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Title:

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Subject: South Fork Day Use Area Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) 56779

I appreciate the extensive work done by the Forest Service in preparing the EA. I understand how difficult it can be to balance different desires and goals and to reach a consensus opinion.

I have been coming to South Fork for 30 years, have live in the area for 18 years, and have managed the Visitor Information Center for 5 years. I have been involved in the current plan for South Fork Day Use Area since its inception and am very familiar with all of its aspects.

With a few exceptions I am in favor of this well thought out and balanced plan.

For the following reasons I support Alternative B Proposed Action:

*South Fork is enjoyed by not just for birding, but for many different reasons such as hiking, biking, education, etc. Actually, more people go there for reasons other than birding than just for birding. [This information comes from local community members who know this area better than anyone and from the Visitor Information Center.] This area and the road belongs to all the people and all should have access.

*For many decades, this area provided a place for the local community to come and relax and enjoy nature. Picnic tables, benches and toilet facilities were used by visitors and the community. Since the floods of Sept., 2014, these have not been available.

*Picnic tables and benches, both suitable for mobility impaired people, will also help them to relax and enjoy the forest and other aspects of nature. It has been well proven that relaxing in nature has wide health benefits and reduces stress.

*For everyone's enjoyment and safety the above items must be replaced.

*There is no handicapped accessible trail, or even one for the mobility impaired on the eastern side of the Chiricahua Mountains. The only one[s] are in the Chiricahua Monument, on the western side. It is impossible for wheelchairs or walkers to use South Fork Rd. Furthermore, this short [approximately 200 yards] handicapped accessible trail in the plan is being paid for by an anonymous donation that is just for this trail. If there is no trail, the donation disappears.

*The only readily available toilet facilities in South Fork are 2 non-handicapped porta-potties. Based on the usage of these, there is definitely a need for vault toilets on South Fork. At some times of the year it is necessary to empty and clean these twice each week. Expecting the people to use the toilets at Sunny Flat will cause those tanks to fill up more rapidly, with the cost to empty also rising. The Sunny Flat system is very old and has had operational problems. It cannot handle a large increase in volume.

*The placement of the new vault toilet is in the only suitable place that is not in the 100-year flood plain, and where there is enough space for it and parking. This information comes from the FS hydrologist.

*The total space of this proposal is less than 1 acre, out of thousands of acres in Cave Creek Canyon, and hundreds of thousands of acres in all of the Chiricahua Mountains. It certainly seems that we could use that small amount of land to provide some amenities.

*The placement of the Day Use Area is not in heavily forested, nor wilderness habitat. It is not a pristine area. It is only partially with trees and plants as compared to the area around the berm or upstream from there, which is truly pristine. It is a far less impinging place to put these very needed additions than further upstream. According to the Forest Service only one tree of any consequence will be cut down.

A number of comments have recommended unreasonable or unworkable solutions to the Draft EA. Some comments have been made by those who do not have complete knowledge of the overall aspects of the canyon and its current facilities. I will address some of unreasonable or unworkable solutions that have arisen:

*This area is for all the people, not just birders. It is for hikers, it is for handicapped, it is for other mobility-impaired, it is for the local community. There are many more non-birders and

- How can anyone tell a 90 year-old woman, "sorry we have to preserve the [blank], there is no place in the forest for you"
- Or the 80 year-old couple: there's no place for you to walk safely in the forest." What gives anyone the right to say that?"

*Education Outreach cannot be handled at the Visitor Information Center [VIC] because:

- The building is too small to hold groups.
- We do not have enough volunteers to always keep the VIC open. There are almost no local volunteers to work at the VIC. It is staffed 90-95% by non-locals who come with their trailers. It is quite difficult to find these volunteers. Based on staffing issues alone, it would be impossible to expand the functions/operations of the VIC.
- There is no outside place to hold groups except during the warm months at the VIC.
- This is a Heritage Site which precludes all additions.
- This is an Administrative Site which precludes most outside activities.
- To provide Educational Outreach, according to our FOCCC Education Coordinator, we need to have access to the forest for the students, most of which are young.
- Last year our Outreach took a total of 70 students into the forest for about 1 hour. If that was doubled, there would only be only 140 student-hours in the forest all year. That is a very small number! We do not have sufficient volunteers to expand the program even if we have access to more students, which we don't.

