

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 3/12/2020 11:59:58 PM
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Organization: Gila Trout Chapter 530 Trout Unlimited
Title: President
Comments: March 12, 2020

Comments submitted via online comment form.

Tonto National Forest
Attn: Forest Planner
2324 E. McDowell Road
Phoenix, AZ 85006

RE: Gila Trout Chapter of Trout Unlimited Comments on the Tonto National Forest Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Dear Forest Planner,

Please accept the following comments from the Gila Trout Chapter (GTTU) of Trout Unlimited (TU) on the Tonto National Forest's (TNF) Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on its Proposed Forest Management Plan. We appreciate the opportunity to have participated in the TNF planning process as it continues with its forest plan revision. Our comments will focus on issues which are of concern to our work and the interests of our local members, sportsmen and women who participate in outdoor recreational activities within the TNF's three-million-acre landscape.

The priorities in GTTU's participation with the general TU May 2017 Scoping comments and in the January 2018 Preliminary Proposed Plan comments for the new Tonto forest plan include protecting and conserving important high value coldwater fisheries and the habitat they are in, the native Gila Trout originally resident in those fisheries, game habitat, preserving hunting and fishing values, minimizing user OHV conflicts and the importance of protecting backcountry areas as they are crucial to maintaining Arizona's important outdoor heritage.

Organization Background

Trout Unlimited is the nation's oldest and largest coldwater fish conservation organization, with over 300,000 members and supporters nation-wide including some nearly 2000 members in Arizona. Our mission is to conserve, protect, and restore North America's coldwater fisheries. Our local chapter volunteer members actively utilize and enjoy the resources of the many streams, lakes and watersheds located on the Tonto National Forest and in the other nearby National Forests. Those nearly 100 members actively fish, recreate and frequently contribute to on-the-ground restoration efforts within the Tonto National Forest. Our volunteer members have contributed countless hours on this forest, working on river and stream restoration projects, reintroduction of native trout species, trail maintenance and other projects.

Sportsmen have a clear stake in the management direction, strategy and priorities that may derive from the forest plan revision process. We appreciate that the Forest Service has encouraged public involvement, through various meetings and interactive websites, to create a forest plan that reflects the interests of the forest users. We are most happy to have helped TNF Planning Staff organize an On-Stream Field Trip on Haigler Creek to discuss opportunities and approaches to Aquatic and Riparian Resource management, we appreciate the several Technical Partner Meetings TNF conducted, and the number of general public meetings which provided for review of the DEIS.

Below we reiterate our priorities for the planning process and improvements to the TNF that will better protect, conserve and restore coldwater fish species, promote healthy game habitat and populations, preserve hunting and fishing values and minimize user conflicts. We look forward to working with the TNF on both the revision and implementation of the forest plan.

Review of the DEIS on the Tonto National Forest

GTTU supports the main objectives and guidelines that parallel our priorities referenced in our May 2017 Scoping comments and in our January 2018 Preliminary Proposed Plan comments. With the direction the Tonto DEIS is taking you are setting important objectives that will strengthen the habitat and species we care about. GTTU will continue to provide collaboration and support in the future.

Considerations that GTTU has suggested including in the TNF plan

- * Manage the coldwater fisheries on the TNF for both recreational fishing and native trout recovery. Mutually coordinate with GTTU and the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) on restoration projects and building Arizona into a destination area for trout fishing and to strengthen the populations of the native Gila trout to one day be a true self sustaining recreational sport fish.
- * When conducting restoration projects for recreational fishing and native trout recovery please refer to the AZGFD's cold water fisheries plan and have aligned management practices.
- * New or reconstructed roads and motorized routes should not be located within 500 feet of intermittent and perennial water features, except where necessary for stream crossings or to provide for resource protection to avoid the long-term adverse impacts such as sedimentation from OHV and vehicle use.
- * Promote backcountry hunting experiences by limiting new road and trail development in existing roadless areas.

Conclusion:

Gila Trout Chapter Trout Unlimited and the sportsmen and sportswomen we represent are concerned with watershed health and wildlife habitat above all else. We appreciate the management work the TNF staff has exhibited, especially providing a valuable and collaborative effort in public participation. We appreciate your careful consideration of our comments and are grateful for the opportunity to provide input on the forest planning process. Please feel free to contact us for further elaboration on these comments.

Sincerely,

Joe A. Miller,
President, Gila Trout Chapter
Trout Unlimited Inc.,
Payson AZ Area