USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Coconino National Forest
Red Rock Ranger District
P.O. Box 20429
Sedona, AZ 86341
928-203-7500
FAX: 928-203-7539

File Code: 1950
Date: September 16, 2015

Dear Fossil Creek Partners and Interested Parties:

On behalf of the Coconino and Tonto National Forests, we are initiating the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for two Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River (WSR) proposals. The WSR is located within the administrative boundaries of the Coconino and Tonto National Forest in central Arizona (figure 1). On the Coconino NF the WSR is accessed from State Highway 260 on Forest Road (FR) 708, approximately 5 miles from Camp Verde, Arizona. On the Tonto NF the WSR is accessed from the community of Strawberry, Arizona via FR 708 (figure 2).

The first proposal (see attachment for details) is a special order to implement additional interim management actions to protect WSR river resources and address public safety. These short-term management actions would include managed day use and reduced overnight camping within the WSR corridor (including Fossil Springs); the establishment of an online reservation system for WSR corridor vehicle access and the use of temporary entry booths to manage traffic according to the reservation system. Short-term additional measures are needed while the Fossil Creek WSR comprehensive river management plan is being developed. The measures would be in place for about 1 year (from the spring of 2016 through the spring of 2017). The river management plan is expected to be implemented in 2017. The second proposal (see attachment for details) includes a geotechnical soil survey which would involve sample drilling and limited material excavation in the vicinity of the historic Fossil Creek Bridge. The survey would be used to gather information about site conditions so that specific engineering plans can be made to replace the bridge that provides access to the Fossil Creek WSR across a steep drainage. Construction activities associated with bridge replacement will be analyzed and potentially approved through additional NEPA analysis. See figure 2 and figure 3 for project locations.

Based on past experience with similar projects, a categorical exclusion is the proposed level of analysis for each proposal. Fossil Creek WSR interim management measures are proposed under 36 CFR 220.6(d)(1) "Orders issued pursuant to 36 CFR part 261 - Prohibitions to provide short-term resource protection or to protect public health and safety". The actions associated with geotechnical survey are proposed under 36 CFR 220.6(e)(8), "Short-term (1 year or less) mineral, energy, or geophysical investigations and their incidental support activities that may require cross-country travel by vehicles and equipment, construction of less than 1 mile of low standard road, or use and minor repair of existing roads".

This decision will be based on compliance with law, regulation and policy, consultation with regulatory agencies, consultation with affected tribes, input from the public, and a review of environmental consequences and the project record.

We are asking for your comments, concerns, and questions concerning these proposals. Detailed information, including maps, is available on the project website: http://data.ecosystem-management.org/nepaweb/nepa_project_exp.php?project=47751. To be most helpful in the planning process, please provide your comments by **October 22, 2015**. Written or oral comments may be

submitted via mail, fax, telephone, or in person. We encourage you to submit your comments directly into the project's website (see address provided above).

Mailing address:
Red Rock Ranger District
Attention: Jennifer Burns
P. O. Box 20429
Sedona, AZ 86341-0429

Physical address:
8375 State Route 179, Sedona, AZ
Phone: (928) 203-7500 or (928) 203-2900
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Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection.

Should you have any questions, or need additional information, please contact Jennifer Burns at (928) 229-7529.

Sincerely,

NICOLE BRANTON
District Ranger

Figure 1. Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River Vicinity Map

Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River Interim Management Proposals

The Red Rock Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest and the Payson Ranger District of the Tonto National Forest is initiating the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to implement additional interim management actions that will protect the Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River (WSR) river values and improve public safety.

Fossil Creek was the site of the first hydrologic power system in Arizona. In 1909 a dam, that diverted the entire baseflow for hydropower generation, was built across Fossil Creek. In 2005 the hydroelectric project was decommissioned and full flows were returned to Fossil Creek.

