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Kane County - their way or the highway

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What has happened to lawfulness and due process in Kane County?

As 35-year residents, taxpayers, owners of off-road vehicles and users of public lands, we take issue with Kane County's recent push to claim and control dozens of off-road trails on public lands northwest of Kanab.

All of these trails branch off of Hancock and Yellowjacket roads, the two main routes connecting Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park to Highway 89. We access our home, Raven Canyon Ranch, from Hancock and know the roads well. Many of the trails that have been marked with county road signs were haphazardly created in recent years by four-wheelers, jeeps and motorcycles and certainly do not qualify as legitimate RS2477 rights of way.

It takes just one vehicle one passage through the sandy soil and high desert vegetation typical of this area to create a road. Most of these roads originated in this manner and they go nowhere. They simply wander across public lands, splitting off into multiple trails that connect to one another and dead-end or loop back to Hancock and Yellowjacket.

We do not object to reasonable and limited off-road travel, but if 1,000 roads are to be designated throughout Kane County, as Commissioner Mark Habbeshaw stated in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, the consequences to wildlife habitat, watersheds, wetlands and archaeological sites will be serious.

By numbering these trails and earmarking them with a four-wheeler insignia, Kane County has thrown the doors open to motorsports enthusiasts, essentially saying, "Have at it. Go anywhere you please, do anything you want. The more roads the better. We don't want wilderness or parks or monuments, and what better way to rebel against public ownership of federal lands than by pushing roads everywhere."

This paranoia and dislike of the federal government is being expressed through the wanton degradation of public lands. Many of the county's newly claimed routes border the Moquith Wilderness Study Area and access public lands that were included in the BLM's wilderness inventory of 1999.

Kane County officials have taken the arrogant and wrongful position that public lands in this county do not belong to all Americans, they belong only to a few county residents. Their decision to claim these trails as county roads was made without the involvement of local residents or the Bureau of Land Management.

While many of us have been working within the system to foster improved public land management policy - attending meetings, writing letters, submitting comments on revised BLM resource management plans - a few county officials have been scheming behind closed doors to impose their own policy.

They are now carrying out their stealthy plans as though they have the full support of the community. They do not. Many of us are opposed to what is going on but hesitate to speak out for fear of retaliation.

Taxpayers are being unfairly burdened with the costs associated with these illegal road claims and the inevitable litigation that will follow.

As more and more roads are created, the land loses its ability to catch, store and release water over time. On what basis did Kane County officials make the decision that protecting our community's watershed is no longer important?

We believe this is a critical issue and are hopeful that the Bureau of Land Management will take immediate action to stop Kane County's illegal land grab. Public lands are reserved for the enjoyment of everyone. Quiet, sustainable, less invasive use of public lands such as horseback riding, backpacking, hunting, birding and botanizing should be given consideration along with motorized use.

We should not allow renegade county officials to take ownership of public lands and then allow irresponsible off-road enthusiasts to trash them. The county's recent actions underscore why the BLM must quickly adopt a

new off-road vehicle management plan closing public lands to ORV travel with the exception of designated areas and trails where such use is appropriate.

The current "open" (go anywhere, do anything) policy is not working in Kane County. It is our opinion that we cannot afford to wait three or four years while a revised and hopefully improved resource management plan is written.

Jana and Ron Smith live on their ranch outside Kanab.