
Title: Roads on WRD Lands

Policy Number:

WRD-R-003

Effective Date:

Revision Date:

Authority:

Page:

01/01/2010

10/04/2019

Division Director

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Purpose:

WRD's guiding philosophy on roads is that all primary and seasonal roads should be open for public access, with limited exceptions clearly defined in this policy document.

This policy establishes guidelines for road designations and access management by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Wildlife Resources Division (WRD) on Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) and Public Fishing Areas (PFA). On WMAs and PFAs, in addition to providing access for our customers, roads are critical to facilitate wildlife and fisheries habitat development, serve as firebreaks for prescribed burns, and provide other specialized needs. The objective of this policy is to ensure a consistent statewide approach that provides a reasonable balance between public access and resource protection/management.

This policy applies to all WRD-managed lands. However, policy implementation on leased lands is subject to compatibility with lessor objectives and any relevant terms and conditions of the lease agreement. Additionally, these guidelines do not pertain to roads and/or road rights-of-way under local government or Georgia Department of Transportation jurisdiction.

This policy does not pertain to roads constructed or maintained on DNR-owned lands for the exclusive purpose of timber operations. Timber roads on DNR-owned lands are covered in a separate policy (WRD-R-004).

Definitions:

Daylighting: Control or removal of trees and shrubs on roadsides and rights-of-way to maximize sunlight penetration and wind exposure to improve moisture evaporation thereby reducing road damage, promote establishment of protective vegetation on road surfaces and shoulders to increase road stability, enhance safety by increasing sight distance, enhance development of early successional habitat, and minimize spread of wildfires. Daylighting is created and maintained mechanically, chemically, by prescribed fire, or a combination thereof.

Open Roads: Roads not closed with a gate, sign, earthen berm or similar device intended to prevent vehicular access.

Policy:

1. Designations:

This policy establishes three (3) road designation levels based on planned use and maintenance. When developing or revising long-term strategic plans for WMAs, or when developing 10-year and annual work plans, all roads should be designated in one of three categories.

Primary: Roads that are open to motor vehicle access and are maintained to provide access in most conditions (except during floods, other natural disasters or law enforcement matters). These roads receive priority for available budget resources for maintaining them in an open status on a year-round basis. If significant damage occurs to this road type repairs are made promptly to restore access. Primary roads should be open year-round unless for extenuating circumstances.

Seasonal: These roads are opened to motor vehicles to provide public access during open hunting seasons in most conditions. Seasonal roads may be closed during a hunting season to minimize vehicle access, to enhance hunt quality and/or to minimize road damage. These roads are given secondary consideration for resource expenditures and as such may be closed to avoid damage during extreme weather conditions. If significant damage occurs this road type may be closed for extended periods until resources are available to repair the road to a safe and operable condition.

Administrative: These roads are for Department access or for official use only and are closed to the public for vehicular access. Their level of maintenance varies but is generally minimal and need dependent. Examples include, but are not limited to, a road leading to a WMA/PFA workshop or other structure not deemed to serve a public use. These administrative roads should be clearly marked with signs with the words, "Official Use Only". Infrequently used administrative roads may also be closed with a gate that also includes such signage.

2. Guidance on Road Closures:

WRD provides an array of outdoor recreation opportunities and experiences, with emphasis on hunting, fishing, and other compatible and appropriate outdoor recreation. As most customers access these areas by vehicle, roads are an integral feature of WMAs and PFAs. Road availability and condition is of primary importance to many WMA/PFA customers.

Resource Protection/Habitat: Resource protection is a primary consideration in determining whether to close a road. Road closures are a valuable tool to minimize wildlife disturbance, protect sensitive or rare features or wildlife species, protect scenic, archaeological or historic areas, protect streamside or lakeshore zones, and serve to provide invaluable early successional habitat that is used by many wildlife species for nesting, feeding and raising offspring. These habitat benefits are enhanced when roads are daylighted. Daylighting roads to a minimum of 15 feet on either side of the road is an integral objective of WRD's road development and management.

User Access Distribution: As hunter use varies temporally and spatially, it is important to have flexibility to open and close roads to manage hunter distribution and hunt pressure while balancing hunt quality and public desires for access. Many hunters recognize the value of closed roads for hunting. As such, designating portions of WMAs/PFAs as walk-in access areas should be given consideration in the effort to facilitate a balanced approach.

To address access for WMA hunters with mobility disabilities, certain roads or section of roads should be designated as handicap vehicle accessible (aka. "Handicap Access Roads"). An acceptable rule of thumb according to provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act and its pertinent regulations is to provide at least 10% of the total seasonal access road mileage on a given WMA as handicap accessible. Through signage, and not by gates, these roads or road sections should be closed to other motor vehicles (except for the occasional need for staff administrative use). Loop roads intersecting primary roads work well for this type access.