On March 30, 2009, Congress designated (P.L. 111-11) approximately 17 miles of Fossil Creek as a Wild and Scenic River (WSR). The WSR is located within the administrative boundaries of the Coconino and Tonto National Forest in central Arizona (figure 1). Section 10(a) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act directs land managers to ensure WSR outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) are protected and to the extent possible, enhanced. Fossil Creek river values (including outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) that are at risk include water quality (river value), recreation, geology (travertine formations), Yavapai Apache traditional and contemporary cultural values and biological. The biological ORVs reflect the river's high diversity of fish and wildlife species including Arizona's only pure warm water native fishery.

Currently, visitor use is managed on weekends and holidays and approximately 12 hours per day during this time. On average, visitor use is managed about 4 days per week. Access to the middle section[1] of the Fossil Creek WSR via FR 708 is controlled by a barricade and gate system that is located approximately 2 miles from Highway 260 (near Camp Verde, AZ). Access to Fossil Springs Trailhead is via FR 708 from Strawberry, Arizona. A similar capacity control system is in place at the trailhead. Visitors are allowed past the entry station or turned away as parking capacity is monitored by Forest Service personnel stationed throughout the WSR. There is no fee associated with access to the WSR. With the available parking capacity, approximately 261 vehicles (approximately 1,044 people at one time) can park within the WSR Corridor. Capacity controls have been in place as part of interim management to address resource and safety issues since 2011.

Purpose and Need for Action

Since full flows have been returned to Fossil Creek (2005) public use has dramatically increased. For example, recreational use during the high use season (June-September) increased from an estimated 20,000 visitors in 2006 to 80,000 visitors in 2013 (Rotert 2013). On the July 4th (a 3-day weekend) holiday weekend in 2015, approximately about 1,000 people were in the WSR corridor per day and about 2,600 people were turned away at the entrance barricade. Social media (YouTube, twitter) and television and magazine articles (from *Arizona Highways*) that have encouraged visitors to seek out this unique Arizona environment have further escalated use.

A comprehensive river management plan (CRMP) environmental analysis is in progress but a decision (and implementation) is not expected until 2017. The CRMP will establish a comprehensive approach to managing the free-flowing natural character of the river and its ORVs. The CRMP will provide detailed management direction, implementation, monitoring and adaptive management actions that will be applied to protect and enhance river values. There is a need to implement additional interim management measures in order to protect Fossil Creek WSR values until the management plan is completed. The need for additional management measures is consistent with the Tonto National Forest Plan and the Coconino

[1] See figure 2. The middle section of Fossil Creek includes Homestead, Irving and Tonto Bench.

National Forest Plan direction for WSRs. The ORVs for scenic, fish, wildlife, and historic and cultural values are to be maintained while also protecting the river's free flowing character (USDA FS 1985, 1987).

Visitors that access the WSR from Highway 260 are accessing Fossil Creek after hours and on days when Forest Service personnel are not present. This is resulting in unmanaged parking and blocked roads as visitors park haphazardly in undesignated spots along the roadway. With block roadways, visitors (and FS personnel) may be blocked from exiting the corridor in the event of an emergency. Recent (2015) monitoring indicates additional riparian vegetation disturbance and removal is occurring along the WSR as visitors look for any opportunity for parking and camping. This is occurring throughout middle section of Fossil Creek in Homestead, Irving and Tonto Bench (figure 2). Overall, the volume of use that is occurring from May to September is resulting in the presence of abandoned trash, feces and toilet paper throughout the corridor.

Until the CRMP decision is made, the WSR corridor will continue to lack the infrastructure needed to accommodate high visitation numbers while protecting river values (including ORVs). There is a need to use additional interim measures that would effectively manage daily visitation numbers and direct visitors to durable parking areas.

Another point of access to the WSR occurs from the town of Strawberry, AZ. Access to Fossil Springs occurs via a 5-mile non-motorized trail. This trail is long and hot and visitors tend to be lacking water and durable clothing and footwear. In July 2015, Gila County expressed concern on the volume of search and rescue operations that are conducted from this point. In July, 2015, approximately 30 search and rescue efforts occurred per day per weekend. There is a need to manage visitor capacity and enhance public safety, awareness and education.

