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## **Public Comment on Tonto National Forest Traffic Management Plan Fossil Creek Area**

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**Project Name:** Tonto National Forest SEIS TMP final comments project #28967

**Issue:** Lack of immediate rescue access to hikers/visitors experiencing a medical emergency in Fossil Creek.

### **Summary of the Fossil Creek Public Safety Crisis**

- 1) The Pine Strawberry Fire District is the closest emergency medical service and rescue agency to Fossil Creek. It is a 4-mile response from the closest fire station to the trailhead of the Upper Springs Trailhead — and a 7-mile response, to the Waterfall Trailhead.
- 2) Over a 4-year period (2015-2018 rescue agencies and fire districts from Yavapai and Gila Counties **have rescued 687 hikers or visitors to Fossil Creek. There have been now been 7 fatalities since 2015. There have been several.** There have been several “near death” missions. A true public safety crisis
- 3) The U.S. Forest Service has closed three roads that previously allowed rapid and more direct access to victims by rescuer agencies. **As a result, what used to be a 1.5-hour rescue event, with few rescuers, now can take as much as 5 to 7 hours to complete (or longer) and requires a dozen or more rescuers to complete.**
- 4) **The three closed roads are 1) the Forest Service 708 Road** (which had been maintained adequately by private commercial power companies operating the old Irving Power Plant for nearly 100 years), **2) the 4 mile Service Road** that

travels from the plant to the dam at the head waters of Fossil Creek (*now called the Flume Trail*), and **3)** the 4.5 mile, two-track jeep road, known as the **Uppers Springs Trail** that was put in during the early 1960's.

- 5) The Forest Service 708 Road.** This road once allowed “public” travel between Strawberry and Camp Verde and was maintained by private power plant operators for nearly 100 years without difficulty. Several years ago, the Forest Service closed a 4-mile section of the road to the public. Public safety agencies were permit access for emergency rescue missions the road has not been maintained. As a result, as a result of two separate small rock slides the road was closed to access from Strawberry to the water fall trailhead most of the last three years (CenturyLink cleared the first blockage when the company went on the road to repair a washout of the road. The second was cleared by Gila County road crews following an August meeting with Tonto Forest officials)
- 6) What was once a 20 to 25-minute response time by the Pine Strawberry Fire District to medical emergencies at the Water Fall now takes 2 hours (or more) to reach the trail head — 6 times longer than previously!** Note: Public Safety/Rescue Agencies are not requesting this road be improved to public use levels, just that the road be maintained adequately for public safety/rescue use only.
- 7) The closing of the Service Road,** and the dismantling of a bridge on this road, now prevents any vehicle access to the Upper Springs area (the headwaters of Fossil Creek) and a feature called the “Toilet Bowl”. When the Forest Service 708 Road was blocked it required a 2-hour and 15-minute response by rescuers to the trailhead, and another 2 hours of hiking to reach a patient (4 hours just to reach the patient). Then another 2 to 3 hours is required to move the patient on a Big Wheel litter (6-7 hours total) to get the patient to a waiting ambulance at the trailhead. Before the bridge was removed the rescue could be completed in 1.5 hours or so.
- 8)** The closing of the service road, and the dismantling of a bridge on that road, now prevents any vehicle access for Forest Service patrols to enforce the prohibition of campfires at the Upper Springs headwaters of the Creek in a very fuel rich canyon. The Forest Service was routinely patrolling this area prior to the roads closing. These patrols ended years ago when access was lost. Loss of the use of the service road further prevents access of wildfire firefighting crews to the area that is dense in fuels.
- 9)** The third road closure is what the Forest Service calls the “**Upper Springs Trail**”. This is a “trail” in name only! **It is actually a 4.5 mile “two track” jeep road** that was put in during the early 1960's. It was maintained enough to allow vehicle travel on the road down to the Springs area through the late 1990's and **the rescue could be completed in 1.5 hours with few rescuers.** Today, the first 2

miles of the road can be traveled by a 2-wheel drive vehicle and much of the remaining 2 miles of the roads surface remains in good condition and will still allow vehicle travel. The only real blockage of travel is at the 2-mile mark where the roads surface has eroded away which narrowed the road. Today, only a single seat quad can pass through and once beyond that the road widens enough for a pickup truck to travel.

- 10) Today, because the Upper Springs Trail “road” is closed even to rescue agency vehicles, where the victim is incapacitated, rescue operations **now require a dozen or more members from the Tonto Rim Search and Rescue Posse and between 5 and 7 hours to complete.** This requires rescuers to pull a Big Wheel litter carrying a patient, 4.5 miles uphill, with a 1,500-foot elevation gain. This place a very heavy physical burden on rescue agencies, EMT's and paramedic's and puts them at increased risk for a serious medical event. Further, these frequent and lengthy rescue events pull sheriff deputies, firefighters, paramedics, and rescue personnel from the communities they are obligated to serve for a long period of time.
- 11) In 2015, rescue agencies offered to improve a few sections of the trail to allow a side-by-side UTV, with a patient litter, to travel the full length of the road travel **at no cost to the Forest Service.** This would have reduced rescue times of 5 to 7 hours to the previous 1.5 hours or so, as well as reducing the number of rescuers required to complete the rescue. **The Forest Service rejected that proposal.**
- 12) More recently, a contractor who has built hundreds of miles of 62-inch width quad trails for the U.S. Forest Service and Park Service, and BLM walked, and GPS mapped the Upper Springs Trail (ROAD). He has advised he can use a specially designed dozer to improve the road to allow a side-by-side UTV to travel the full length of the trail. He stated the project could be completed in about 7 days. **The work would have been done at no cost to the Forest Service. The Forest Service refused the offer**
- 13) It should be noted that the Upper Springs Trail Road is in the Tonto National Forest and does not penetrate the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River Boundary.
- 14) The Forest Service 708 Road also has critical communications optic fiber cables buried under the road. The importance of keeping the Forest Service 708 Road maintained is illustrated in a “near miss” outage of internet and emergency 9-1-1 services. In September 2018, following a long monsoon season of heavy rains, it was discovered that a washout had grooved a deep ravine through the road exposing four critical CenturyLink communications cables to damage. CenturyLink crews had to remove the large bolder in the road (and did so easily) that the Forest Service refused to do, to make access to the site.

