

CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

NEWSLETTER

No. 8
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P.O. Box 16480
Portal, AZ 85632

THE SOUTH FORK TRAILHEAD PROPOSAL

In our last Newsletter we called attention to a Forest Service proposal whose principal elements were gating the road in the South Fork of Cave Creek (eliminating, with minor exceptions, vehicular traffic) and establishing a trailhead at the South Fork road junction. The proposal generated considerable interest, and the CRC sponsored a public meeting at the Portal Library on February 21, filling it to capacity. Bryant Smith of the Forest Service (the Project Leader) described the project, displayed maps of the alternative variants the Forest Service considered, and replied to numerous questions from the audience. The reaction of the audience clearly was mixed, with (as judged from a show of hands) only minority support for either complete status quo or for the Forest Service's preferred alternative.

The CRC Directors feel that the proposal deserves both additional public input and reconsideration by the Forest Service. Accordingly, we reproduce here a letter to the Forest Service from the Directors, and urge that CRC members make their own opinions known, preferably well before the Forest Service's deadline of March 31.

Mr. Brian L. Power
Douglas District Ranger
R.R. 1, Box 228R
Douglas, AZ 85607

Dear Mr. Power:

The Directors of the Chiricahua Regional Council have considered the Scoping Report for the proposed South Fork Creek Trailhead & Trail Construction, the printed explanation of Preliminary Alternatives provided by Bryant Smith at a public meeting held in Portal on 21 February, and the exposition and

answers to the many questions posed by attendees at that meeting and the follow-up session at the field site.

Initially, we note that the "consensus" on the desirability of the project mentioned in the Scoping Report was not a consensus of the full Planning Team contributing to the 1995 Cave Creek Recreation Concept Plan, but only of a Forest Service-selected core group.

We are concerned that Alternative A (no action) has already been effectively rejected by the Forest

Service prior to any opportunity for thoughtful public review or comments. This became evident at the 21 February meeting when Bryant Smith indicated that the Forest Service had already obtained a commitment for some \$80,000 of State monies for the project. The Forest Service seems convinced that considerable development needs to be done, either at the South Fork junction, in the Sunny Flat Campground, or at both places. But the reasons the Forest Service gives for pursuing extensive development are, in our view, less than compelling. We propose to present a somewhat different perspective on the alternatives offered.

One reason given for the project is protection of wildlife and hikers from noise, dust, and vehicles. Vehicular disturbance is confined to a narrow marginal strip. (The road will continue to exist indefinitely and will not be replaced by a tree-shaded trail.) Sediment caused by vehicles crossing the creek is a second reason given, but this could easily be avoided by spending some of the thousands of dollars evidently available to construct a concrete ford at the crossing. A third reason is overuse of the trailhead. The present trailhead parking space is saturated on rare occasions. But the proposed significant development measures are far more damaging -- environmentally and socially -- than occasional vehicular congestion.

A major argument against gating the road is that this would add a four-mile (Forest Service estimate) round trip on foot to the present trailhead and parking area. This would discourage access to some of the principal attractions of South Fork (e.g., the fall maple colors found above the present picnic area but not lower in the canyon) by a significant number of persons who now visit South Fork or

who might do so in the future, especially the more elderly and those with small children. The canyon upstream from the present trailhead would be denied to all but the more vigorous.

Birdwatchers are among the most frequent visitors to South Fork, and the situation with respect to gating the road is ambiguous. One view is that the birding along the road is of equal quality to that upstream from the trailhead and that removing vehicular traffic would improve the experience. Others take a contrary view, believing that birding along the road is inferior to that upstream. The Forest Service may have to deal with substantial criticism from bird tour leaders and participants who have expectations of visiting the upper parts of the canyon without considerable expenditure of time and energy.

Alternatives B (the "Proposed Action"), B1, B2 and B3 have in common considerable development (hence, habitat destruction) at the South Fork road junction. The first of these and B3 are especially objectionable, involving as they do picnic sites, rest rooms, parking for cars and large Recreational Vehicles, turn-around space and a barrier-free nature trail. Even the Alternative with the least development includes a 12-car parking lot, rest rooms, and the barrier-free trail.

If the road is to be gated, parking space for vehicles is necessary, but alternatives B go far beyond this creating, in effect, a small visitor center that will attract passers-by not interested in hiking South Fork. The net result will be crowding out those who intend to walk farther into the canyon. The Forest Service has already rejected the alternative of not providing a toilet at the proposed new trailhead; that objection is