Currently, there are about 99 inventoried, undesignated campsites. The CRMP analysis is indicating campsites account for about 4 acres of denuded vegetation in the WSR corridor; and, the number of suitable sites likely range from 0 to 13 (does not include wilderness-related backpacking). In order to protect the river values (including ORVs), there is a need to manage camping and require visitors to use durable campsites where adequate sanitation facilities are located. .

Fossil Springs, which is a sacred site for the Yavapai Apache, has no sanitation facilities. To date, the remoteness of the area has precluded the use of traditional "porta potties". Visitor use records indicate about 335 people are visiting Fossil Springs on weekends and holidays without having access to any toilet facilities (USDA FS 2015, unpublished report). Recent monitoring (2015) indicates the volume of use mixed with the lack of sanitation facilities is posing a risk to water quality (USDA FS 2015, unpublished report). There is a need to use additional interim measures that would reduce the potential for water quality impacts associated with a volume of visitor use that exceeds the capacity of the area.

Proposed Action

In response to the purpose and need additional interim measures include the following actions:

- Replace the existing entry station on FR 708 (accessed off of State Highway 260 approximately 4 miles from Camp Verde, Arizona) with a 24-hour on-line reservation system. The reservation system would be in place to manage access to the WSR corridor until 2017 (or until a CRMP decision is implemented). The reservation system would provide users with a convenient way to assure there would be a parking space for them at Fossil Creek ahead of time or to plan another day to visit. Reservation system fees would be set by the national recreation reservation system contract and would be at least $10 per passenger vehicle. Reservations would be checked by

