

CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

NEWSLETTER

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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.

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

