

CHIRICAHUA REGIONAL COUNCIL

NEWSLETTER

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P.O. Box 16480
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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.

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

