

# CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

## NEWSLETTER

No. 10  
March 1998

P.O. Box 16480  
Portal, AZ 85632

**SOUTH FORK GATING:** Much ado about no action. **CAVE CREEK RECREATION CONCEPT PLAN:** The Stealth Plan--it's there, but who has seen it? **CRC'S CAMPGROUND USE SURVEY:** The first solid data on campground occupancy in Cave Creek. **PRESCRIBED BURNS IN THE CHIRICAHUAS,** and other topics of interest to resident and transient users of public lands in the Chiricahua area.

**SOUTH FORK GATING.** The Forest Service's proposal to gate the South Fork of Cave Creek, build a new recreation site at the mouth or nearby at Sunny Flat, and change the road into a trail was by all odds the most contentious issue of 1997, both between the FS and the general public and among South Fork's public clientele (see CRC Newsletters 8 & 9). Initially, the FS favored extensive development at the mouth of South Fork, but in August changed to an alternative that would have placed the trailhead in the Sunny Flat Campground.

Now, a letter from Bryant Smith, USFS, dated 20 Feb 1998, informs us that Coronado Natl. Forest Supervisor John McGee has decided to adopt the "No Action" alternative, thus maintaining the status quo. One reason given is a belief that "issues and concerns surrounding acceptable levels of wilderness use, recreational residence tenure, access, and future campground renovation are likely to be better addressed in the upcoming long-term Forest Planning process, rather than in this trails project analysis." Another is that "without a broad public consensus to alter access from a road to a trail, and without any irreversible negative impacts pending," there is no "compelling need to alter access at this time." Forest Supervisor McGee is to be congratulated on his sensitive and sensible decision. Additional information is available from Mr. Smith at the Douglas Ranger District, 3081 N. Leslie Canyon Road, Douglas, AZ 85607, phone 520 364-3468 (request a copy of letter 1950/2300).

**CAVE CREEK CANYON RECREATION CONCEPT PLAN.** The final Recreation Concept Plan, approved by (then) Douglas District Ranger Brian Power last July, languished in the Forest Supervisor's Office in Tucson for several months before publication funding could be found. By December it had been printed and it is now in the Douglas office waiting to be mailed to all those who submitted written comments on the draft plan. Copies should become available in public libraries in the Chiricahua region and upon request from the Forest Service.

Since it is a "Concept Plan" and not a document requiring public review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the FS is not now soliciting further comment on the plan. But implementation of any major phase of the plan, such as campground construction, will require public review under NEPA. Such review would include determination by the Arizona Dept. of Environmental Quality that the project would not adversely affect Cave Creek's water quality over the long term. The CRC will be alert for any opportunity for informed comment on this and any other FS undertakings.

Retained in the final plan is the proposal to construct a 40-unit campground just upstream from the Southwestern Research Station. As noted in our August 1995 Newsletter no. 5, among the 83 letters commenting on the draft plan, 77 formally expressed opposition to this proposal, and *no one* spoke in favor of a campground in this location. Former District Ranger Brian Power and his staff assured us that construction

of a large campground is not likely to be funded for many years, and that in any case a campground could not be built until the existing summer home leases are phased out, a process which could take 20 years. Nevertheless, the issue remains a quietly ticking time-bomb, and controversy will not die until the FS formally abandons the proposed campground project.

Probably few would disagree that the FS is obligated to provide reasonable facilities for public recreation, yet 56 (of 83) of those commenting on the draft plan spoke in favor of leaving Cave Creek Canyon very much the way it is. If the limited funds that may soon be made available to the Douglas District for recreation facility construction were spent on restoring Rucker Lake and its damaged campground, a much more heavily used area, this would benefit many more people than a similar expenditure on rehabilitating or increasing camping facilities in Cave Creek Canyon. The number of recreationists that Cave Creek can accommodate without serious damage to the flora and fauna is limited. Restoring Rucker Lake would likely relieve some of the current recreation pressure in Cave Creek Canyon.

**CAMPGROUND USE SURVEY.** One of the FS's selling points for campground construction involves present and projected campground usage. Yet the campground usage and Forest visitation estimates have been very rough approximations, and the projections correspondingly flawed. This is not a new problem: "The 1939 plan discussed the existing campground facilities and projected that these facilities, without addition, would meet recreation demands for the next five years. No new campgrounds have been added since that time" (Cave Creek Recreation Concept Plan, 1997, p. 5). Thus, "five years" of projected adequacy has turned out to be almost 60 years!

Thanks to CRC members Roberta and Maury Ward, who organized, supervised, and participated in the survey, and to several volunteers, we now have the first hard data on usage of the five Cave Creek campgrounds during the most active time of the year, from mid-March to mid-October 1997. These data provide a baseline against which FS claims and projections may be judged, and with which future surveys may be compared.

The voluminous data provide insight into seasonal use, campground preferences, and other topics. For the present, at least, there is no evidence of need for additional camping space. On only three days--the Easter Sunday weekend and Sunday of the Labor Day weekend--were all 38 campsites occupied

at the same time. Average monthly occupancy for the entire period was 43%, ranging from 29% at Herb Martyr to 68% at Stewart.

Cave Creek is especially popular with tent campers, whose site use represents 55% of the total, exceeding that of trailers, camper vehicles, and large recreational vehicles combined.

We note particularly the popularity of Stewart and Idlewild camps, which accumulated 60% of the total full days. These camps are scheduled (in the Concept Plan) to be replaced by the proposed Crystal Campground. We feel that replacing these favored small camps with sites in a megacamp would be a poor move.

**ROAD CLOSED.** Hikers, birders, hunters, and others accustomed for years to enjoying Jhus Canyon (between E. Whitetail and E. Turkey Creek) will be disappointed to learn that the landowner over whose property the access road crosses has gated, locked, and posted the road at one mile in from its junction with the Whitetail Canyon road. The Forest Service is negotiating to reestablish access, but from past experience this could take years.

**NEW DISTRICT RANGER.** Native Arizonan Doug Hardy, transferring from a District Ranger position on the Mark Twain National Forest in Missouri, arrived in mid-March to assume the post in the Douglas District Office. His work on the Mark Twain included prairie restoration with the use of prescribed burning and timed grazing. Previously he spent about 10 years on the Apache Sitgreaves National Forest in wildlife, range, and recreation positions. His work on the Apache Sitgreaves included prescribed burning, and using reclaimed water to construct wetlands for wildlife.

**SALVAGE LOGGING AREA RESTORATION.** Early in 1996 the CRC Board supported a FS proposal for salvage logging of standing dead trees in a 69-acre parcel burned in the 1994 Rattlesnake Fire. We gave support because no new roads were needed for the logging, because removal of some standing dead trees might prevent or at least slow the spread of any future wildfire in the area, and because of two significant mitigation procedures in the proposal. These measures included felling dead trees under 6" in diameter and staking them parallel to slope contours to reduce erosion, and revegetating the logged area with seedling conifers grown from seed collected in the Chiricahuas.

Execution of these measures has been disappointing. Some small trees were staked

