

CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

NEWSLETTER

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Beginning late in 1990 people interested in management of public lands in the Chiricahua Mountains region attended public and private meetings to discuss various Forest Service proposals. It became clear that there was considerable regional dissatisfaction with government land management policies. Out of this situation grew the idea of an organization representing diverse interests that could speak with a unified voice, as informed and interested members of the public, to the government planners regarding management decisions. The Chiricahua Regional Council Inc. is the result. The CRC's area of interest is the Douglas Ranger District of the Coronado National Forest and other public lands in the vicinity of that District. A five-person board of directors consists at present of Richard G. Zweifel (President, Paradise, AZ), Karen Hayes (Portal, AZ), Edward Roos (Rodeo, NM), Wm. McDonald (Douglas, AZ), and Noel Snyder (Portal, AZ). Mary Willy (Portal, AZ) is Secretary-Treasurer. Three committees in specialized areas of interest report to the board. The committees are Communications and Education, Forest, and Range. Membership in the committees is open to interested CRC members.

The First Year in Brief

Late in 1991 a Forest Service (FS) "Draft Only" document, the CAVE CREEK - PINERY CORRIDOR CONCEPT PLAN, dated August 1991, came to our attention. Many of the management proposals in the document concerned spending large amounts of money on recreation development and were distinctly threatening to the region's physical, biological and cultural environments. A number of people provided comments and questions about the Concept Plan to the CRC, and these formed a list of 42 questions, statements, or requests for information submitted to the FS. Recurrent themes were that the plan was short-sighted and reflected no concern for detrimental overuse, especially with regard to expansion and development of recreational activities in sensitive habitats.

The FS answered few of our questions or requests, stating that a concept plan is merely an intermediate step toward a planning document, which would be more specific and open to questioning and (by implication) legal challenge. We were later told that a revision of the concept plan would be available for our review by August 1992, but in September they said that the scope of the plan was narrowed to Cave Ck., with the western slope (Pinery Canyon, etc.) part deferred. We have heard no more.

NATIONAL RECREATION AREA: In March 1992 the Coronado National Forest Supervisor's Office began a publicity campaign to gain public support for Congressional designation of parts of at least three mountain ranges in the Forest as an NRA. The FS held five public meetings ("workshops"), one each in Tucson, Sierra Vista, Green Valley, Safford, and Douglas, to explain the NRA proposal and to receive comments from the public. Members of the CRC attended all the meetings and helped to clarify that an NRA designation is neither necessary nor desirable given the

higher values of biological diversity and cultural-economic traditions in the region. The FS acknowledged that NRA designation was an image-enhancing device to acquire greater funding for recreation development.

Public reaction to the proposal was overwhelmingly negative, and most people expressed the opinion that the FS should be seeking funds for improved maintenance of forest lands, not jeopardizing biological diversity and rural lifestyles simply to expand FS budget and staff. A FS newsletter of September 1992 conceded that "there does not appear to be sufficient support to warrant seeking designation at this time." Even though the NRA proposal is moribund, the recreation development plans still exist, so the issue is not closed.

The CRC regards recreation as one among several appropriate uses of public land. We take the position that recreation, and other uses of the land, should be tailored to the special values of a given region. It is the biodiversity of the Chiricahua region that attracts many of its visitors and has made the area a center of field research in biology. Recreation development in such an area, therefore, should make the least possible impact on sensitive ecosystems.

With regard to a special designation for the region, CRC is eager to cooperate with the FS and legislators in formulating a legislative document that will recognize biological and cultural needs but does not, for example, equate "progress" with "full-service" campgrounds in sensitive areas. Meetings of CRC Directors jointly with Congressman Kolbe and FS officials give some hope that this will be a worthwhile path to follow.

CAVE CREEK GRAZING PERMIT TRANSFER: The CRC participated in a public meeting with the FS on March 12, 1992, to discuss the proposed transfer of the Cave Creek Allotment from Three Triangle to Mr. Wm. Kambitch. A follow-up letter to the FS from the CRC: 1) endorsed the continuation of the multiple use concept in regard to grazing on public lands; 2) stated that cattle did not conflict with biological research; and 3) approved of transfer of the permit "as is".

JOHN LONG CANYON ACCESS: Road access over private land to this canyon, north of Rucker Canyon, was closed to the public eight years ago because of public interference with ranching operations. In a notice mailed March 9, 1992, the FS proposed alternatives for opening an access road, all of which violated the Forest Plan's proscription against new road construction in riparian areas. The CRC requested that the FS hold a public meeting and in a letter to the FS pointed out numerous deficiencies in the brief FS notice of March 9. The meeting took place in Douglas on May 6, 1992. Apart from the potential damage to riparian habitats, a basic issue addressed was whether, as some hunters felt, vehicle access should be restored, or whether, in the view promoted by the CRC, some areas should remain free of vehicles. (Access to the canyon on foot had not been denied by the landowners.)

In March 1993 the FS issued draft versions of an Environmental Assessment and a Finding of No Significant Impact. The CRC has written to the FS questioning or disagreeing with several points in these documents. It is our understanding that the FS's preferred alternative route into the canyon is unavailable, but that they plan to pursue another route. Our preference remains "No Action."

WHITETAIL MINING: An individual's proclaimed intent to commence mining in the Hilltop area has ominous implications for both public and private lands in East Whitetail Canyon, and is causing great concern among residents and landowners there. In response to letters from several landowners and from the CRC, the FS's blanket reply was that they can (or will?) do nothing until a Plan of Operation is on file. Actually, several plans have been presented but withdrawn; was this because the FS found them inadequate? The CRC intends to stay close to this issue.