Weather: Some roads may be impacted for long periods by river or creek floodwater regardless of local rain amounts. Many river systems have gauges that are posted on the USGS Website and should be consulted to objectively document when certain roads will be closed. A road should be considered for closure when it is has standing/running water across areas not designed to serve as fords at a level substantial enough to hide the bottom (6-12 inches) for a period of several days or if water levels are predicted to rise to a level that may impair safe access through low areas/fords within 24 hours. If it is reasonable to assume a 2 wheel-drive vehicle will become stuck or damaged due to washout, soft mud, deep sands, etc. on the road then closure should be considered. Due to the nature of some roads, it may be left up to the discretion of the user as to whether their vehicle may be able to traverse low areas or poor roads, due to the need to maintain access, however, public safety is a primary consideration (discussed below) and supersedes all other concerns. In winter, freezing and thawing may impact seasonal roads and these roads may require closure to minimize damage and perform required maintenance. Additionally, snow, sleet, and other freezing precipitation that jeopardizes public safety or the integrity of the roadbed may be justification for temporary or prolonged road closures.

Public Safety: A road should be considered for closure when the safety of customers is a concern. Closure should be considered when: a) it is reasonable to assume damage to user vehicles may occur as a result of road damage, road substrate or other factors on the area; b) water levels are likely to strand users on any portion of the area; c) water levels are predicted to rise to a risk level within a 24-hour period; d) prescribed fires are being conducted and the road serves as a firebreak if other proactive safety measures (e.g., signage, flashing lights) aren't available; e) access to a burn unit needs to be temporarily restricted; f) smoke from prescribed burns or wildfires creates a hazard; and, g) any exigent circumstance or need arises from natural disasters.

Law Enforcement Activity: Roads may be closed to prevent chronic vandalism, dumping, or other unlawful activities. WRD should coordinate with DNR's Law Enforcement Division to provide a coordinated, strategic approach to help preclude the necessity of road closure.

Handicap/Mobility-Impaired Access: Certain roads, or segments thereof, that are closed to general public access should be designated as handicap/mobility-impaired access. The physical condition of these specially designated roads or road segments should be such that they can be accessed by a motor vehicle or other power-driven mobility device (OPDMD) such as a golf car, ATV, or other approved OPDMD. Per the Americans with Disability Act guidelines, at least 10% of closed road mileage during any given time should be designated as handicap access/mobility impaired; the recommended sign design is shown in Attachment 3. Thus, while some roads or road segments may permanently be designated as handicap/mobility-impaired access roads, other roads or road segments may need to be temporarily designated as such to maintain the overall 10% rule on a Division property.¹ A road or road segment posted with the handicap/mobility-impaired access sign should not be closed by a gate, berm, or any other impairment that would prevent a properly permitted hunter to access by vehicle or OPDMD. Further information on the OPDMD policy and Special Use Permit may be obtained from DNR’s or WRD’s ADA Coordinator.

3. Notification of Closures:

Following policy guidance, decisions for road closure are made by the responsible regional office and are based on assessment by local staff with approval by the Region Supervisor. Decisions to close roads based upon exigent public safety and/or resource protection needs may supersede all previous road decisions and designations. When primary roads or unplanned seasonal roads must be closed the WRD public affairs office should be contacted along with the Director’s office also being notified. A notice of the road closure will be posted to the main WRD website and on the individual webpage of the WMA/PFA. Offices should also have available information for the public of road closures for their region. Such road closure notices shall include the name and/or location of the road, the reason for the closure, and an approximate date that the road will reopen. WRD regional staff should also maintain current road status (i.e. “open” or “closed”) on the ArcGIS online database as this road feature information can be conveyed to the public via the interactive mapping feature on the WRD website. The WRD regions should also make every effort to keep current road closure information posted at the WMA/PFA check station or other main information kiosks.

Roads that are closed should be obviously identified to the WMA/PFA user by either a closed gate and/or clearly visible signs. Closing roads by cables is prohibited. If trails and firebreaks are subject to be driven on by vehicles, they should also be posted by signage, but should not be referred to as a road. See Attachment 1 for preferred trail/firebreak signage and attachment 2 for administrative access sign.

¹ For WMA’s the 10% rule applies primarily during the hunting season. However, attention should be given to the provision of handicap/mobility-impaired access during other times of year, especially pertaining to facilitating access to popular areas such as fishing spots, boat ramps, scenic natural features, etc.

Attachment 1: Permanent Firebreak and Trail Signs (designed for dimensions of 11.75” width x 7.5” height, or an appropriate scaled version thereof).

PERMANENT FIRE BREAK

FOOT TRAFFIC ONLY



TRAIL

FOOT TRAFFIC ONLY



Attachment 2. Administrative Access Road Sign (designed for dimensions of 11.75” width x 7.5” height, or an appropriate scaled version thereof).

**ADMINISTRATIVE
ACCESS ROAD
FOOT TRAFFIC ONLY**



Attachment 3. Handicap/Mobility-Impaired Access Sign (designed for dimensions of 12” x 18”, or an appropriate scaled version thereof).

