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Court Finds Sierra Nevada Off-road Vehicle Plan Illegal, Closes 89 Miles

SACRAMENTO, *Calif.*— A federal court today ordered the U.S. Forest Service to close 89 miles of off-road vehicle routes in the Eldorado National Forest that cut through and damage fragile Sierra Nevada meadow habitats. The court-imposed remedy implements a May 2011 court decision that found the Forest Service's "travel-management plan" violated legal protections for meadows as well as threatened California red-legged frogs. In response to the May decision, the Forest reconsidered impacts to the frog and its habitat.

Meadows occur over only 10,416 acres, or 1.7 percent, of the 596,724-acre Eldorado National Forest. These scarce, fragile, wet habitats are heavily used by wildlife.

"Meadows are among the rarest, most important and sensitive habitats in the Sierra Nevada," said Karen Schambach, president of the Center for Sierra Nevada Conservation. "They are too important for wildlife and for clean water to allow their destruction by vehicle use."

The court-imposed remedy resolves a legal challenge brought by the Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Sierra Nevada Conservation and Forest Issues Group in 2009. The court's 2011 decision found the plan violated the National Forest Management Act and the Endangered Species Act by favoring off-road vehicle use over protection of sensitive forest resources, including endangered species and meadow habitats. The Eldorado National Forest contains key recovery habitat for red-legged frogs and many other rare and imperiled species as well as clean-water resources critical to the state.

"We hope that other national forests in Region V will take this opportunity to review and revise their travel-management plans that unlawfully allow motorized travel across sensitive meadows, damaging water quality, plants and wildlife," said Don Rivenes, executive director of Forest Issues Group.

"Closing 89 miles of ORV routes that unnecessarily cut through important meadow habitats and already-damaged riverside conservation areas is a big step in the right direction," said Lisa Belenky, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. "The court fashioned a reasonable solution to the Forest Service's failure to protect Californians' wildlife and lands on the Eldorado National Forest — such a critical home for California red-legged frogs and other endangered species."

The Eldorado is likely to prepare a "supplemental environmental impact statement" and new decision to address the issue of meadow protection. Some of the closed miles of

road may be rerouted, some designated for nonmotorized recreation, and some possibly decommissioned to protect the meadows.

Plaintiffs were represented by Dave Bahr of Bahr Law Offices, Erik Schlenker-Goodrich of Western Environmental Law Center and Lisa Belenky of the Center for Biological Diversity.

More information on the California red-legged frog and other imperiled species can be found [here](#).