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[Date]

Kerwin S. Dewberry, Forest Supervisor
c/o Alysa Hansen, Special Uses Program Manager
Coronado National Forest
300 W. Congress Street
Tucson, AZ 85701

RE: Comment in Support of Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) – Organizational Camp Permit Issuance, Camp Columbine, Inc., Proposal #339379, Safford Ranger District, Graham County, Arizona

Dear Supervisor Dewberry and Ms. Hansen:

I am writing to strongly support Alternative 1, the Proposed Action, and to urge the Forest Service to issue a 20-year Special Use Permit so that Camp Columbine can reopen. For several generations, my family has camped, hiked, and spent time together in the Coronado National Forest, and the Pinaleno Mountains are part of who we are. It is my sincere hope that Camp Columbine will once again serve the young people and families of Graham County and all of Arizona.

1. Reopening Camp Columbine will have no environmental impact.

Camp Columbine has been present in this area since the 1960s. An organizational camp operated at this exact site under a Forest Service permit from 1966 to 2008, and the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) itself recognizes that because the buildings, utilities, and patterns of use are already in place, “the Camp is part of the existing environment.” Reopening the camp simply returns a long-standing, established use to its existing footprint. There is no environmental impact. The record supports this:

- The Proposed Action does not expand the camp. It is confined to the existing 5.9-acre permit area, and the only new ground disturbance is approximately 340 square feet for a camp host pad and two accessibility ramps into the dining hall.
- The camp would be closed and unused for five months of every year (November 15 – April 15).
- The EA found no adverse effects to scenic resources, air quality, or the eligibility of Ash Creek as a Wild and Scenic River; no documented impacts to water resources over decades of use; and no expected adverse effects to fire behavior, forest conditions, or the Mount Graham (Dził nchaa si ’an) Traditional Cultural Property.
- The habitat effect on Mexican spotted owl designated critical habitat is described by the EA as insignificant — approximately 0.005% of the critical habitat unit.

- The Mount Graham red squirrel population has rebounded from an estimated 35 animals after the 2017 Frye Fire to 232 in 2025, with the camp’s facilities standing in place throughout.
- The Design Criteria in Table 2 of the EA provide strong protections, including 92-foot no-disturbance buffers around red squirrel middens, scheduling of maintenance outside the owl breeding season, bear-proof food storage, annual Forest Service monitoring, and conservation education for every camper and staff member.

Notably, the EA finds that Alternative 2 (Removal and Restoration) would itself be “likely to adversely affect” the Mount Graham red squirrel, due to up to three seasons of demolition with heavy equipment generating 80–85 dBA of noise. Removing the camp would create disturbance that does not exist today, while permanently eliminating the camp’s public benefits.

2. Removal would permanently eliminate the only organizational camp on the mountain.

The EA states that Alternative 2 “would eliminate the only organizational camp in the Pinaleno Mountains and therefore would have permanent adverse effects on Recreation opportunities.” Forest Service Handbook 2709.14, Chapter 10, defines an organizational camp as one that “provides a valuable service to the public by using National Forest System lands as a setting to introduce young people ... to activities that they may not otherwise experience and to educate them on natural resource issues.” Camp Columbine fits that purpose exactly and supports the recreation and public-connection goals of the 2018 Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

3. Time in nature is vital for young people, and the research is clear.

- **Lifelong stewardship.** A Cornell University study of more than 2,000 adults found that participation in “wild nature” activities before age 11 — camping, hiking, and exploring the woods — was a particularly potent pathway to pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors in adulthood (Wells & Lekies, 2006). Children who come to love places like Mount Graham grow up to protect them.
- **Learning and well-being.** A 2019 review in *Frontiers in Psychology* found converging evidence that experiences with nature improve children’s attention, reduce stress, strengthen self-discipline, increase physical activity, and boost interest and engagement in learning (Kuo, Barnes & Jordan, 2019).
- **Camp outcomes specifically.** The American Camp Association’s five-year National Camp Impact Study, conducted by the University of Utah across 80 camps (2017–2022), found that quality camp experiences build independence, social awareness, a sense of belonging, and an affinity for nature; 58% of youth reported that camp helped them appreciate being present in the moment and less dependent on technology (American Camp Association, 2023).
- **The need is growing.** Tweens now average more than four and a half hours of screen media per day and teens more than six and a half hours (Common Sense Media). Places that give children unplugged, hands-on time outdoors are more important than ever.

Under the Design Criteria, Camp Columbine would deliver exactly this kind of experience together with direct education about the Mount Graham red squirrel, the Mexican spotted owl, Leave No

Trace, and fire safety. Each summer, more young Arizonans would leave the mountain understanding why this sky island matters.

4. Request.

I respectfully ask the Responsible Official to select Alternative 1, issue the 20-year Special Use Permit with the Design Criteria in Table 2, and allow Camp Columbine to reopen. A camp that has been part of this mountain since the 1960s deserves the chance to serve the citizens of Arizona once again, and it is my sincere hope and full support that it will.

Thank you for your work on this project and for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,


Randy Quinn

References

- American Camp Association. (2023). *National Camp Impact Study: Final Report* (research conducted by the University of Utah, 2017–2022). Summary: Recreation Management, “Study Outlines Benefits of Camp Experience.”
<https://recmanagement.com/articles/153633/study-outlines-benefits-camp-experience>
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- Kuo, M., Barnes, M., & Jordan, C. (2019). Do experiences with nature promote learning? Converging evidence of a cause-and-effect relationship. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 305.
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- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. (2026). *Organizational Camp Permit Issuance – Camp Columbine, Inc.: Draft Environmental Assessment* (Proposal No. 339379). Coronado National Forest, Safford Ranger District. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r03/coronado/projects/339379>
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. *Forest Service Handbook 2709.14, Recreation Special Uses Handbook*, Chapter 10, § 13.3 (Organizational Camps).