacle to original condition. In addition to this we plan to implement a Volunteer Trail Patrol as outlined and instructed by United Four Wheel Drive Association whereby incidents of illegal activity are reported to FL4WDA and are relayed to the Forest Service or an assigned Law Enforcement contact. It is our hope that the compliance of the Four Wheel Drive routes will be supported in part through education.

Our members can assist the installation of signage for trailheads, obstacles and other areas along the trail. We appreciate the opportunity to offer our suggestions for a better recreation plan for our use and look forward to working with you.

Cordially,

Jason Kawaja, President FL4WDA