



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Ribbon-cutting marks grand opening of Sahara Woods off-highway vehicle trail system in southern Illinois**

CARRIER MILLS – Off-highway vehicle (OHV) enthusiasts and state and local officials celebrated the grand opening of new trails at Sahara Woods State Recreation Area in Saline County on Friday, marking the culmination of a 26-year endeavor to establish Illinois' first OHV park on public land.

“This years-in-the-making Sahara Woods project represents what happens when strong government partnerships prioritize local communities,” said **Governor JB Pritzker**. “By repurposing this coal mine site into a new 4,000 square-foot OHV park, we are investing in conservation, tourism, and recreation for the Saline County community. I’m grateful to our partners at DNR and the hardworking leadership in southern Illinois for their efforts to support economic development in this region.”

The Sahara Woods OHV trail system was built on reclaimed mine land where both surface and underground mining operations were conducted by Bankston Creek Collieries and the Sahara Coal Co. from 1936 until 1993. The company donated the land to the State of Illinois in 1999.

“We’re here today because of the grit and resolve of countless individuals over nearly three decades who were determined to see this concept become a reality,” said **Natalie Phelps Finnie, director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources**, which operates the park. “An old coal mine site that once was an economic driver for Saline County has been transformed into a unique recreational site that will once again contribute to the local economy.”

Sahara Woods near Carrier Mills offers nearly 30 miles of landscaped OHV trails for riders’ enjoyment. The trail system was built using a combination of state and federal funding, including a Recreational Trails Program grant from the Federal Highway Administration. IDNR’s Abandoned Mine Lands Program oversaw more than \$10 million in mine reclamation work that cleared the way for construction of the park and subsequently the OHV trails.

The Illinois Capital Development Board (CDB) led the planning and construction of a new 3,400-square-foot OHV building that includes a welcoming lobby, office and display areas, employee amenities, a break room, and a garage space designed for servicing small vehicles. Additionally, a separate 520-square-foot precast concrete restroom facility was constructed. The new buildings meet ADA requirements and are designed for year-round use, supporting site operations at Sahara Woods.

“The project at Sahara Woods is a great example of how thoughtful investment and collaboration can enhance our state parks for future generations,” said **CDB Executive Director TJ Edwards**. “The new infrastructure and improved trails will expand access to outdoor recreation in one of the most dynamic regions of the state.”

**State Senator Dale Fowler** of Harrisburg has been a strong advocate for development of the Sahara Woods OHV trail to diversify the outdoor recreational opportunities available in southern Illinois.

“This has been a long time coming, and I’m proud to see this partnership with IDNR and our shared vision for Sahara Woods finally coming to life,” Fowler said. “This off-highway vehicle project represents years of persistence, planning, and investment that will provide lasting benefits for outdoor recreation, tourism and economic growth right here in southern Illinois.”

The Village of Carrier Mills supplies water to the site, and numerous constituency groups have provided valuable input on the project and helped move it along through the years, including ABATE of Illinois, the Illinois Federation for Outdoor Resources, and the American Motorcycle Association.

The OHV trails at Sahara Woods will be open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday through Monday each week through late January 2026. The trails will close temporarily during the winter and reopen again next May for the 2026 season. A limit of 120 vehicles can use the site each day.

One-day permits cost \$20 per vehicle. Four-day permits are available for \$65 per vehicle. [Rules and guidelines](#) can be found online, along with registration forms, waivers of liability, and instructions for purchasing ride permits.

[Sahara Woods State Recreation Area](#) comprises 4,000 acres featuring excellent fishing opportunities, including largemouth bass, crappie, bluegill, redear, and channel catfish; boat ramps; and hunting.

#### **About IDNR:**

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) is celebrating 100 years of conservation and service to the people of Illinois throughout 2025. The department was established July 1, 1925, as the Illinois Department of Conservation.

Today, IDNR’s work encompasses wildlife, fisheries, and natural heritage; management of about 400 sites across Illinois, including state parks and historic sites; mines and minerals; Lake Michigan water allocation and coastal management; oil and gas; conservation police; issuance of licenses, permits, and numerous grants; the World Shooting and Recreational Complex in Sparta; and the Illinois State Museum.

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