

# CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

## NEWSLETTER

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P.O. Box 16480  
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**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



out parallel to contours this past summer in the portion of the logged tract that seemed most vulnerable to erosion. No seedlings have been planted yet, but the FS does have enough trees (mostly Ponderosa and a few Apache pines) on hand to plant, this year, an area of about 5 acres at the south end of the tract. The FS supply of Chiricahua seed is exhausted. When a bumper crop comes along, volunteer seed gatherers may have an opportunity to help replenish the supply.

**ROAD PAVING.** The FS is to be congratulated on the paving this past summer of another 0.6 mile of Cave Creek Canyon road upstream from South Fork bridge. As before, the road has been brought up to Federal standards in an attractive way, with minimal habitat damage. Funds are available this year to continue about 0.8 mile more up canyon, probably in the fall after easements are worked out with several landowners. To remove as few trees as possible, the road may split into two lanes in one or more stretches, as was done down canyon.

**CAVE CREEK WATER QUALITY.** Early in 1997 the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) completed a plan for monitoring water quality in Cave Creek and South Fork Cave Creek, both of which were designated as Unique Waters in Arizona in 1996. The first sampling (4-8 June 1997) aimed at assessing any impacts to water quality following Memorial Day weekend, typically a period of heavy recreational use. Seven sites were sampled along Cave Creek from above Herb Martyr Campground to below Idlewild Campground, and two sites in South Fork, one near the wilderness boundary and one just above the confluence with Cave Creek.

Further monitoring scheduled for this past fall was canceled due to insufficient funding, but chances for resuming the program this year now seem good. One of the principal benefits of the monitoring will be the accumulation of baseline data with which future samples can be compared. This will help insure that no project in the drainage is permitted to degrade Cave Creek water quality on a long term basis.

With a few years of good water quality data in hand, ADEQ can propose site specific standards for streams designated as Unique Waters. Any further activity in the watershed must then be conducted so as to keep water quality within the established standards. Sampling efforts help to identify aspects of the stream's health that can be addressed through proper land management.

**JOHNSON PEAK PRESCRIBED BURN.** Perhaps encouraged by success with recent experience

in the southern Peloncillo Mountains, the Douglas Ranger District has begun plans for a series of prescribed burns in the 32,000-acre Johnson Peak area between West Turkey Creek and Rucker canyons. Burning would take place in the months of November and December over as long as 15 to 20 years. This is the only major pine and mixed conifer forest in the Chiricahua Mountains not affected by the lightning-caused Rattlesnake Fire of 1994.

Following many decades of alteration by human activities, and well intended but often ill-advised fire suppression, major portions of this forest now feature dense understories of small trees, closed canopies, and unnatural accumulations of ground litter. Heavy fuel-loading makes the area ripe for another catastrophic wildfire.

The Forest Service proposal to replace the long lost natural fire scheme by prescribed burning during the cooler and often wetter time of year has the potential of greatly reducing the chances of another large Rattlesnake-type wildfire. Burning can also be expected to facilitate the return of extensive open areas of grasses and forbs, with major benefits for both wildlife and grazing. Burning blocks smaller than 2000 acres at a time, with follow-up burns in those blocks in later years, is contemplated. The resulting mosaic of burned and unburned areas, with more open canopied forest, should significantly reduce the likelihood of fire spread and allow for a greater diversity of plant and animal life.

When the Douglas District sought our comments on their proposal, CRC concurred in the urgent need to reduce the fuel loads, and in the use of prescribed burning to reach that objective. Particularly in the rugged Johnson Peak area, much of which is designated wilderness, we could suggest no feasible alternative to prescribed burning. Nonetheless, CRC did urge the FS to consider several related matters seriously when developing the Environmental Assessment for the prescribed burning program.

One of these matters involves soil erosion. Anyone who witnessed the aftermath of the Rattlesnake burn can appreciate the severity of the problems caused by that fire. The evidence included long-lasting torrents of deep, black silt in Cave Creek, deeply scoured higher elevation ravine bottoms, Rucker Lake and once-deep pools in Cave Creek filled with gravel, and loss of the non-native trout population in Cave Creek. Funding problems may have been primarily responsible, but erosion control measures that could have made a huge difference were



sadly lacking before and immediately after the fire.

CRC Director Jo Austin has had great success in reducing soil loss and in re-establishing streambed vegetation by building thousands of small, loose rock dams at his ranch on the west slope of the Chiricahuas. Immediately after the fire he had several hundred of the loose rock dams built in a drainage affected by the fire. Heavy rains that soon followed did minimal damage in this drainage but caused severe erosion in an adjacent drainage on the Forest where no dams had been built.

The proposed prescribed burning program is intended to prevent a wildfire like the Rattlesnake Fire, and its inherent soil losses. For this effort, the FS should be praised, but the program could be made even better. CRC recommended that the burn plan require construction of loose rock dams before the burns, wherever appropriate in drainages near planned burn areas. However, the Douglas District has responded informally that no preburn erosion control structures are planned.

Two reasons given by the FS for not planning to build erosion control dams are 1) that building the dams within designated wilderness would not be practical because no mechanical devices could be used and 2) low intensity burns started in small areas at the tops of drainages would not promote the drastic sort of erosion caused by the Rattlesnake Fire. Regarding the first point, the low, loose rock dams in question typically are built by hand without mechanical devices. Regarding the second point, such dams inevitably would serve a valuable function even if no drastic erosion results from prescribed burning.

Every prescribed burn should help, but it will take years to reduce the heavy fuel loads significantly. Any erosion control work done along with the prescribed burning will be a wise investment of labor in case a major wildfire occurs in the meantime. As the FS proceeds burning down drainages in future years, building small, loose rock dams would be a logical task for crews already standing by until weather conditions

meet the burn prescription.

CRC also urged the FS, while developing the Environmental Assessment, to devote particular attention to both favorable and adverse potential impacts of the prescribed burning program on the Apache race of the Northern Goshawk. In the United States, the Apache Goshawk's range is nearly limited to the Coronado National Forest, with about 60 known territories. It has not been found in extensive surveys within its former range in Mexico in recent years. Four Apache Goshawk territories, known to have been active in some recent years, are within the proposed burn plan area.

The goshawks living within the burn plan area comprise a significant segment of the total Apache Goshawk population. A carefully planned and executed prescribed burning program should benefit the goshawk population. On the other hand a major fire, whether a wild fire or an escaped prescribed burn, could impact the Apache Goshawk population in a significantly negative way.

The FS is now concerned more with Spotted Owls, because of their formal endangered status, than with goshawks. The Apache Goshawk is being considered for listing by the Secretary of the Interior under the Endangered Species Act. Listing seems very likely. It would be to the FS's advantage to do preemptive protection of goshawks without waiting to be forced to do so when the species is listed.

A third matter of concern to CRC was the possibility that the proposed prescribed burning might be used as justification for road construction within that portion of the burn plan area not designated as Wilderness. We have been assured, again informally, that existing trails with routine maintenance will be used to access burn areas, and no roads will be constructed.

The Environmental Assessment may be completed this spring. A public meeting will be called when the EA is out. No burning will be done before November 1998. We will keep CRC members advised of progress on this proposal.

CRC board of Directors: Josiah Austin, Pearce, AZ; Karen Hayes, Portal, AZ; Noel Snyder, Portal, AZ; Mary Winkler, Rodeo, NM; Richard Zweifel (President), Paradise, AZ. Manager: Alan Craig, Portal, AZ.