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Comments: Comments on Assessment Report...Cibola National Forest Mountain Ranger Districts

Please accept attached comments on "Assessment Report of....Risks to Sustainability, Cibola National Forest Mountain Ranger Districts."

Regards,

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COMMENTS ON "ASSESSMENT REPORT OF ECOLOGICAL/SOCIAL/ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, TRENDS,
AND RISKS TO SUSTAINABILITY,
CIBOLA NATIONAL FOREST MOUNTAIN RANGER DISTRICTS"

February 2015 edition

Submitted by Virginia Seiser, vseiser@unm.edu

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I have hiked and climbed in the Cibola National Forest over most of the last thirty years. Since my retirement, I have been hiking in the Sandia Ranger District several times a week, so my comments will focus on recreation in the Sandias, with some mention of the other ranger districts.

My comments pertain to Volume II Chapter 5 "Recreational Settings, Opportunities, Access and Scenic Character."

Pages 162-63: Magdalena RD: Types of Recreational Opportunities: Please give extra emphasis to need for barriers, signage and patrols to protect the Withington Wilderness from illegal motorized travel.

Update status of Magdalena travel management plan. Did it go into effect in 2014 as projected?

Pages 165-67: Sandia RD: Developed Recreation: Because of unpredictable snow fall, the 2015 project open Capulin snowplay area only on pre-selected weekends did not work well. Staffing needs to be flexible enough to take advantage of snowfall when it occurs. The Sandia RD needs increased budget to hire winter seasonal staff and to contract for snow plowing to open Capulin promptly when weather cooperates. This would increase public

safety by channeling parking and snow play into safe supervised areas and would mitigate growing public dissatisfaction at being denied access to an attractive recreational site.

Adding currently unauthorized trails to the system will help disperse use, reducing hiker concentration on the current heavily used trails. Signage (notably in the Placitas area) and additional official access points will help reduce user tendency to blaze their own access. Hikers like connections between trails to vary familiar hikes by creating loops, cross overs and access to special features of interest. Three unofficial trails especially worthy of addition to the trail system are (1) at the south end of the Sandias, the connection from the upper end of the Hawkwatch Trail to the South Crest Trail, (2) the White Rock Trail on the west side, going from the end of Manual Blvd to the Oso Pass junction of 3 Gun and Embudito Trails; and (3) Larry's Trail on the east side which connects Faulty and South Crest Trails.

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Pages 165-67 continued: Sandia RD: Developed Recreation: Specific mention should be made here of cooperation with other public land entities adjacent to Sandia RD: City of Albuquerque Open Space, Bernalillo County Open Space, and Albuquerque Public Schools Outdoor Education Center. A number of unofficial trails on the west side start in City of Albuquerque Open Space. At the south end of the Sandias, an unofficial trail connects Carolito Open Space with the lower end of the South Crest Trail, an attractive tie-in between city and FS land.

When deciding which unofficial routes on the west side of the Sandia to add to the roster of official trails, maybe connectivity with public transit should be factored in. Collaboration between the city bus system, Albuquerque Open Space and the Sandia RD to encourage outdoor recreationalists to reduce fossil fuel consumption by using public transit would be a positive step toward environmental conservation

Mountain bike use is already restricted to the areas outside the Wilderness boundary. Modest improvements to existing legal trails that already get heavy bike use might encourage bikers to stay in approved areas. For example, bikers on the Challenge Trail ride across the Crest Road 536 east of the Capulin picnic area and continue down the slope to Hwy 165, causing significant erosion in triangle of land formed by the NW corner of the intersection of the Crest Road and Hwy 165. A well designed connecting trail between the Challenge Trail and Hwy 165 should be constructed, and the existing erosion damage in this triangle replanted.

FR333 is popular with bicyclists. Wider shoulders would increase safety.

La Luz Trail Run parking issue might be mitigated by requiring race managers to set up a shuttle bus, possibly negotiating with Sandia Casino parking.

Page 167 Sandia RD: Dispersed Recreation: While the 2005 VAB may have found that its participants said "...wilderness is a valued resource, but did not see a need to expand existing wilderness area," comments elsewhere in this report that "a portion of the Sandia Mountain Wilderness are overutilized" counterbalance this statement. The Forest Service should be alert to the possibility of acquiring inholdings to create wilderness buffers (and reduce landowner/recreationalist conflicts). One possible opportunity is the old Ellis Ranch/Presbyterian summer camp property currently operated as a not-for-profit Sandia Mountain Retreat Center (SMRC). It is a beautiful piece of land with old-growth trees, a perennial spring and associated stream, and a shelter-cave that may have been used by indigenous people. The managers of SMRC love the land and want it preserved but are struggling to find the manpower and financial resources to maintain it. FS should cultivate a liaison with SMRC. Ultimately, FS acquisition of the land might be seen as a win-win solution, but preliminary relationship building would need to be done.

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Page 167: Apache Kid, Manzano and Withington Wildernesses: Dispersed Recreation: The 1985 finding of relatively light use is probably still the case today, suggesting that these Wilderness areas are actually the core of a much larger area with wilderness characteristics. The revision of the forest management plan is an opportunity to put forward proposals to expand designated Wilderness areas. Our wilderness heritage is irreplaceable and

deserves official protection, before it is gone. I have personally visited the Panther Canyon area adjacent to Withington Wilderness and can attest to its solitude and untrammelled beauty. Our group was there on a weekend in late spring, and met no one at season when higher visitation might be expected.,.

