

CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

NEWSLETTER

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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.

SOUTH FORK PARKING RESTRICTIONS. The decision to limit parking at the South Fork trailhead/picnic area to eight spaces aims at reducing South Fork Trail use in late-April through May. No one questions that human traffic on the South Fork Trail during this period is often too heavy for optimum enjoyment, but most people do stay on the trail.

We are not convinced that heavy trail use is doing irreparable harm to plants or animals. Restricting the number of legal parking spaces at the trailhead is unlikely to reduce South Fork Trail use significantly, but it may create much unnecessary animosity toward the Forest Service. Some vehicles will be parked illegally, as close as possible to the trailhead. Many trail users may be dropped at the trailhead, to be joined later by their driver. The designated driver may have to hike back a mile and half or more from the nearest vacant legal parking space. We suspect that very few visitors will simply leave without hitting the South Fork Trail, particularly those who have come from all over the country to bird in a long-time favorite area.

An exception to the above is that birding and other tour group vans, arriving at the trailhead and finding all parking spaces occupied, may leave and take Cave Creek Canyon off their tour itineraries in future years. Their drivers, typically also serving as tour leaders, will be reluctant simply to drop their tour groups off while they search for a parking space. The refusal of tour groups to return in future years would reduce South Fork Trail use, but it would also adversely affect Portal area food and lodging businesses as well as FS fee revenues (see FOREST SERVICE USER FEES, following).

In September the CRC Board had a lengthy discussion with the District Ranger regarding the pros and cons of paving in South Fork and the planned parking limitations there. Doug Hardy said he could implement the project as

planned or he could modify it. He has also said that renovating the three campgrounds has priority, the bridge in South Fork has priority over the paving, and funding for paving in South Fork would most likely not be available for 3-5 years. That allows plenty of time for public opinion to be brought to bear.

SOUTH FORK PAVING. The wisdom of paving one lane of the graded road up South Fork is questionable. Paving will reduce the dust clouds that envelope roadside hikers and coat roadside vegetation whenever the road is dry, and to some extent it should also reduce vehicular noise. Potentially then, birding and hiking along the road could be more enjoyable. However, the concern is that paving will inevitably result in increased vehicle speed and increased traffic, and hiking along the road will be less enjoyable and less safe. Traffic is likely to increase because a paved road can be expected to attract those who are just out for a drive and might be inhibited by an unpaved road.

The Environmental Assessment for the project states that the "operational design will be for low speed (5-10 mph) use," but few vehicles will travel the predominately long, straight stretches of road at such a low speed; up to three times the "design" speeds are more likely. Regular enforcement of the speed limit cannot be expected, given current and anticipated funding for such purposes.

Installation of speed bumps along a paved South Fork road may be the only hope for keeping vehicle speed at a reasonable level. FS highway engineers stated previously that speed bumps could not be used along the main Cave Creek Canyon road because of liability considerations, but the District Ranger recently learned that they can be used on the dead end South Fork road. We may dislike them, but properly designed speed bumps are effective and, at low speeds, they damage neither vehicles nor occupants. Speed bumps may discourage use of this road by those just

out for a drive.

An alternative to the planned walkway along the road would be a trail some distance from the road, and separated from it by trees. At least the beginning of such a trail already exists at the mouth of the canyon. Bird visibility is often better from the road, but when traffic is significant, a trail on one side of the canyon or the other could offer safer and quieter hiking conditions.

FOREST SERVICE USER FEES. Nearly two years have passed since CRC Directors discussed, with Forest Supervisor John McGee and District Ranger Doug Hardy, the need of local residents and other frequent Forest visitors for long-term, multiple destination permits to visit Coronado Forest fee demo areas. CRC Directors met again with Mr. Hardy this past September to discuss fees and possible inequities in the program. Under the Forest Service Fee Demonstration Program authorized by Congress, almost all of the fees are retained locally to improve and maintain public use facilities. Public support of the program, at least in South Fork, has been generally good.