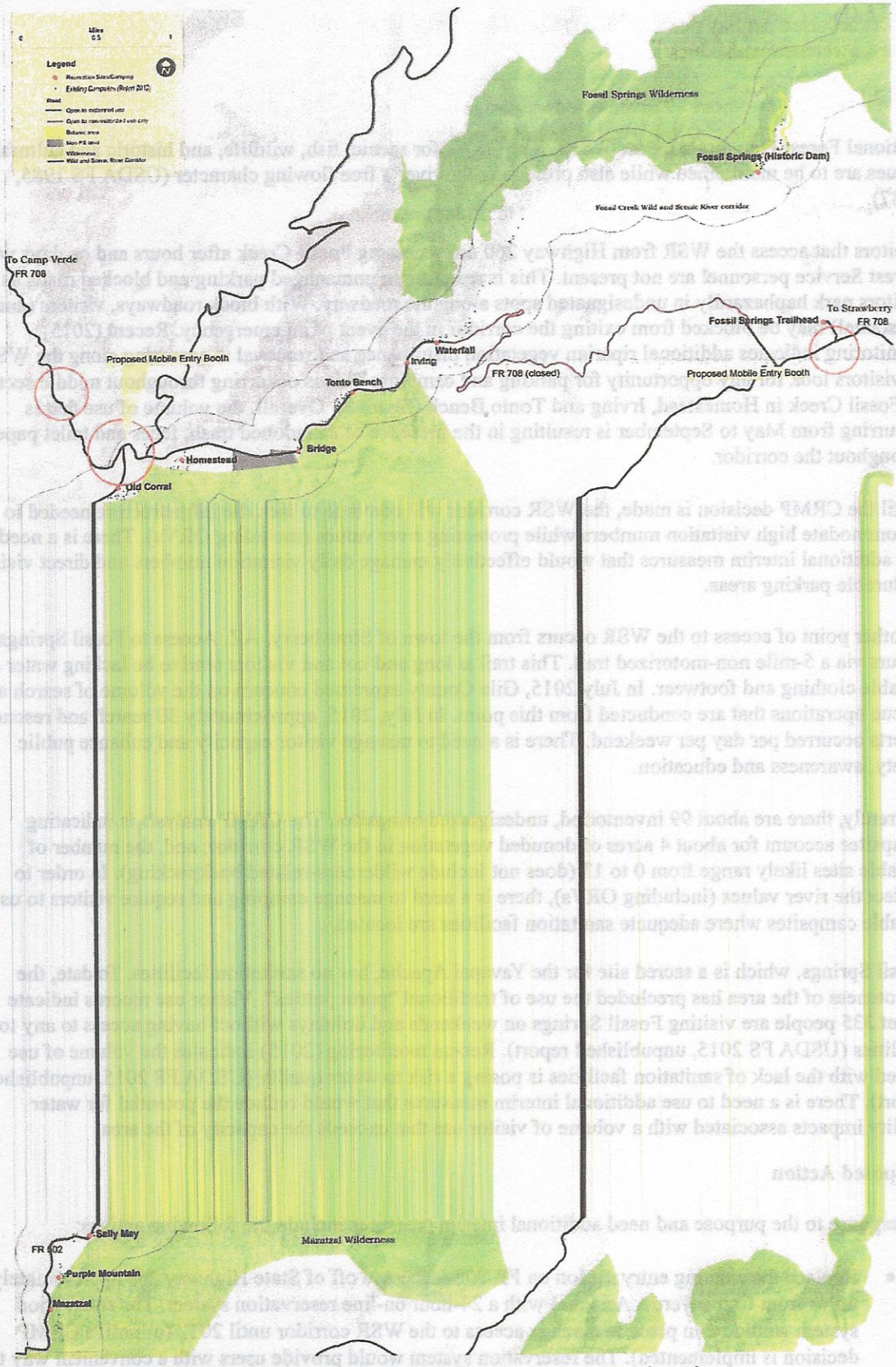

Figure 2. Fossil Creek WSR interim management proposed action locations

Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic River Geotechnical Soil Test Proposal

The Red Rock Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest and the Payson Ranger District of the Tonto National Forest is initiating the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to conduct a geotechnical soil test in the vicinity of the Fossil Creek Bridge (figure 3).