Page 168 Sandia RD: Caves: I commend the FS for its proactive approach to cave protection.

Page 173-174: Mt. Taylor RD: Important Recreational Sites: I applaud the FS for its cooperation w/ BLM and the Continental Divide NST to create trail corridors. The NW Multi-Agency Visitor Center is a great success in making visitors more aware of the recreational and scenic opportunities in this part of the state.

Page 174: Magdalena RD: Important Recreational Sites: While some consider mine tailings to be a blight to scenic values, the above-ground structures and rusting equipment around mine sites are often viewed as picturesque photo opportunities.

Page 174 Sandia RD: Capulin Snow Play Area: The FS has a big investment in physical improvements at Capulin. For many city kids, sledding is their first introduction to the recreational potential of forestland. Newspaper coverage has drawn attention to public frustration over limited access to this attractive winter resource. Solving staffing and equipment problems should be given a priority. See also comments regarding pp. 165-67

Page 175: Sandia RD Sandia Man Cave: Thank you to the FS for its cooperative stance on protecting the cave from damage. There is a real opportunity here for interpretive signage explaining why all caves deserve protection. Maybe a volunteer presence on high visitation days (Memorial weekend, Veterans Day, 4th of July) might provide further opportunities for informal public education.

Sandia Mountain Tramway: Make room for an information counter for a Forest Service volunteer in the remodeled facility at the top of the tram. Tourists can be disoriented by the abrupt transition to a high altitude environment on the edge of wilderness. Interaction with an experienced volunteer can promote public safety.

Sandia Crest Byway: The Crest road is a favorite challenge for hard core road bike riders. Wider shoulders would make it safer for them. Can the Forest Service make that request of the State Highway Department?

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Page 175 continued: Sandia RD: Important Recreational Sites: Two additional human created features in the Sandia RD that are foci of visitation are the TWA crash site and the Eye of the Sandia. Both are problematic for different reasons. The FS needs to remain aware of the unofficial trails leading to these two features, but probably shouldn't actively promote visitation.

The TWA Crash site, on the west flank of the mountain, is a place of solemn remembrance for bereaved families, and on the other hand, a point of interest for aviation buffs and local historians, and an attractive objective for strong hikers looking for challenge. It is protected from casual visitation by its relative remoteness and rugged terrain.

The Eye of the Sandia is a piece of contemporary rock art created in the 1950's and periodically refreshed by anonymous artists. It can be accessed by unofficial trails starting at the Open Space trailhead at Copper, and overlooks the village of Carnuel. It is part of local lore and, with time, has transcended the category of graffiti to the status of historical artifact. It deserves protection but not emulation.

Page 176-77: Sandia RD: ...Condition of Trails...: Trail erosion is a problem on the steeper trails ascending the west side of the Sandia, notably the middle section of the Embudito Trail.

Conflict with private landowners over lack of right-of-way has come to a head on the east side with the closure of the Cole Springs Road. The southeast quadrant of the Sandia is underused as a result. Two improvements would help mitigate this loss of access: (1) Negotiation with APS for an easement along the southern border of its Outdoor Ed Center would provide good access to Larry's Trail, and might relieve APS of the nuisance of

unauthorized hikers "sneaking" across their property. (2) Develop trailhead parking on FS property near the end of Casa Loma Road, for a new trail connecting to the Faulty Trail.

Page 178: Sandia RD Volunteering: Trained Forest Service volunteers walking high use trails during the summer season can avert situations that might otherwise turn into a rescue of ill equipped and ill advised novices. Dave Hammack, who has been walking the La Luz Trail all these years is a treasure.

Page 179: Sandia RD: Conservation Education/Integration: Talking Talons and "More Kids in the Winter Woods" deserve mention as well.

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Page 180-81: Sandia RD: Conditions...Affecting...Recreational Settings and Scenic Character: Leaving felled trees along trails is contributing to hazardous fuel buildup as well as being unsightly. windstorms are dropping deadfall across trails, creating blockages that hikers circumvent by blazing detours, causing more potential erosion.

Page 180-81: Magdalena RD Conditions...Affecting...Recreational Settings and Scenic Character: Not mentioned in this chapter is the environmental damage done by cattle, which impacts scenic character as well as sustainability. I was hiking a section of the Six-Mile Canyon Trail in the Magdalena RD in May 2014. It was badly trampled and littered with compacted cow dung. Apparently drought-starved free-ranging cows had used the trail to access greener areas in the high country. At the least, holders of grazing allotments should be required to maintain fences to protect adjacent recreational areas.

Page 184: Recreation fees: Golden Age passes for seniors are highly appreciated and should be continued. We're a healthier nation if we keep hiking in our golden years.

Page 188-89: Sandia RS: Socioeconomics: The Sandia Tramway has potential to reduce use of fossil fuels by encouraging ridership as an alternative to driving to the Crest, but the cost of tram tickets is out of reach for financially stressed citizens. Tram management could be encouraged to have a Kids Ride Free promo on selected days tying in with "More Kids in Winter Woods" programming. Reduced fees to seniors for multiagency permits ("Golden Age" passes) is another way that the Forest Service assists the economically disadvantaged.