

A vision and suggestions for the use of South Fork

Author: Eskild Petersen, with the input of many residents of Portal at meetings and through e-mail.

Date of document 3/9/20

This content was sent to Doug Ruppel and Reed Peters prior to the Forest Service meeting on 3/9/20 at the Geronimo Center.

The Vision and Suggestions document was developed as an alternative to the FOCCC's published proposal for development at the Berm that included picnic area, trails, amphitheater and kiosk. The FOCCC's proposal was viewed as overly ambitious and too destructive for South Fork.

Background

The scope and plans as presented to us so far through FOCCC newsletter and communications by e-mail include a draft plan:

Exciting News

FOCCC Announces the South Fork Project

For many months the FOCCC Board has been working with the Forest Service on a plan to provide a new and greatly improved trailhead area where the berm is now, at the end of South Fork Rd. This area will have:

Picnic tables and benches

Educational kiosk

Educational trail with handicapped access. 4-5' wide and hardened for wheelchair or walkers, only such trail on east side of the Chiricahuas.

Other trails to the creek

Amphitheater with benches for interpretive presentations

Message board and trail maps

Connect the South Fork Project Area to the new trail, which goes to the old Trailhead and the Chiricahua Wilderness. The new trail was designed and constructed by the Forest Service, Wild Arizona, and community volunteers last July.

FOCCC will continue to supply toilet facilities

This is just a concept plan and must go through the approval process and there will be additions and changes

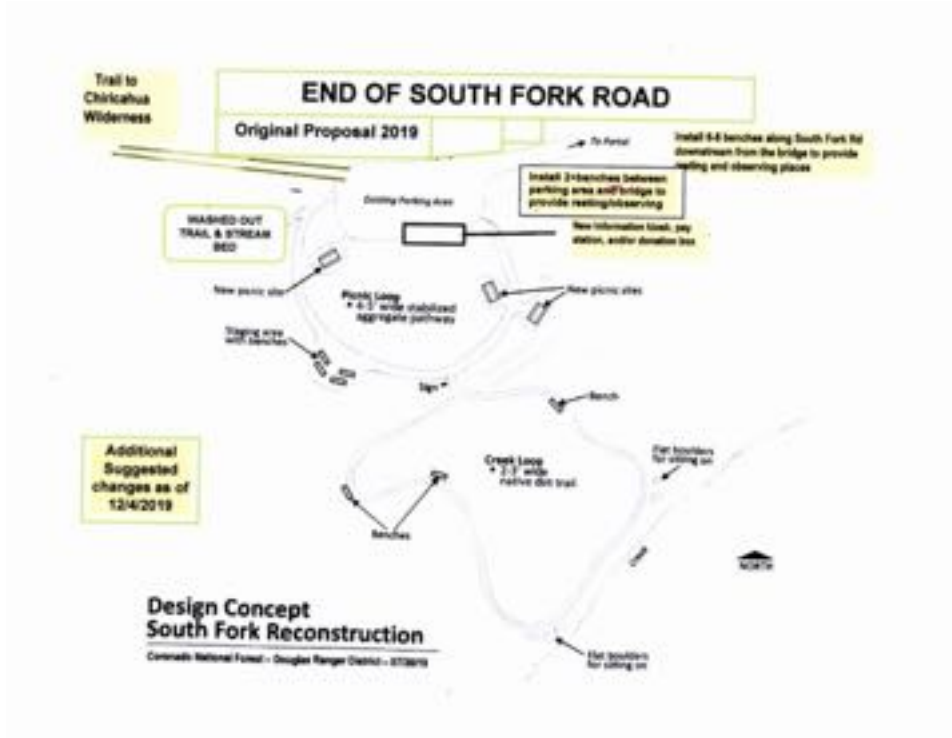
Also

There will be 5-8 benches along South Fork Road between the turnoff from FR 42 and the bridge crossing South Fork. Walkers will be able to relax and observe the wildlife.

Under development are plans to put in a vault toilet, parking, picnic tables and a trail to or along the creek.

Additional proposal elements as of 3/1/20: *place the 2-vault toilet approximately 1/4-1/3 of the distance between the start of South Fork Rd from FR42*

until the bridge. There will be parking and a picnic area with a trail to the creek. These additions will substantially reduce the traffic at the berm trail head and increase the safety. The porta potties will remain at the berm trail head.



Our vision and alternative solutions

After reviewing the above information, we would like to propose these alternatives for the community, the Forest Service and FOCCC to consider.

Our Vision for Cave Creek Canyon

The Cave Creek area should continue to be a place of exceptional wilderness value and extraordinary biodiversity, a birding mecca, a place for quiet, solitude, dark skies and unparalleled hiking. We want the South Fork and Cave Creek areas to continue to be a place for people interested in nature to study and treasure. We must not compromise the wildness of this special place or negatively impact native plant and animal communities. It is NOT just another picnic spot.



Suggestion

- Motorized transport on FS42E - the road from FS42 to the parking area at the berm – should, during the high season from March to early May, be accessible to handicap or special permits only.

The area along the road provides excellent birding opportunities. We should encourage walking rather than driving on FS42E. Make beginning of FS42E the site where people would have to start their exploration of South Fork. Make no infrastructure improvements at the berm site as that would lead to increased traffic on the road.



Suggestion

- Create a site close to the intersection of FS42E and FS42 for parking, toilets and informational signage. Close off road here during high season –March to early May- to most vehicular traffic.
- In this way visitors would have to walk up the road to observe the rich bird and wildlife activities here. To further encourage walking the FS42E we could consider adding benches or flat sitting boulders along the roadside.
- The more we limit motorized traffic on FS42E the likelier it is that South Fork area will stay pristine.



Education

- **The Visitor Information Center (VIC) is the perfect place**
- Educational activities about nature and wildlife are important but can best be performed at sites where the educational resources are abundant and readily available. Thanks to the work of FOCCC in cooperation with the Forest Service the VIC now has great teaching materials available and accessible. The educational experience could be expanded by making a new hiking trail from the VIC to the beginning of the Nature Trail at the Silver Peak Trailhead. Restoring the trail on the east side of the road opposite the VIC would broaden exposure to different fauna and flora next to the creek. The experience could be enhanced by having signs or an app identifying plants along the trails and South Fork Road.



Education for School Groups

- VIC is the perfect site for educational sessions involving school classes. The parking here is optimal for school buses. The nearby nature trail(s) are great for teaching on site as is the area with tables and benches.
- The best teaching is hands-on, especially with young children. The biggest impact comes from moving through the forest and stopping to watch, listen, and touch. It does not require seating areas within the protected area.



Summary



Keep South Fork as pristine as possible, with **no more developed facilities** on FS42E except at the Northern Access close to FS42. Keeping human impact low with limited development is consistent with past and present visitor use as a premier birding, hiking and study area. It is also consistent with South Fork's designation as a ZBA (Zoological Botanical Area).

We must **protect** the biological integrity of this unique area. It is not just another picnic spot.

Expand the use of the Visitor Information Center and enrich with signs and apps the nearby nature trails to provide even better and more accessible opportunities for education and for enjoyment of this beautiful and unique canyon.