The FS seems to be in full agreement with the idea that frequent users should be able to purchase a long-term permit, but developing a permit system has been painfully slow. The Douglas District had made some progress and was on the verge of printing permits. However, the Forest Supervisor's office decided to establish a Fee Board, including a Douglas District FS representative. This Board is considering questions of permit cost and duration, and whether permits should be valid throughout the Forest, throughout a District, or neither. So far, no answers have been received to these questions.

JOHN LONG CANYON UPDATE. Last spring the Arizona Game and Fish Department obtained an easement and improved a road across Rucker Creek and through a private land parcel to give hunters vehicle access to the Forest boundary

at a point about one and a half miles south, as the raven flies, of John Long Canyon. As the District Ranger pointed out in October 1999 (Newsletter 12), the FS had two options. One was to provide a parking area just inside the Forest boundary, from which hunters could hike to John Long Canyon. The other was to open a supposed "existing road" for high clearance vehicles leading roughly three miles to a point above the Dart Ranch, from which hunters could hike a shorter distance into John Long. They chose the second option.

Considerable debate arose whether significant portions of this "existing road" really did exist. Long time ranchers in the immediate vicinity were willing to testify in court that there had never been a road along portions of the route, and CRC Directors were unable to find a trace of a road where one was claimed. A 1992 FS document proposing this access route to John Long Canyon showed that new construction would be required for the beginning portion of the route. Even if the entire route had previously existed, significant stretches had not been used for so long that revegetation had occurred. Allowing vehicles to use the route was equal to opening a new road in a roadless area.

District Ranger Doug Hardy had assured CRC, on October 8, 1999, that an environmental assessment would be prepared and would be available for public review during the fiscal year that had just started. Mr. Hardy said the potential impacts of vehicle access upon a significant stretch of riparian habitat paralleling the proposed route was one of the topics that needed to be addressed in this environmental assessment. He also gave written assurance that a public meeting would be scheduled. These statements reinforced assurances given when the CRC Board met with him on June 29, 1999.

No environmental assessment has been prepared, and to our knowledge, no public meeting ever was held. The latter is particularly distressing, given

that a substantial number of hunters like having one prime canyon left in the Chiricahuas that does not have public vehicle access, and consequently still provides quality hunting opportunity. We can only assume that skipping the environmental review process was authorized by someone up the FS chain of command. The justification given was that an existing road was being reopened, so no environmental review was required.

If the decision was within the letter of the law, accepting that a "road" did exist, it was not within the spirit of the National Environmental Policy Act, nor was it within the spirit of Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck's program of reducing unnecessary National Forest roads. No doubt those who want every bit of public land to be within easy walking distance of a vehicle will continue to push for extending this reopened route on down to the bottom of John Long Canyon. Current FS word is that, during the Forest Plan review process, they will determine whether this extension is needed.

CAVE CREEK WATER QUALITY MONITORING.

As anticipated last year, the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality has reduced its program of monitoring water quality. ADEQ will monitor just two watersheds in Arizona each year, rotating to different watersheds in subsequent years. Nonetheless, ADEQ's Kyle Palmer, who was instrumental in getting Cave Creek designated as one of Arizona's Unique Waters, informed us that current plans include monitoring Cave Creek twice each year. One sampling will be done in the spring, to include aquatic macro invertebrates, and one will be done in fall or winter, at the eleven sites established along Cave Creek upstream from the Forest boundary.

ADEQ has established a new Surface Water Database that should facilitate retrieval and analysis of data and simplify development of site-specific water quality standards. These will be needed to evaluate future changes in water quality in Cave Creek, where Mr.

Palmer has not noticed anything out of the ordinary over the last several years.

CORONADO NATIONAL FOREST PLAN. Revision of the 1986 Coronado National Forest Plan has been postponed another year. The process is now scheduled to begin in Fiscal Year 2002, i.e., sometime after October 1, 2001. According to District Ranger Doug Hardy, however, work could start toward the end of the current fiscal year. In any event, CRC will advise members when the Notice of Intent for the revision is published.