**15) The CenturyLink Cable travels the full length of the Forest Service 708 Road between Camp Verde and Strawberry. In 2015, the cable system was severed by crews working on the Forest Service 708 Road on the Strawberry side of the road creating a loss of internet and cellular emergency 9-1-1 services for 15 hours. Businesses could process credit card purchase; travelers could not use ATM's to get cash to purchase gas to get to Phoenix.**

**16) The 15-hour outage also created a major public safety emergency. Some 30,000 regional residents with cellular phones could not place 9-1-1 calls to report structural fires or medical emergencies.**

**17) The fact that the entire Forest Service 708 Road carries the 4 critical communications cables the full length of the road creates a special public safety emphasis on keeping the road adequate for repair by CenturyLink maintenance crews**

**18) NOTE: The Pine Strawberry Fire District, the Copper Canyon Fire and Medical District and both the Gila and Yavapai County Sheriff's Offices fully support the Forest Service permit system utilized for Fossil Creek.**

**Reason of Change Request: Rescue agencies need rapid access to subjects experiencing medical emergencies in Fossil Creek. Today's 5 to 7-hour rescue missions can be reduced to about 90 minutes with vehicle/UTV access, thus, increasing the patient survival profile.**

At a recent meeting, hosted by Gila County Board of Supervisor member Tommie Martin, with Tonto National Forest officials, District Ranger Debbie Cress asked if any fatalities had occurred because of delayed response of rescuers.

I described two separate drownings at the "Toilet Bowl" at the base of the old dam. Each were similar. Both victims got in trouble swirling around in the Bowl. Both had a rescuer that went to the victim's aid. Both rescuers described they held onto the victim for 30 – 40 minutes, before the cold water created hypothermia and exhaustion. Both described making the difficult decision to save themselves and let go of the victim.

I also described that cellular service is available at that general location and prior to closing of the roads, response time from the Strawberry fire station to the Toilet Bowl was about 30-40 minutes.

I also described a near death case history of an 18-year-old female who collapsed just a mile below the Upper Springs trailhead this past June. It took 3 hours for rescuers to bring a "Big Wheel" litter and haul the girl to the awaiting medical helicopter. She was transported to a Valley trauma center where she was admitted to the ICU for 3 days with a very high core body

temperature and another 2 days on a general floor before. She required follow-up skin grafts to repair large blisters created by the heat stroke. She nearly died. She suffered kidney and liver damage along with memory loss.

I stated that had rescuers been able to access the victim with a side-by-side UTV the rescue time could have been reduced to an hour or less and would have also reduced the girl's injuries

**Proposed Solution:** Designate all three roads as “Administrative” to allow emergency vehicle access during rescue missions.

During the August meeting with Tonto National Forest officials at Supervisor Martin's office, Tonto Forest Supervisor Neil Bosworth described the buried cables under the Forest Service 708 Road was critical infra structure which needed to be protected and the road needed to be minimally maintained to allow repair crews a rescuer access.

Public Safety representatives stated they aren't requesting any major upgrades to the road. They believe the priority is to clean out the drainages to prevent further erosion of the roads surface. They believe that in late spring of each year, and before the April 1<sup>st</sup> permit period, a basic road grading to clear debris on the road is adequate to allow rescuer access.

In the short term, within a week of the August meeting, Gila County road crews cleared a small rock fall and the road was opened.

Supervisor Bosworth also discussed restoring the bridge on the Service Road and stated he would discuss the issue with the Comprehensive River Management Planning Group.

The Upper Springs Trail/road experiences the greatest number of rescues of all three roads and can be repaired to allow for side-by-side UTV access. While the Upper Spring Trial/road can be repaired, District Ranger Cress stated the tribes have stated they are opposed to vehicle access. This issue needs to be pursued further.

## **The Comprehensive River Management Plan**

I, and Yavapai County Sherriff Captain Rich Martin, are members of the Comprehensive River Planning Group. I represent the emergency medical service and rescue needs for the plan and Captain Martin represents the law enforcement needs.

We both have advocated for the need for a public safety impact study of the high numbers of rescues in Fossil Creek. That study still needs to be pursued.

The planning group has identified several alternatives to recommend for implementation. The preferred alternative for the Forest Service is Alternative E. That would designate the Forest Service 708 Road as OHV trail. Public Safety agencies has submitted public comment that they can support that alternative providing that the road receives basic maintenance to allow full-sized rescue vehicles access during rescue missions.

That position by public safety agencies aligns with Tonto Forest Supervisors concern that the closed 4-mile section of the Forest Service 708 Road be maintained to a level to protect the optic fiber cable system and a means for cable repair crews to access the road for cable repairs.