

CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

NEWSLETTER

No. 6
June 1996

P.O. Box 480
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WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH THE CAVE CREEK CANYON RECREATION PLAN?

Newsletter No. 5 summarized comments of CRC members and many other concerned citizens from around the world on the Douglas Ranger District's draft Cave Creek Canyon Recreation Concept Plan. We had hoped by now to receive the Forest Service reaction to these comments, most of which had been critical of some of the key features of the Plan. Most notable of these features was the 40-unit Crystal Campground proposed for a relatively undisturbed canyon bottom bordering the Southwestern Research Station.

Owing to staff relocations and reductions, government shutdowns, and most recently, being called upon to help fight early wildfires elsewhere, the Douglas Ranger District has yet to complete its responses to the public comments, and its recommendations to the Forest Supervisor, on the draft Concept Plan. Perhaps this is a case of no news being good news, at least for the near term.

Current thinking at the District level is that if money becomes available, it should first be spent on providing camping facilities near the Visitor Information Center. We are also told that even if funds become available to build the 40-unit Crystal Campground, it likely will be 20 years before the nearby summer cabins can be phased out, a necessary first step.

The District Ranger's final action on the Concept Plan, with his recommendations to the Forest Supervisor, will not be a National Environmental Policy Act document requiring circulation for public comment; such documents will come later if and when major features of the plan are proposed. We are assured, however, that at least one copy of the final concept plan will be made available for our review.

We will keep our membership posted. Meanwhile we have taken every opportunity to promote the CRC position, reflecting the comments of many members, to higher Forest Service levels. This position, based partly on the belief that the carrying capacity of Cave Creek Canyon for recreation use has been reached, is that limited funds should be spent on maintaining or revising existing campgrounds, roads and trails rather than on building new facilities.

Hikers in the high country will be pleased to find that many of the trail signs destroyed in the 1994 fire have been replaced and some effective trail repair has been accomplished.

TIMBER SALVAGE

The salvage logging planned for 69 acres of timber almost completely killed by the 1994 Rattlesnake Fire near Rustler Park is still on hold. Due to the fire danger, Douglas Ranger District will not be issuing permits for salvage logging anytime soon.

The Southwest Center for Biological Diversity, which filed suit this past winter to stop the salvage sale, lost the first round in court but is appealing the decision.

Your Board of Directors, in a letter to the Forest Service, basically supported the planned salvage sale on the basis that it made the best of a bad situation. This letter should not be taken as support for timber salvage sales in general (the CRC does not comment on issues external to its defined geographic area of concern), or even as support for possible future sale proposals for the Chiricahuas. Any such proposals would have to be considered as individual issues with the results of the current project in mind. The following is quoted from the CRC letter:

"...two extremely critical management problems in the Chiricahua Mountain forests following the Rattlesnake Fire are the loss of soil, and the very heavy fuel load that remains.

"Logging skid trails will very likely cause some soil loss, and if stone gabions or other appropriate erosion control devices have not already been constructed in the drainage(s) immediately below the salvage area, we strongly urge that they be constructed before logging is permitted.

"...we believe the total soil loss from this site may be greater if it is allowed to recover naturally than if the salvage logging is completed as planned. This belief is based upon (1) the fact that no new roads will be constructed, (2) your requirement that dead trees under 6" in diameter be felled and staked parallel to slope contours, (3) your requirement that all living trees be left undisturbed as potential seed and shade sources, and (4) your plan to reforest the site with seedlings, of several pine species, derived from native Chiricahua Mountain stock.

"We can support your decision not to designate specific snags for retention, given the large number of dead trees surrounding the salvage sale site, the small area to be logged, and the likelihood that some of the dead trees within the site are not suitable for timber and will also be left standing. However, we strongly support Forest Service guidelines which generally require designation of snags, and in future similar operations we can probably find at least one or two volunteers within our membership who would be willing to assist with selecting and marking snags to be saved."

Several additional paragraphs discussed why and under what conditions the salvage logging would not be likely to impact Spotted Owls.

We closed the letter by encouraging the Forest Service to "consider other small sites where carefully planned salvage or thinning cuts, or

prescribed burns, can provide fuel breaks and reduce the chance of another large devastating fire."

