

# CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

## NEWSLETTER

No. 7  
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P.O. Box 480  
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### THE YEAR JUST PAST

With respect to activities bearing upon the preservation or restoration of the Chiricahua environment, 1996 was largely a year of waiting for bureaucratic shoes to drop. Nothing as terrible as the 1994 Rattlesnake Fire happened, and the status quo prevailed on many fronts. We present a summary of various activities (or lack thereof) that should be of interest to the CRC's membership.

Of immediate interest for 1997 is the Forest Service's Scoping Letter for a proposed trail head near the mouth of South Fork, Cave Creek. Public involvement in the planning effort is being strongly encouraged. See page 3.

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**Cave Creek Canyon Recreation Concept Plan:** The draft of this plan first made public almost two years ago created more than a little controversy, especially the proposal therein to build a large campground bordering the Southwestern Research Station (SWRS). (See the CRC Newsletter, Special Edition, April 17, 1995.) Strong and widespread objection to that part of the draft was essentially stonewalled by the Forest Service (FS), whose only consolation to us was that there probably would not be enough funds in the foreseeable future for the construction.

The FS has yet to reply to the critical responses by eighty-three concerned citizens to the Douglas District's draft plan. Contacts with the District Office continue to yield only reasons for the delay, with no specific end-date in sight. We will continue our communications with Douglas. It might help, however, if any of you who responded to

the draft plan would send the FS a follow-up note asking when you can expect their reply.

The District Ranger recently said they had to balance local residents' needs with National needs. We could not argue with that philosophy, but we hope the FS will keep in mind a far more important need: To restrict recreational and all other resource uses to a level that will insure that the resources are kept in their existing or better condition, for future generations.

Any major construction proposed in the concept plan, such as the new campground near the SWRS and another in the mouth of the canyon, would have to go through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, where public input should carry some weight. In the meantime we wait for one of the more prolonged bureaucratic gestations to come to term.

**Salvage logging:** In May 1995 the FS proposed a salvage logging sale on two sites totaling 69 acres near Rustler Park that were burned over by the Rattlesnake Fire (the decision to implement the sale came in December 1995). Salient features of the proposal included: no new roads to be built; living trees to be undisturbed; smaller dead trees to be felled and staked parallel to slope contours for erosion control; reforestation with pines of local species from local stock.

The CRC Directors viewed this as a potentially valuable test case to see how such treatment might affect an area both seriously disturbed by fire and a candidate for additional damage through unchecked erosion. Our experienced ornithologists advised that the salvage logging would not cause significant loss of Spotted Owl habitat but might even, through reforestation, jump-start succession of the site to more suitable owl habitat.

The Southwest Center for Biological Diversity took a different view and sued to halt the proposed sale, garnering widespread publicity in the media. As a result, the first cutting (permits issued on a lottery basis) was delayed until September 1996. Come spring we will be back in the logging area to make a first assessment of results, based in part on our photographs taken shortly after the sale was announced.

**Tree-cutting Ban:** A well-meant ruling can have unintended consequences. The FS had done some good restoration work on the Crest Trail, damaged by post-fire erosion. This work halted when dead, standing trees could no longer be felled for erosion barriers. In a similar sequel to the ban, CRC members report erosion gullies 10 to 20 ft. deep that could have been avoided had cutting of fire-killed trees been

permitted and erosion control undertaken.

**The Well:** Several of our Portal area members called attention to a well being drilled in the mouth of Cave Creek Canyon near the Cave Creek Ranger Station and Visitor Information Center (VIC). The FS gave two principal reasons in answer to our question why a new well was needed: 1) To provide a dependable water supply for the Sunny Flat, Idlewild and Stewart campgrounds (the present well being unreliable); 2) to provide a water supply in the lower canyon that would enhance fire-fighting ability. The FS has been considering building a 20-unit campground downstream from the VIC and acknowledged that if this comes to pass, the well would supply that campground.

**Road Paving:** Resurfacing another stretch of the Cave Creek Canyon road is one of those proposed actions that seems forever on the horizon, never at hand. According to the FS, the first priority is the damaged section below the VIC. Some of us accompanied District Ranger Brian Power on a walk up the section scheduled to be paved upstream from Stewart Campground. We came away feeling that chances were good that the job would be done with minimum environmental damage, as exemplified by the earlier paving of the road in the lower part of the canyon. Possible problem areas include obtaining right-of-way and, in particular, dealing with a seemingly intractable roadside boulder and drainage problem next to the SWRS. The ban on tree-cutting contributed to the delay.

**Tour of El Coronado Ranch:** In October CRC Director Jo Austin hosted a tour of his El Coronado Ranch on West Turkey Creek. The purpose was to demonstrate the effectiveness of erosion mitigation measures the

Austins have implemented over the course of several years, chief among them the construction of more than 20,000 small, unmortared rock dams.

