**South Fork Project Draft EA Comments**

**From: Kim Vacariu, board member, Friends of Cave Creek Canyon, Portal, AZ 85632**

**1. Significantly Reduce or Eliminate Road Closures**The proposed 4-month closure of South Fork Rd. to the south of the proposed Alternative B South Fork Project site should be eliminated or significantly shortened. The road should remain open because of the reliance by the surrounding communities on year-round public access to long-established trails accessed by the South Fork Road. Such a closure of a designated USFS road for 1/3 of the entire year creates bonafide discrimination against the many area public forest users who may not be birders, and who may not be disabled, but whose age or physical comfort make it difficult to walk bigger distances to access the part of the canyon that has given them inspiration, solitude and exposure to wild lands and wildlife. Many live here simply because of access to Cave Creek Canyon. Such individuals have already been asked to add a .5-mile walk to get from the existing berm parking area to the original South Fork trailhead. And now they are being asked to walk an additional .75-miles due to the gate closure. As you can see, such a lengthy road closure can be viewed as exclusionary to a major portion of the area’s population, which is often elderly.

Despite making the decision to include a major, long-term road closure in the Draft South Fork EA, the report mentions no legitimate reasoning behind that decision. Because the EA does not indicate any specific science-based cause and effect rationale for such a road closure, I assume this is merely an opening for the public to weigh in on how best to provide access to the original South Fork Trailhead without unintended consequences. It’s clear that all stakeholders need to weigh in on the amount of road closure needed, if any at all, based on the traditional usage, needs, and rights of area citizens.

Therefore, based on these observations, I urge the Forest Service to keep the South Fork Road open throughout the year, or with extremely limited closures, and instead reduce or eliminate that closure to the greatest extent possible by adding specific new road protections that would accomplish the same goals (see #2 below).

**2. New Road Protections to Eliminate/Reduce need for South Fork Road Closures:**

Signage

The Kiosk at the proposed recreation/parking site could have specific, highly-visible signage that notifies users of the sensitivity of the road area to the south of the site, reminding users that slow speed is critical so as not to disrupt other walkers on the road or wildlife that may be present, with penalties for violators noted. The sign could also note that parking at the new site is recommended because the parking space at the berm/trailhead is extremely limited. The sign could further state that tour vans and tour busses are not permitted on the road south of the new site at any time.

Additional signage along the road itself, beginning at the junction of 42 and South Fork Rd., could emphasize that parking is limited at the trailhead; and that tour vans and tour busses are prohibited beyond the new parking site. This approach would comply with birding company requests that no busses or vans travel south of the new site due to lack of toilets and parking space at the berm parking area.

Dust Abatement

Since dust is a major reason often cited for closing the road, commonly-used**,** environmentally-friendly dust abatement materials, such as “Earthbind 100” from EnviRoad could be applied annually. This method of dust control has proven widely successful in all types of conditions and would work well in this application. It is feasible that the cost of such a procedure could be offset through various fundraising activities.

Speed Bumps

Installation of speed bumps could greatly reduce the speed of vehicles using the road and at the same time reduce dust.

Restricted Berm Parking

Limit parking at the current Berm trailhead location to those who must drive to the berm due to age or physical disability. Such users would need to qualify for vehicle access via a yet-to-be-determined means. During any limited closures these users could be provided a key or some other means to drive to the berm parking area.

**3.** **The following statement is unfounded in fact and creates an unneeded and unhelpful political tone in the South Fork EA. The statement has no impact on the EA itself or on the selection of an Alternative. Please delete the statement from the EA.**

RE: “If the proposed border wall were constructed, both illegal and DHS activities in the Chiricahua Mountains may decrease, which would benefit recreation settings in Cave Creek Canyon.”

**From the South Fork EA:**

**1. RE: Closure of South fork Rd.; From Alternative B:**

2. During the months that the new gate would be closed approximately March 1 through June 30, the recreation setting beyond the gate could become a non-motorized area, which would benefit visitors who prefer a quieter place to walk and bird watch. The gate would be open the rest of the year, which would provide safer monsoon season evacuation (by vehicle), and allow unrestricted access for cabin owners.

3. Relocating the developed site as proposed and installing a gate to restrict vehicle access to South Fork Road up canyon of the site would, during times when the gate is closed, allow the closed portion of the South Fork Road to be used for walking and bird watching mostly free from vehicle noise, dust, and hazards. Although visitors who wish to drive to the end of the road (including hikers accessing Chiricahua Wilderness) would be inconvenienced, this change would increase visitor satisfaction for the many visitors who enjoy walking.

4. When the new gate is closed, visitors would be required to walk approximately 0.75 miles further to access to Trail #243 and other trails into the Chiricahua Wilderness.