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Global warming concerns may tighten OHV rules**Senator tells BLM, USFS to explain how off-road activities regulated**

By Steve Tetreault
Stephens Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Here's another impact of climate change.

Prolonged drought coupled with the growing use of public lands by offroaders means that soil erosion and dust pollution will only grow worse to threaten water supplies in the West, a federal expert said Thursday.

Trail use by dirt bikers and drivers of all-terrain vehicles "is having a much more profound impact than it did 10 years ago, and with future conditions predicted it is going to be worse," research ecologist Jayne Belnap told the Senate Natural Resources Committee at a hearing.

"We have drought and we are predicted for drought for the next 30 years. We have to really think ahead about something that might not have been such a problem 10 years ago," said Belnap, who works for the U.S. Geological Survey.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, the committee chairman, called on leaders of the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service to explain how federal lands are being managed where it comes to off-roaders, a population estimated to have quadrupled in the past 25 years.

"It appears questionable to me whether either the BLM or the Forest Service has been able to keep up with the challenge of properly managing this use," said Bingaman, D-N.M.

"In some cases it appears laws are not being enforced while in others it appears the agencies are ignoring unregulated use of public lands with significant consequences for the health of public lands and communities," Bingaman said.

The BLM is mapping and designating proper trails for off-road use in districts across the West but it will take another 10 years to finish the job, agency deputy director Henri Bisson said.

"It is a very long time but we are doing the best we can with the resources we have," Bisson said. "We are going as fast as we can.

"We are moving to a place where 99 percent of lands are designated so people know where they can travel," Bisson said.

"Ten years is a long time and I would like the schedule to be moved forward," Belnap said after being asked by Bingaman to weigh in on the matter.

Off-road vehicles "do increase soil erosion and this can compromise air and water quality which is a major issue especially in the West, Belnap said.

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