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Office of
Sheriff of Gila County
J. Adam Shepherd

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Sandra Watts, Acting Regional Forester
Southwest Region
333 Broadway SE
Albuquerque, NM 8710

Please accept this correspondence as my agency's public comment on the final draft of the Fossil Creek Comprehensive River Management Plan. For the period of 2015 through 2020, a total of 740 persons have been rescued from, or treated for medical emergencies; and 7 people have died in Fossil Creek. Those number would be significantly higher but, the last three years the Upper Springs Trail was closed for up to 3 months due to fire restrictions.

Compounding this public safety crisis, three roads that previously allowed rapid access to victims in Fossil Creek have been closed by the U.S. Forest Service. These road closures have extended rescue and extraction times from a typical 90-minute mission to 5 to 7 hours. Following a meeting in August 2019, with Gila County Board of Supervisors and regional public safety officials, one of those roads, USFS Rd 708 was opened. This has reduced a 2-hour response time to the Water Fall Trail Head to around 30 minutes. I am pleased to see that the final draft plan recognizes the need for this road to remain open for public safety.

I do recommend, that the plan be revised to address the emergency access needs related to the two other roads known as the Upper Springs/Bob Bear Trail and the Flume Trail. Nearly all those rescued on the Gila County side of Fossil Creek occurred on the Upper Springs Trail/Bob Bear. For those cases where the hiker is incapacitated, and a big-wheel litter is required to extract the victim, rescue times continue to average 5 to 7 hours normally in temperatures above 100 degrees. To complete the rescue extraction, it requires two dozen personnel to move the victim as much as 4 miles, with up to a 1,500-foot elevation gain, to the trailhead and an awaiting ambulance. This rescue effort also places an extraordinarily high physical demand on the Search and Rescue, Posse members, and my employees which puts them at a higher risk of a serious medical event which could be fatal.

The Flume Trail is in better shape for UTV access. A bridge was removed, and it is presently closed to rescue agencies at the 3-mile mark. At the 2019 meeting with Tonto National Forest Officials and the Forest Supervisor, Public Safety Agencies requested to have UTV access to the bridge location. To date, no action has been taken. Public Safety agencies are still requesting access to reduce rescue response and extraction times. The two roads that remain closed need some basic improvements to allow UTV's access for public safety personnel which could reduce 5-to-7-hour extraction times to about 90 minutes.

The three roads discussed above provide critical public safety access to the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River Wilderness Area which is important and should not be ignored in the Fossil Creek Comprehensive River Management Plan. Please feel free to contact me with any questions. I appreciate your consideration of this critical public safety issue that impacts my County.

Thank you,

Sheriff J. Adam Shepherd
Gila County