The benefits in soil retention and conservation of runoff were unmistakable, and would have been so even without comparison to adjacent FS land ravaged by post-Rattlesnake Fire flooding. Especially impressive were thick mats of vegetation forming over bare rock streambed, and still alive after a very long drought.

The tour was sponsored by the FS, the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Willcox-San Simon Resource Conservation District. Numerous local ranchers as well as representatives of the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, and all the sponsoring agencies attended the demonstration/tour. One question that kept coming up: How is it that virtually unlimited funds can be found for fighting forest fires, but almost nothing for pre- and post-fire erosion control?

**West Side Plans:** The West Side Recreation Concept Plan is apparently itself just a concept. A recreation concept plan for the Dragoons may take precedence.

**John Long Canyon:** Our long-time members will recall the controversy over the FS proposal (backed by Arizona Game and Fish Dept. but opposed by the CRC) to establish road access, mainly for hunters, to this canyon north of Rucker Canyon. The latest information we have is that the project, if not quite dead, is moribund.

**This Year's Fire:** It was a relatively small one on the Mahoney property, a private enclave in Cave

Creek Canyon. The potential for serious damage was there, but fortunately the nearby SWRS swimming pool provided a source of water accessible to the helicopter, and the fire was controlled.

#### WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR 1997?

**South Fork Cave Creek Trails Plan:** On January 24 the FS asked us to publish the following notice:

"The Forest Service is proposing a trailhead and trail development for the South Fork of Cave Creek. Our intent is to alter the basic experience of the South Fork Zoological Botanical Area to one which is more pedestrian-based and interpretive in focus, while greatly curtailing vehicle use. Specifically we are proposing to construct a trailhead near the mouth of the canyon, and converting the South Fork road to an interpretive trail.

"The South Fork Zoological Botanical Area is a very special part of Cave Creek--special to the public, special to us. It was established for the protection of its plants and animals, and to provide unique opportunities for recreation dependent on these biotic resources. We believe this proposal will further the public purposes of the area.

"Currently, we are requesting public comment on this proposal--both the overall objectives and the specific actions needed to implement them. A Scoping Report, detailing this proposal, is available by contacting Bryant Smith at (520) 364-3468 or Douglas Ranger District, RR1 Box 288R, Douglas, AZ 85607."

Two copies of the Scoping Report will be available in the Portal Library. The report suggests that comments received by February 18, 1997, "will have the most influence on the planning process," but we

would urge the FS to give equal consideration to comments received for at least two weeks after any public meeting they hold.

If sufficient interest is expressed, the FS will schedule a public meeting in South Fork to discuss the proposal. Whether you choose to make comments now or later, you may want to contact the FS soon if you would like them to hold a public meeting.

We will have another chance to comment on the plan when completed, during the NEPA public review process (tentatively scheduled for this spring), but we suspect that changes are easier to incorporate at this stage of the game, hence more likely to be accepted.

**Rucker Lake:** Floods subsequent to the Rattlesnake Fire filled Rucker Lake with rubble and buried part of the campground. A plan to restore the lake is in the works and may be ready early this year. The FS is looking for partners to share in the cost of removing the rubble.

**Dragoon Mountains Erosion Control:** The FS recently completed 12 loose rock check dams in the Dragoon Mountains. In cooperation with the grazing lease holder and the NRCS, they plan to construct 30 more erosion control structures, of three different types, this year. The FS pays for the materials on FS land, the NRCS on private land, and the labor is performed by prison crews.

**Maverick Burn:** Pre-burning of perimeter lines for this year's planned prescribed burn in the Peloncillo Mountains is scheduled to begin in March. CRC generally supports carefully planned prescribed burns, not only for their ability to restore shrub-invaded grasslands, but because they are preferable to waiting for a potentially catastrophic

wildfire.

**Cave Creek Water Quality Monitoring:** As noted in Newsletter No. 6, Arizona designated Cave Creek and South Fork Cave Creek as Unique Waters in April 1996. Kyle Palmer of the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality recently informed us that he is continuing to seek funding and equipment to support a regular monitoring program for Cave Creek. Water quality measurements over a period of years will assist the DEQ in evaluating potential and actual effects of future projects in the Canyon, helping to insure that water quality is not significantly degraded over the long term. We will keep our members posted on further developments.

**Endangered Species Act:** Those wishing to keep informed on this controversial topic may want to read the October 1996 issue of *Arroyo*, quarterly publication of the University of Arizona's Water Resources Research Center. The entire 12-page issue is devoted to a discussion of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Emphasis is on the Act's effect on water projects in Arizona, but both sides of the issue are covered objectively, illustrating that the ESA can be used effectively and fairly in virtually all cases. Portal Library has a copy, and CRC has several copies available for loan.

**Forest Service Funding:** A recent Associated Press story noted that the Coronado National Forest's annual budget, as high as \$11 million in 1991, is now down to about \$7 million. Isn't it a good time to concentrate on resource protection measures such as erosion control, using prison labor, to concentrate on maintaining existing facilities, and to forget about building new campgrounds?