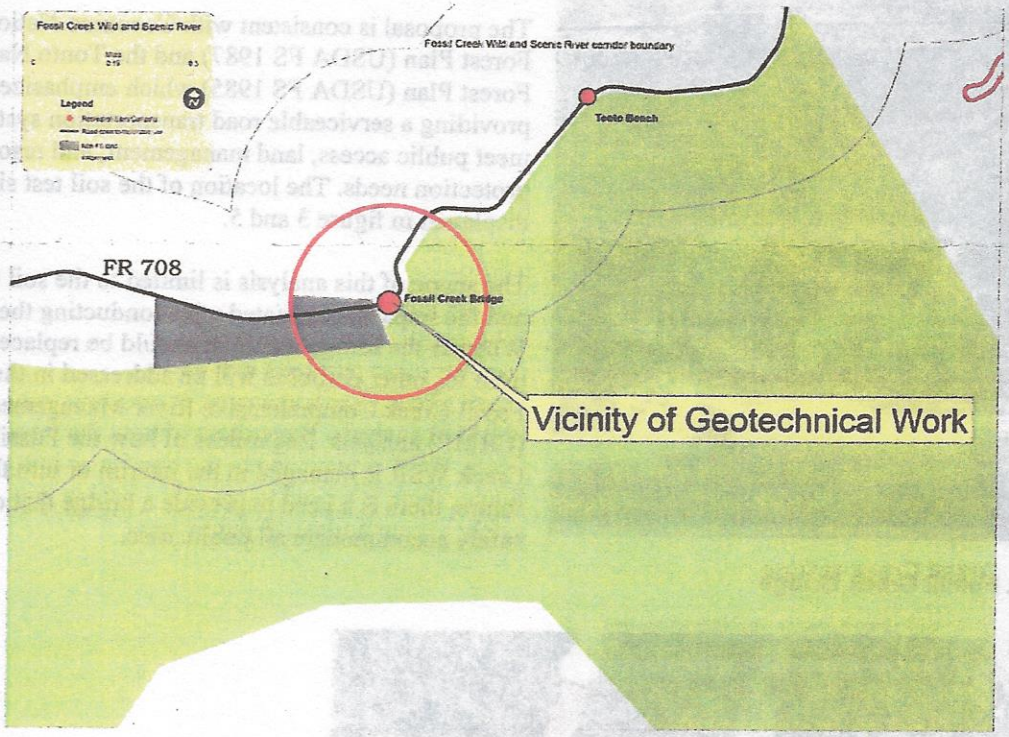

Figure 3. Fossil Creek Bridge Geotechnical Survey Vicinity Map

There is a need to evaluate the soils to determine if there is potential for a replacement bridge adjacent to the historic Fossil Creek Bridge (figure 4). Visitor access to the middle portion of the Fossil Creek WSR is via FR 708 from Camp Verde, AZ. The majority of recreation users drive across the bridge in order to get to the Tonto Bench, Irving and Waterfall sites (see previous figure 2).A 2015 bridge inspection (loads analysis) found the Fossil Creek Bridge (built in 1933) is limited in the loads it can carry and its condition will continue to decline (USDA FS 2015, unpublished report). Heavy use of the WSR during the high use season (approximately April through the end of October) necessitates installation of portable toilets at recreation sites along FR 708 to provide for sanitation. Septic pumper trucks must drive across Fossil Creek bridge, and their loads (when full) may exceed the weight limit. In addition, there is a fiber optic cable that parallels the road and bridge. This cable requires heavy equipment for repairs that may also exceed the weight limit. The condition of the Fossil Creek bridge is beginning to preclude basic operations and maintenance activities for Fossil Creek WSR and utility permits. Overall, the bridge may be inadequate for continued heavy use and use by large vehicles.

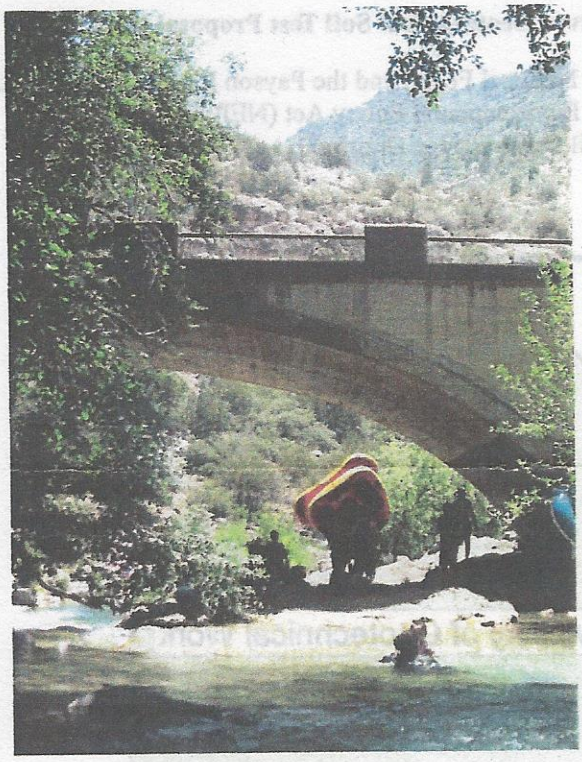

Figure 4. Fossil Creek Bridge

The proposal is to drill approximately 8 holes (up to 4 inches in diameter and up to 30 feet in depth or until bedrock is reached) for the purposes of evaluating soil conditions in the vicinity of the Fossil Creek Bridge (figure 5). The test would be conducted in the fall of 2015 over the course of 1 week.

The proposal is consistent with Coconino National Forest Plan (USDA FS 1987) and the Tonto National Forest Plan (USDA FS 1985) which emphasizes providing a serviceable road transportation system to meet public access, land management, and resource protection needs. The location of the soil test sites is displayed in figure 3 and 5.

The scope of this analysis is limited to the soil test and the impacts associated with conducting the test. Whether the bridge would or should be replaced or used for other purposes will be addressed in the Fossil Creek Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP) analysis. Regardless of how the Fossil Creek WSR is managed in the interim or into the future, there is a need to provide a bridge that can safely accommodate all public uses.

Figure 5. Geotechnical soil survey area