**Friends of Cave Creek Canyon Statement**

**Draft Environment Assessment, South Fork Day Use Area**

**Sept. 8, 2020**

**The consensus of the Friends of Cave Creek Canyon­­­­ Board is to Support the Proposed Plan, with Certain Reservations.**

The plan consists of a new picnic area 0.2 miles up the South Fork Road from the paved Forest Road 42. This is a full mile downstream from the original day use and picnic area. The picnic area will consist of three picnic tables, a 2-seat vault restroom, benches, informational signage, a handicapped accessible loop trail to the creek, and parking. The plan reactivates the User Fee system for the Day Use portion only that had been in effect at the old picnic area. The plan also calls for a seasonal closure to vehicular traffic of the South Fork Road beyond the picnic area, from March through June.

Most of the elements of the plan are what FOCCC has been working toward for several years, and we are glad to see the project moving forward.

We feel that all the elements of this plan will protect South Fork, while providing the public needed and safe access. We believe that placing this day use area a mile downstream from the old picnic area will reduce human impact on the rest of South Fork, including social trails, waste, and disturbance of the forest. Materials and colors that blend into the scenery will be chosen, so the picnic area will visually harmonize with the canyon.

**Some key elements are:**

-The two-vault handicapped accessible restroom will help eliminate human waste in the forest and the creek, as well as being necessary to the comfort of visitors.

-Picnic tables and benches, both suitable for mobility impaired people, will help visitors relax and enjoy the forest and other aspects of nature, with the health benefits and reductions in stress that experiencing nature can provide.

-Attractive educational signage about the canyon and the Zoological-Botanical Area will increase visitor appreciation and understanding of this unique area, helping the public to properly value it.

-A loop nature trail suitable for mobility impaired people will be the only such trail on this side of the Chiricahuas, and will give access to the creek from the picnic area. The trail will be funded by an anonymous donation specifically for this trail.

-Providing toilet facilities, educational signage and a small educational kiosk will be of great assistance in educating students in the forest.

**Reservations and Concerns**

Several elements and comments in the plan are of concern to the board, and we will communicate these concerns to the Forest Service. None of them are significant enough to imperil our support, but they are worth trying to change while we can.

Estimated costs. The board hopes to find sources to directly acquire the picnic tables, benches, toilet, etc. for less cost than estimated. FOCCC revenues are significantly down because of Covid 19 (Visitor Information Center closed, few visitors to the canyon, etc.) and we want to make sure FOCCC money is well spent.

Parking. The plan shows 9 spots at the picnic area, with optional parking along the road below the picnic area. This is less parking than was available at the old picnic area, but parking along the road may meet the need.

User Fees. The User Fees in the proposal would apply ONLY to the day use area, not to the South Fork Trail or use of the road. There were user fees at the old day use area as long as it was open, but in the six years since it closed people have become used to no fees. We will assemble a list of passes the USFS accepts in lieu of a fee.

Gate Closure. The proposal closes the road above the picnic area from March through June. The stated reasons do not seem to warrant a 4 month closure.

In relation to the gate closure, dust is one of the reasons mentioned. For dust, several alternative remedies are possible: spraying the road annually with a dust reducing environmentally neutral chemical; speed bumps; signage with reasons for low speeds; water diversion bars (have same effect as speed bumps, but are also to decrease road erosion); forbidding buses or vans beyond the picnic area, etc.

We would like to see clarification, if any, which wildlife issues warrant the road being closed for 4 months.

Other impacts of the gate closure: If the road will be closed for several months, could there be an exception for handicapped persons? What about people not officially handicapped, but still not able to walk the mile to the old trailhead, who would like to walk on the trail a short distance?

Maintenance Costs. FOCCC will be asked to bear the maintenance costs, mentioned as $10,000 to $15,000 per year. We need to understand how this figure was determined, and what we would be agreeing to. Perhaps we could do it for less. We feel the user fees should offset some of this maintenance expense.

Border Wall comments. There were several references in the document to the border wall; references that seemed unnecessary and jarring, and likely to reduce support for the plan. Additionally, we believe they do not have any relevance to the Environmental Assessment. We would like those references removed.

Reed Peters

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