

# CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

## NEWSLETTER

No. 9  
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P.O. Box 16480  
Portal, AZ 85632

### GATING SOUTH FORK: The Second Shoe Drops

The "Draft Cave Creek Canyon Recreation Concept Plan," distributed by the Forest Service (FS) in February 1995, included a recommendation to close the South Fork of Cave Creek to vehicles and construct pedestrian trails, an "interpretive node," "occasional pedestrian bridges," and a large parking area, in addition to phasing out the summer homes. The first shoe did not really drop, however, until a detailed "Scoping Report" became available in mid-January 1997, followed on February 21 by a public meeting (at CRC's request) with FS representative Bryant Smith in Portal. The Report presented three major alternatives (two with some minor variants): A) no action; B) trailhead at the road junction with parking for cars and RV's, picnic sites, restroom, barrier-free nature trail, elimination of picnic site at current trailhead, and phasing out of summer homes; C) similar to "B" except that parking and other facilities would be located in the Sunny Flat camp area. Alternative B was specified as the Proposed Action.

Attendees at the full house public meeting held at the Portal Library made it evident that no strong consensus existed either for leaving South Fork unaltered, or for the establishment of a mini-recreation area at the road junction, as the FS then preferred. Some spoke eloquently against denying access to the current trailhead picnic area to those who, for whatever reason, could not make the required 2.6 mile round trip on foot. But no one in the audience spoke in favor of the alternative (B) preferred by the FS. The second shoe dropped early in August with the distribution of a formal Environmental Assessment (EA) of the South Fork project.

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A NEW PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE. Those wishing access to South Fork to remain unaltered will be disappointed, but others may be relieved to hear that the FS has changed its preferred alternative to one (C) that places the new trailhead in the already disturbed Sunny Flat camp area rather than cluttering up the South Fork road junction. The stated features

of this alternative are:

Trailhead constructed at south end of meadow in Sunny Flat;

New access road around edge of meadow replaces road through riparian area (current road would be naturalized);

Parking for up to 20 vehicles (including 2 handicap sites) for South

Fork trail, trail to VIC [Visitor Information Center], and new walk-in picnic sites;

Close 5 campsites within 100-year floodplain and use that location for 4 new walk-in picnic sites instead;

Move toilet out of floodplain to a site between new trailhead and campsites;

South Fork gated at junction with Cave Creek road (vehicle access limited to summer home owners, handicapped person access, and administrative uses);

Roadway narrowed to single lane (8-12' with occasional turn-outs for vehicle passing);

Trail from trailhead (in Sunny Flat) to Zoological Botanical Area constructed as a barrier-free nature trail;

Retain existing South Fork picnic site as a walk-in site;

Tenure of summer homes not determined in this project.

Under the present proposal, construction activity would be limited to the period Sept. 1 - Jan. 31 to minimize impact on breeding activities of the two endangered or threatened species identified, peregrine falcon and spotted owl.

**CRC'S EARLIER RESPONSE.** Because of the wide divergence of opinions expressed by CRC members and others commenting on the basic idea of converting the South Fork road to primarily pedestrian use, the CRC Board chose not to take a strong position which might not represent the opinions of many members. Instead, in a letter to the Douglas District Ranger, we addressed many of the concerns that had been raised regarding the initial proposal. This letter was published in CRC Newsletter 8, March 1997.

**COMMENTS ON THE CURRENT PROPOSAL.** By selecting "C" as the preferred alternative, the Forest Service has responded in a positive fashion to a number of topics that were raised earlier. But, in addition to the basic question of whether it is wise or necessary to close the South Fork

road to vehicles, several concerns remain:

1. The EA does not address the problem of substantially increased vehicle traffic across the Cave Creek ford at the entrance to Sunny Flat Campground, or the additional turbidity and siltation that inevitably will result in the state-designated Unique Waters of Cave Creek. A low level concrete slab crossing, similar to but smaller than the one at the Foothills Road Cave Creek crossing, should greatly reduce turbidity and siltation problems in the long run.

2. Water flows of even moderate levels exclude many low-clearance vehicles from Sunny Flat, not only due to the water, but also to the cannon-ball size and larger rocks in the stream bed. A concrete crossing would increase the percentage of time when folks eager to visit South Fork would be able to park at Sunny Flat. Even if a hardened crossing cannot be built with "trails" funds, the need for it is dictated by the choice of Alternative C.

3. Converting "a significant portion of the South Fork road to an interpretive trail" is one of the stressed features of the proposal. The EA (under "Recreation") speaks of a "three foot wide hard surfaced trail....along the roadway" to the creek crossing up South Fork, with the roadway narrowed to a single lane. When this could happen is a question. Presumably vehicular access for disabled persons with mobility problems and for summer home owners will continue until (or if) summer home leases are phased out (currently permitted to Dec. 31, 2008). Any eventual decision to remove the road totally will have to consider the importance of the South Fork road to fire suppression.

The "how" of road narrowing is not discussed--whether the existing roadbed material in the other lane would be removed, loosened, planted, or merely allowed to revert over a period of many years to somewhat

natural appearing riparian forest. Riparian vegetation tends to recover quickly, but the process is still likely to take many years if the compacted, relatively high and dry, roadbed material is not removed.

4. Converting five of the Sunny Flat camp sites to four picnic sites is likely to increase the perceived if not the actual need for adding campgrounds in Cave Creek Canyon. Consideration could be given to moving the five sites to the upper edge of the meadow, with a new road just below the sites. Loss of meadow habitat is never a happy prospect, but we understand that it is a little-used, manmade meadow. However, the EA implies a future for Sunny Flat as the major trail nexus, with camping minimized.