We hope that such actions will be contemplated only in areas where construction of additional roads will not be needed, and we will be monitoring future proposals carefully in this regard.

Any member wishing to see the complete text of our letter on the timber salvage may obtain a copy by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to CRC's Portal Post Office box address.

VIGAS MAY BECOME AVAILABLE TO AREA RESIDENTS

If and when the extreme fire danger is over, the District Ranger anticipates that local residents, as well as others, will be allowed to purchase, cut and remove logs from the salvage area near Rustler Park, for use as vigas in their own construction projects. For further details, contact the Douglas Ranger District.

NORTH END ACCESS

Hikers, birders, hunters, and other forest users will be pleased to know that the Forest Service has completed its projects to provide easier public access into Wood and Emigrant canyons at the north end of the Chiricahuas. Some signing is yet to be done but the roads are reported to be in good condition and are receiving considerable use.

MORE PAVING ANTICIPATED IN CAVE CREEK CANYON

District Ranger Brian Power expects that funds will be available after October 1 to pave an addition-

al segment of Cave Creek Canyon road. The new stretch would extend the existing pavement at least as far as the bridge near the Cazier property.

We are assured that community members will again have a say in how the road work is done, to minimize impacts on the canyon. The District Ranger is pleased with how the last paving job turned out and the Forest Service greatly appreciates the planning input received from area residents.

Engineers have already agreed to continue two of the techniques used in the lower stretch to preserve as much as possible of the canyon's character. These are (1) using concrete strips along the road edges, to reduce the width of road that needs to be paved and (2) removing as little as possible of the tree canopy over the road.

UNIQUE WATERS DESIGNATION FOR CAVE CREEK

The Governor's Regulatory Review Commission gave final approval on April 23, 1996, to the designation of Cave Creek and South Fork Cave Creek as **Unique Waters**.

The designation, which applies from the headwaters down to the Coronado National Forest Boundary, allows the Dept. of Environmental Quality to deny permits for projects which would significantly degrade the water quality of Cave Creek over the long term. DEQ will continue to approve projects which may cause temporary degradation but which are designed to protect or improve the creek or its resources in the long run.

EXPLORATORY DRILLING IN JORDAN CANYON

Late last fall Kennecott Exploration Co. filed a Notice of Intent with the Coronado National Forest to conduct mineral exploration in Jordan Canyon in the northern Dragoon Mountains. CRC expressed concern regarding revegetation plans, and potential impacts on archeological sites, particularly the old stage station about half a mile from one of the drill sites.

Subsequently Bill Gillespie, Forest Service archeologist, discovered an archeological site along a new road route needed to reach a drill site. The FS required Kennecott to reroute the proposed road, avoiding damage to the archeological site.

The exploratory drilling is complete. Kennecott has cleaned up and seeded the drill sites and temporary road and has expressed no interest in further mining in the area. With the ongoing drought, the FS is holding onto the company's site restoration bond to insure that the disturbed soil is revegetated satisfactorily.

ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

Several CRC members expressed serious displeasure about Cochise County Board of Supervisors Resolution 95-79 regarding reauthorization

of the Federal Endangered Species Act. The general feeling, relayed to the Board, was that their resolution opposing the Act (by a 2 to 1 vote) did not reflect the opinion of the majority of Cochise County residents.

H.R. 2275, which would have essentially gutted the ESA, was defeated. On June 3, 1996, an Environmental Defense Fund spokesperson advised us that Representative Saxton (R, NJ) is planning to introduce a more moderate bill which would provide incentives to private landowners for the protection of endangered species.

RUCKER CANYON REHABILITATION

Recreation planning for the Dragoon Mountains and for the Chiricahua Mountain's west side, necessarily delayed by fires, government shutdowns, and personnel reductions, may now be further postponed to allow a similar planning effort for Rucker Canyon.

The Douglas Ranger District would like to be ready with a planning document in the event that funds become available to restore Rucker Lake and damage done to campgrounds and other facilities following the 1994 Rattlesnake Fire. The District assures us that meetings will be held early in any of these planning efforts to obtain public input.