As part of the plan revision process, the FS will review all roads on the Forest, including both existing and proposed roads, and judge whether they are needed. FS policy requires that roads be scheduled for decommissioning when they are determined not to be needed. According to information received from the Sky Island Alliance, the Coronado National Forest has some 3000 miles of system roads, a total that already exceeds and therefore violates the Forest's standards. In addition, there are about 1000 miles of illegal, wildcat roads. Public input during the Forest Plan revision will be crucial if vehicle access in the Forest is to be kept at a reasonable level.

LESLIE CANYON, A LITTLE KNOWN WILDLIFE REFUGE. One of the lesser known wildlife areas in Arizona is Leslie Canyon National Wildlife Refuge located at the south end of the Swisshelm Mountains in Cochise County. The refuge is noteworthy for several reasons: it is one of only about five national wildlife refuges established primarily for endangered native fish; it is one of relatively few refuges in the system that currently are closed to general public access; it is the only refuge in the system named after a murderer.

About one hundred years before the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the Refuge, it was a part of the 7-UP Ranch. In 1889 bartender, gambler, and cattleman Frank Leslie found his girlfriend with another man at the ranch and shot them, killing

Molly Williams. Frank then made his way to Tombstone through a mountain pass that became known as Leslie Canyon. Ultimately he went to jail for his crime, but his name became permanently associated with the creek and the canyon. In 1983, the F & W Service, prone to naming wildlife refuges after geographical locations, established Leslie Canyon National Wildlife. Thus, murderer Frank Leslie was immortalized by the Department of the Interior.

The refuge protects about 1.2 miles of flowing stream representing part of the headwaters of the Rio Yaqui Basin, a watershed draining portions of southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico, and eastern Sonora and western Chihuahua in Mexico. In the United States it receives runoff from the Swisshelm, Chiricahua, Mule, Pedregosa, Perilla, and Peloncillo mountains.

Leslie Canyon NWR was formally established to "...conserve fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species...or plants." The primary targets were the Yaqui Chub and the Yaqui Topminnow. Also, it is one of the few areas still inhabited by the Yaqui form of the Longfin Dace. These fish species occur together in only three places in the United States.

However, the 2,500-acre refuge does more than simply provide habitat for three small fish. Mammals from an extensive desert area utilize the refuge for its water, including such diverse species as Desert Shrews, Coatis, Spotted Skunks, and Mountain Lions. During late summer, the canyon's hillsides are frequented by endangered Lesser Long-nosed Bats which feed upon the abundant agave nectar. The riparian gallery trees, dominated by Arizona Black Walnut and Arizona Ash, provide nesting habitat for a multitude of birds, including the Bell's Vireo, Summer Tanager, Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Cardinal, and Vermilion Flycatcher. The refuge is also an important resting and feeding area for migrating species including such rarities as the Green

Kingfisher, Violet-crowned Hummingbird, and Louisiana Waterthrush. A great number of reptiles and amphibians inhabit this protected area, which is one of the last native strongholds for the increasingly rare Chiricahua Leopard Frog.

A spectacular diversity of invertebrates, some known from almost nowhere else in the world, inhabits the unique mix of high desert canyon, stream-fed riparian zone, and open sacaton grassland. The refuge also protects populations of the Huachuca Water Umbrella, an endangered, wetland dependent plant species.

Closing this refuge to general public access allows native fish and wildlife, including endangered species, an opportunity to survive fairly unmolested. However, the refuge is bisected by Leslie Canyon Road, a County-maintained roadway open to anyone. From this road, a beautiful drive that parallels Leslie Creek, visitors can easily see the majority of the refuge and be right where some of the best bird action is. In addition, refuge managers are planning special days throughout the year when the refuge will be open to limited numbers of people on a guided tour-like basis. Such limited public access will allow visitors opportunities to better view, appreciate, and support this and other special places.

To visit the refuge, drive north about 16 miles from Douglas on Leslie Canyon Road, or drive east about 11 miles from McNeal on Davis Road. Follow the signs to Leslie Canyon. After passing through Leslie Canyon, the county road continues to Rucker Canyon in the Chiricahua Mountains. Call the refuge office at (520) 364-2104 for additional information.

The CRC thanks Bill Radke, Refuge Manager, for this article on Leslie Canyon National Wildlife Refuge.