5. Closure of the South Fork road to most vehicle use will make that 1.4 mile stretch of the canyon a more enjoyable place to hike and observe wildlife, but it will also add almost 4 miles (starting from Sunny Flat) to an already rigorous hike up canyon to where the maples put on a spectacular show each fall. The additional miles may put these trees out of reach for some of our older citizens, and perhaps younger ones too, for whom this fall hike has been a long tradition. The EA shows no evidence that serious consideration has been given to what seems like a logical solution: If vehicle access can be allowed for those with disabled plates or stickers, why should not the road be open to everyone when use is very light, such as on fall weekdays? The number of days open could be adjusted as needed to keep use of the wilderness area at a tolerable level.

6. South Fork is a common destination for birding tours, generally van-based. The EA does not mention if the FS plans any accommodation for these groups.

THE "NO ACTION" ALTERNATIVE. There was no possibility (short of lack of funding) that the FS would accept the

"no action" alternative, which was little more than a straw man. As far back as June 1996 the FS submitted to the AZ Heritage Fund a grant proposal (later accepted) for funding the South Fork project based on the alternative preferred in the January 1997 Scoping Report. Clearly, the FS had dismissed the No Action alternative months before the Scoping Report was promulgated for public comment.

The grant proposal included questionable statements. For example: "Especially strong support was expressed [by the public] for converting the South Fork road into a trail . . . ." In fact, of 83 letters to the FS regarding the draft concept plan, only 11 (7 for, 4 against) commented on the South Fork plan. (See CRC Newsletter 5, Aug. 1995.) Again, the statement that the "roadway is located out of the floodplain" would have been news to anyone driving or walking on it during a post-Rattlesnake Fire flood in 1994-95.

RESEARCH--A DIRTY WORD? The FS continues to downplay the importance of biological research in the Cave Creek region--both that based at the Southwestern Research Station (SWRS) and that carried out by researchers working independently. In the EA the word "research" appears only once, 12 pages into the document under "Recreation," and without further discussion. Considering that the Chiricahuas are one of the country's major sites of biodiversity, one could hope for evidence of more serious consideration of the sources of information that document and help us understand the diversity.

#### THE CAVE CREEK CANYON RECREATION CONCEPT PLAN

The final version of this Plan has had several debuts postponed, but may be issued this summer. Inasmuch as the South Fork gating was recommended in the severely criticized draft of the plan (issued in February 1995), we all are eager to see what if any significant changes have been made in other parts of the Concept

Plan. There is mention in the South Fork EA of "two localities that have room for expansion" of campsites, namely the mouth of Cave Creek and the "Crystal" site adjacent to SWRS. Both are cited as having few conflicts with current or future trail opportunities, but again potential disturbance with research activities at SWRS are ignored. The "Crystal" site was strongly opposed when proposed in the Draft Cave Creek Recreation Plan and now doubt will be again if it figures in the forthcoming Plan.

#### MORE LOGGING?

As yet we have no final report on the salvage logging near Rustler Park, but additional selective tree cutting may be in the works. The Forest Service is going to be looking for some really thick second growth timber stands adjacent to existing roads in the Chiricahuas, with the idea of selling some of the 12-14" diameter trees and leaving the larger, old growth trees, to create more natural looking, open stands. Enough of the medium-sized trees would be left standing to replace older trees as they die. A main objective of sales of this type, according to District Ranger Brian Power, would be to improve the appearance of the stands. Such sales would not create firebreaks, but would help reduce, in relatively small areas, the excessive fuel loads present in the Chiricahuas, and could make it easier to stop or slow the spread of a wildfire into other areas, if deemed necessary. Many wildlife species prefer the more open timber stands, which apparently were the norm before the days of timber harvesting and fire suppression. We will be closely scrutinizing any timber sale proposals to insure that snags are retained according to Forest Service guidelines and that endangered species are given adequate protection.

#### ROAD PAVING

Preparation work for the next segment of paving in Cave Creek is scheduled for the first two weeks in September. The Forest Service has funds available in the current year's budget to pave the approximate one-half mile stretch from the South Fork Bridge, up past the entrance to Sunny Flat Campground, to the private land boundary. If all goes as planned, this section will be paved in late October or early November.

#### RUCKER LAKE RESTORATION

Douglas Ranger District personnel have located equipment necessary to remove the rubble that filled Rucker Lake following the Rattlesnake Fire. They are now hoping that a few equipment operators may volunteer some time to the project, and they are looking for a suitable site to dispose of the rubble as it is removed. Rucker Lake was formerly a very popular recreation spot for Douglas residents and many others. The Forest Service is hopeful that agencies, including Cochise County and the City of Douglas, organizations and individuals will share in the cost of this monumental task. Actual work may be delayed until after the winter rainy season--probably not a bad idea since weather experts are predicting a record El Niño. Torrential rains in Southeast Arizona this winter are certainly possible. It might not be too late now to rush in with some prison crews and install a lot of small loose rock dams in the upper Rucker Creek drainage, to protect the major investment being contemplated for Rucker Lake.

ADDRESS COMMENTS ON THE SOUTH FORK ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT TO BRYANT SMITH, USFS, 3081 N LESLIE CANYON RD., DOUGLAS, AZ 85607; (520) 364-3468; FAX (520) 670-4588. The closing date for considering public comments is September 8. The Environmental Assessment can be seen at the Douglas Ranger Office or the Portal Library.