*Improvement of rest room facilities is definitely needed because:

- Currently only 2 non-handicapped porta-potties are available at the berm.
- It is incredibly difficult to keep them clean.
- It cost \$thousands/year to maintain.
- If a young student or other needs assistance, there is no way for anyone to assist them.

*I completely fail to understand the objection to a staging area. This is a very small area [20x10 or 200 sq.' with only 4-5 8' benches, where a small group or family can get together. It can be used for the Educational Outreach program or any other programs. Likely, it would only be used infrequently. It certainly would not be an enticement to large groups - it can only hold 10-12 people. It is also a very minor expense of the entire project.

*The idea of converting the beautiful campground of Idlewilde into a Day Use Area is very poorly thought out. It does nothing toward solving the lack of facilities where they are needed. Additionally, it like all the campgrounds, are in the 100 year flood plain. It is not part of the Draft EA, which is what we are asked to comment on.

Exceptions and questions to the Draft EA:

*The following statement is unfounded in fact and creates an unneeded and unhelpful political tone in the South Fork EA. The statement has no impact on the EA itself or on the selection of an Alternative. This statement has no place in the EA.

RE: "If the proposed border wall were constructed, both illegal and DHS activities in the Chiricahua Mountains may decrease, which would benefit recreation settings in Cave Creek Canyon."

*Closing the South Fork Rd completely would be a major mistake:

- It will have a detrimental impact on visitation to the Canyon and all of the mountains and the community. Many of the visitors are not able to walk from the proposed gate to the end of the road.
- Many will not then come to the Canyon which will have a very negative impact on the businesses of the community.
- Of the comments made so far over 80% do NOT want the road closed. This road belongs to everyone.
- Handicapped and mobility-impaired will then have almost zero access to the canyon.

*Estimated maintenance expense of \$10,000-\$15,000:

- FOCCC has agreed to pay the annual maintenance. However, this amount is very large. How is it derived?
- FOCCC may pay the maintenance, but that should be reduced by any revenue from the Day Use Fees and any donations.
- FOCCC will upon installation of the vault toilets, remove the porta-potties from the berm area which will save thousands of dollars per year for FOCCC.

Closing South Fork Road:

The Mexican Spotted Owl nests high up on the cliffs. Fledglings come down to the canyon bottom later, but I am not sure they are likely to be harassed in South Fork. Is there any information about them being harassed in the past? We would like to see clarification of the closure reasons.

-For decades, both in Cave Creek Canyon, Pinery Canyon, Schelite Canyon near Sierra Vista, and others, The Mexican Spotted Owl has been a highly sought-after species by birdwatchers.

-Even after being very sought-after by people, they still return to the same areas. Hundreds of people this year have gone to Pinery Canyon to see them - and they stay right there - you can even approach very close to them without disturbing them I am told.

-If it was thought necessary to close the road to protect wildlife it would be much more appropriate to close it for a short time period to reduce the pressure on the Elegant Trogon, a very much sought-after bird that brings in large numbers of bird watchers and visitors in general, far-far exceeding the Mexican Spotted Owl.

-There have been Forest Surveys in the last few months of Mexican Spotted Owl and Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

What have been the results of these surveys?

-If the road has to be closed, it is much more sensible to close the road for about 6-8 weeks starting in mid-April. This would protect the Trogons and at the same time reducing the small pressure on the owls.

Possible alternatives to the road closure situation:

- 1.Close the road for 6-8 weeks starting on about 4/15 or the generally accepted arrival date of the Trogons. The gate will remain closed thru mid to late May. The gate will remain open but access ONLY for handicapped/mobility people beyond the gate.
- 2.Mobility impaired people must be able to access 12 months out of the year.
- 3.Property owners must have access year-round.

Additional Suggestions:

- 1.Install 8-10 speed bumps to reduce speeding and the large amount of dust generated
- 2.Lower the speed to 10 mph. Install motion activated cameras to take pictures of speeders. They are then cited and the fines are used to defray maintenance costs.
- 3.Investigate the solutions to keeping the dust levels down presented by Kim Vacariu's comments to the FS.