

# CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

## NEWSLETTER

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P.O. Box 16480  
Portal, AZ 85632

Everybody talks about the weather, the CRC not excepted. Other *deja vu* all over again items are a variety of Forest Service actions and plans for the Chiricahua Region, including road access to John Long Canyon, renovations in Cave Creek, and irresolution on fees. A guest article on the Leslie Canyon Wildlife Refuge comes as a bonus.

**DROUGHT, BUT FEW WILDFIRES.** Severe drought afflicted the Chiricahua and Peloncillo mountains from October 1999 through September 2000. For example, Bob Morse's gauge in Portal collected only 8.12 inches of rain, the lowest 12-month total in 30 years, and less than half the annual average of 18.05 inches for those 30 years. The monsoon season got off to a promising early start with record heavy rain in the second half of June, but later rainfall generally was disappointing.

Conditions were prime for wildfires, particularly in May and early June, yet the region was spared the catastrophic fires that plagued so much of the West in 2000. The Douglas District of the Coronado National Forest experienced seven minor wildfires. One of these, the Ida Fire, started before June rains began. Aggressive suppression by the FS limited the fire to about 45 acres. The Sulphur Fire in July produced much smoke visible from the Cave Creek/San Simon Valley area for two and a half weeks, but burned only about 150 acres and no suppression was needed. This and one other fire which burned about 25 acres in early October were closely monitored.

The Douglas Ranger District, which includes the Chiricahua, Peloncillo and

Dragoon mountain ranges, is the first district on the Coronado National Forest with a fire management plan (the Johnson Peak Fire Management Plan) that contains the new fire standards. These standards provide guidance for the timing of prescribed burns when it is reasonably safe. Also importantly, they allow the FS to let natural fires continue whenever neither critical resources nor human structures are threatened. The plan covers the 32,000-acre Johnson Peak area (see Newsletters 10 and 11).

Prolonged drought ended abruptly in the latter half of October, when many areas received record or near record rainfall. Welcome as it was, the rain temporarily damped this fall's intended prescribed burning in the West Turkey Creek and Monte Vista areas. Rain and snow totals close to average this winter could result in more delays.

Fire Management plans for the Peloncillo Mountains area are nearing completion by the FS and BLM. The Douglas Ranger District will be preparing fire management plans for the wildland/urban interfaces around Portal and Paradise. One objective will be to reduce fuels that might enable fire to spread from Forest to private residential property, or vice versa.

**RENOVATION IN CAVE CREEK CANYON.** On August 22, 2000, Douglas District Ranger Doug Hardy signed a Decision Notice, the Cave Creek Developed Recreation Renovation, confirming in writing that four features of earlier draft plans that many thought undesirable are no longer being considered by the Forest Service: 1) Constructing a new 40 to 80 unit campground adjacent to the Southwestern Research Station; 2) constructing a new 20 to 40 unit campground near the mouth of the Canyon, between the Visitors Information Center and the Forest Boundary; 3) closing Idlewild and Stewart campgrounds; 4) closing the road up South Fork Canyon.

The FS is to be commended for dropping these items from Cave Creek Canyon recreation plans, and particularly for deciding to spend their limited funds on improving the quality of existing campgrounds rather than on building new campgrounds. Widespread public opposition to the proposed large campground above Middle Fork, coming from as far away as Australia, no doubt helped. The campground survey conducted by CRC volunteers (Newsletter 11), documented the adequacy of existing campgrounds. It found campgrounds completely full only three days of the year, and many vacant sites most of the time.

The following renovation actions under the latest plan will be completed over a period of several years, progress depending on funding.

1) Installing prefabricated steel bridges to replace low-water creek crossings at the Sunny Flat Campground entrance and at the ford on South Fork Road. These one lane, free span bridges will be similar in design to the one installed this fall at the entrance to Idlewild Campground. Under this design, abutments are placed outside the usual stream channel and the bridges are lifted in place with a crane to minimize streambed disturbance and to avoid tree removal. Bridges are paved to reduce vehicle noise.

2) Moving five campsites at Sunny Flat from the floodplain to the north edge of the existing 2-acre grassy field. The restroom will also be moved

to the grassy field. The existing road along the south edge of the field will be extended about 1150 feet to circle the north edge of the field, while the road serving the floodplain campsites will be removed, and the existing power line over the field will be buried. Campground capacity will be increased slightly at Sunny Flat to a total of 13 to 15 sites, 8 of which will accommodate RV's up to 36 feet.

3) Paving the roads in Sunny Flat, Idlewild, and Stewart campgrounds, and paving a single lane up South Fork to the South Fork Trailhead and Picnic area (see following discussion). These paved roads will be finished with flush curbing, matching the repaved sections of Cave Creek Canyon road.

4) Providing 6 to 8 head-in, paved parking spaces on the existing disturbed area at the South Fork road junction, but limiting parking at the trailhead/picnic area to 8 spaces. Additional "up-to-seven" 2-car parallel parking areas will be provided at points along the South Fork road. The single lane road in South Fork will have "inter-visible" turnouts to allow opposing traffic to pass.

5) Stabilizing or hardening existing trails between Idlewild and Stewart campgrounds and between Stewart and Sunny Flat campgrounds, and a new walkway paralleling the single lane South Fork road.

6) Replacing the restroom at Idlewild Campground, and installing a new restroom near the parking area at the beginning of the South Fork road.

7) Constructing an information kiosk and a 28-foot diameter ramada with three picnic tables at the Visitor Information Center.

Provisions to minimize environmental impacts include no removal of trees greater than 9 inches in diameter at breast height, no removal of cottonwoods, sycamores or madrones of any size, replanting disturbed areas not needed for other purposes with native plant species, prohibiting generator use in the three campgrounds, and limiting construction to the non-nesting season.

