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Hikers, bikers and off-road vehicle riders traveling through the Ocala National Forest have probably noticed their favorite off-the-beaten path blocked off with a tree or replanted with fresh saplings in the roadbed that once existed.

As part of the Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation Initiative (LRRI) created by Congress in 2008, the National Forests in Florida and its partner organizations are working to give back to nature thousands of miles of unneeded and non-designated roads and routes on the Ocala National Forest to protect and restore community water sources, ecosystems and wildlife habitats.

“The biggest step we’re taking is restoration – it’s all about restoring habitat areas that have been destroyed or denuded,” said Rick Lint, District Ranger on the Ocala National Forest. “Everything left over is a scar on the landscape that needs to be rehabilitated and restored and what we’re doing is planting it back.”



U.S. Forest Service employees and volunteers plant trees in the Ocala National Forest where non-designated routes caused erosion. (Photo by Carrie Sekerak)

Spawned by environmental problems from user-created routes, excess roads, and old fire lines that were never closed, the LRRI dedicated nearly \$40 million to the nation’s national forests to decommission old roads and user-created routes, perform critical road repair and remove barriers threatening species and natural habitats.

Remnants of more than 2,200 miles of unneeded and non-designated roads – some user-created and others that once served a purpose – still exist today in the Ocala. About 1,800 miles of such roads span the Apalachicola and Osceola National Forests.

“We had over 4,000 miles of travelable routes in a 600 square-mile forest -- that’s way too much and too busy,” Lint said. Inroads that offshoot from other roads have the potential for people to get off the path and do illegal things; removing them decreases the amount of exposure to harm the environment.”

Community members were hesitant about the Legacy Roads and Trails at first, said Lint, because it involved removing these routes.

After engaging others on prioritizing projects such as protecting watersheds and restoring water resources, organizations such as the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, National Wild Turkey Federation, and Sierra Club came on board to support.

“We’re still looking at strategies to get areas ready for restoration,” said Lint. “We’re serious about this.”

Protecting Florida's Water

U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologists like Carrie Sekerak are taking the lead to implement strategies for removing unneeded routes that add to erosion and sediment runoff.

“Watersheds are a primary interest of the agency,” Sekerak said, emphasizing that the U.S. Forest Service has an obligation to take care of unneeded roads and routes necessary to protect water quality.

“There are not a lot of green places that can clear contaminants and the Ocala is one of the biggest landscapes that can provide that as water moves through the natural land process.”

Watersheds are areas of land where rain water flows, picking up sediments and pollutants along the way, as it moves toward a water source.

Since the LRRF funding was allocated, the Ocala National Forest received \$150,000 in 2008 to successfully protect the St. John's watershed in the Billie's Bay and Astor areas.

About 40 miles of user-created roads were decommissioned for habitat restoration: 6,000 trees and shrubs were planted and 90 acres in 60 areas were revitalized with groundcover to create hunting enhancements. Additionally, the project reduced sediment to streams and wetlands to improve water quality, restored threatened, endangered and rare species habitat and reduced fragmentation that impacted 43,000 acres of imperiled ecosystems.

A \$300,000 allocation in 2009 was invested into two ongoing projects: protecting the wetlands and watershed near Lake Ocklawaha area and reducing erosion at Alexander Springs Run.



U.S. Forest Service employees plant trees in an area once used by motorized vehicles on the Ocala National Forest. (Photo by Carrie Sekerak)

Restoration efforts at Alexander Springs will alleviate erosion, improve public drinking water, and enhance habitat conditions for species. Tree plantings, seeding and use of native materials will stabilize soil and restore about 30 miles to natural conditions.

Efforts at the Penner Ponds region of the Oklawaha River watershed focus on protecting critical habitat for Florida manatees, sandhill cranes and striped newt. About 100 miles of legacy roads and trails are in this area and activities include putting up signs advertising restoration, pulling in berms, removing culverts, restoring wetland vegetation and covering visible road entrances.

Challenges on the Horizon

Sekerak has worked in the Ocala for the past 11 years, and while there are successes, she also runs across challenges.



A non-designated route is closed off for restoration in the Ocala National Forest. (Photo by Carrie Sekerak)

“When road densities through forests exceed those in cities, you can expect the ecosystem and wildlife to be stressed by multiple impacts,” she said, referring to increased human population size, erosion, water quality degradation, inability for prescribed fire to carry across the landscape due to road density and increased illegal dumping sites.

Most disappointing are users re-opening blocked roads to create new illegal routes or driving over restored areas. The U.S. Forest

Service has put up signs, blocked them with trees and even planted live vegetation to prep areas for restoration.

“Chain saws and yank straps have been used to cut away into the forest to make new trails,” she said. “This type of destruction removes the hard effort put into the Legacy Roads projects.”

One user-created route Sekerak recalled made a culvert-like trench toward the wetlands. Her team tackled the problem by planting wax myrtles and palmettos to revive the natural landscape and prevent further erosion.

“Restoring Legacy Roads back to forests and prairies and conducting associated projects like watershed restoration is one of the most significant actions we can take toward rebuilding the ecological integrity of the Ocala National Forest,” she said.

Challenges remain, but Sekerak doesn’t let them stop her passion for restoring the forest. Lint added, “People need to understand that this is restoration, with live vegetation and the many trees that have been tilted over to block entry are alive as well. It will be a bad choice for someone to reopen these, damage live vegetation, or cut living trees. Fines can be up to \$5,000 or 6 months in jail.”