

March 2020 Community Meeting about South Fork Plans

Reed Peters, President FOCCC: Welcome, start with some opening comments: This is not a new project. After the flood of 2014, had a community meeting and a group went to South Fork in the middle of March 2015. USFS recommended putting infrastructure at the junction between FR 42 and the South Fork road (FR 42E). Community consensus wanted to have development at the Berm, closer to the trailhead. Former District Ranger did not make a decision, as he was leaving his position. The new District Ranger, Doug Ruppel, communicated with FOCCC about the project. 18 months ago, FOCCC learned that funding is not available from the USFS. So FOCCC has gotten support to work on the project. Last January (2019), the USFS and FOCCC marked a new trailhead, and worked on plans for the development area, mostly near the Berm. In Oct 2019, Mary Braun of the Forest Service distributed an email to the Portal-Rodeo google group with a Scoping Letter for the Proposed South Fork Day Use Area and a request for public comments. The community was informed of the process for developing a plan for the South Fork area several times during the past couple of years.

Doug Ruppel (USFS District Ranger):

- Thanks to FOCCC for bringing community together and moving project along. History of project: In USFS archives, a project exists on the same footprint from ~1990s. No money at the time, not high priority. Still had toilet and benches at the old picnic area. After Odile in 2014, no longer had functioning toilet. FOCCC for 2.5 years has paid for porta-johns near the Berm. Can't keep doing that – it admits a problem, says we aren't willing to do anything about it. Need to provide reasonable level of services in the canyon. Replace infrastructure that was lost. USFS Recreation in DC and Regional Office have said "sustainable recreation" is a priority. This mean having the smallest footprint on the land, because USFS can't support the infrastructure we have (campgrounds, trailheads etc). Costs eat up budget, cannot maintain infrastructure unless we have a partner. The community in Cave Creek Canyon, including FOCCC, is one aspect of this partnership. USFS plan is that infrastructure will be torn down as it reaches the end of its useful life.
- Current National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, which needs to be followed: Consult with community about what we want to do. Introduced USFS staff: **Dana Backer** – Partnership coordinator, knows NEPA process well. **Debby Kriegel** – Landscape architect; long history with Cave Creek Canyon. **Walt Keys** – forest roads engineer - long history with area. **Armando Arvizu** – Recreation Area Manager, works frequently in the canyon.
- NEPA – currently in the scoping stage. USFS plan; FOCCC has plan also. Rest of public can provide alternatives and comments. USFS will use input from stakeholders and USFS staff to produce draft environmental assessment. After draft environmental assessment, public will have opportunity to comment. After comments are received, final decision will be made by Doug Ruppel.

Comments by community members:

Education: need to educate children to be stewards of the land. Would not be frequent in South Fork.

Rewilding: public was not unanimous in 2015 about where site should be located, rewilding the canyon is recommended by this person. Also recommends moving facilities down canyon, rather than at the berm.

Berm: Is it in the flood zone?

Doug Ruppel:

Only development at the Berm would be trails and possibly kiosk. Two locations down canyon are under consideration; one, which the USFS proposed; another that Debby Kriegel proposed, ~1/2 mile from intersection with FR42. Those are the only 2 places that could have developed infrastructure. One is out of the 100-year flood zone, but not sure about the other one. Hydrologist will weigh in as we move farther through the process. Originally talked about vault toilet at Berm, but talked with Engineers and would have to tuck up on the hill, so would not be accessible. So better down the canyon. Less expensive also.

Comments by community members:

Zoological/Botanical Area: South Fork is designated a Zoological/Botanical Area, should have a management plan, has not been done. Proposed to get people together to have a plan. Suggested potential conflict between birders and schoolkids.

Campground: first used it in 1967, usually full, better off without it. South Fork special place for lots of people, needs to be preserved for its own sake, not just another recreation or education area.

Quality and Harmony of Construction: keep high quality and harmonious visual effect of construction that is in the rest of the canyon (campgrounds and bridges). Have less of a footprint going up South Fork.

Doug Ruppel:

People's comments are focused on the Berm – USFS hasn't been talking about putting infrastructure near the Berm for months.

Comments by community members:

USFS printed plan: what are plans for Berm?

Doug Ruppel:

In NEPA process – don't come out with "PLAN" – rather have scoping document. What are the needs in the canyon, due to lost resources? Need to replace infrastructure and deal with people who are coming into the canyon. Have discussion with the community – the interested parties – see what people can support.

Comments by community members:

Native Plants: keep invasive plants out from coming in on construction equipment and soil.

Doug Ruppel:

Can do things to address invasive plant issues.

Comments by community members:

Comment to Berm topic: FOCCC was working on the Berm site as they thought it was the only area available. Later learned lower site possible, then proposed putting vault toilet there to take pressure off the Berm area. Some people only going to the Berm to use the toilet. Board has discussed keeping porta-potties at Berm area as well as vault toilet in lower area.

Doug Ruppel:

The drawing in the Scoping Notice was the plan being considered in Oct 2019, but discussion and scoping process is still going on. Doug Ruppel can't say what is going to happen "predecisional." He wants the plan to address key issues. What are ideas about how to address the issues? FOCCC put together its plan before discussions with USFS – now an alternative will be developed and an analysis will occur.

Comments by community members:

Less Impact: Wants gentle change. Need bathrooms. Don't need picnic tables for kids. More magical. Kids don't need signs. Less impact – keep the canyon for horses and people.

Other Stakeholders: Reed Peters – Now recalls comment about rewilding at 2015 meeting in South Fork, but also recalls many wanted to be close to the trailhead. General public – elderly couples, families. They are stakeholders that are not represented here.

Move amenities to Visitor Information Center (VIC): Happy to have all the work at the VIC. Drawing doesn't include cabin owners- they are stakeholders. USFS has Quiet Recreation component. South Fork is small proportion of Coronado – should be maintained for zoological and botanical interests.

VIC limitations & need for Handicapped Trail: First came in 1990. First experience was camping in South Fork. South Fork was for the community. Some community members have proposed expanding activities (such as Education and restrooms) at VIC, but it is a heritage site and has limitations. FOCCC has trouble filling volunteer positions; don't have enough people. Bathrooms can be open only when VIC is open. No room for other exhibits. Using VIC as a surrogate for other proposals will not work. There is not one handicapped accessible trail on the eastern side of the Chiricahuas. Have basic support for FOCCC's proposal from Sky Island Alliance, Chiricahua Regional Council, schools, and other partners.

Minimal Change – Alternate compromise plan: not a birder. Member of wider public. Attracted by wild character to the area. Asking for minimal change. Doesn't want canyon to be user friendly, domesticated. Need some changes to restore toilet facilities. See the compromise plan – no one has spoken about this plan. Sensible proposal with more limited impact. Read this.

Doug Ruppel:

Don't debate different plans now. Invited compromise plan interest to speak.

Comments by community members:

Keep South Fork Special, Reduce Traffic: South Fork is not just a pretty place – special for animals and plants – should stay that way as much as possible. Reduce traffic that goes to the Berm – keep cars parked at entrance, where toilets are. Not just a picnic area – keep it special as much as possible. This plan is a starting place – goal is to come to a compromise.

Benches and Handicapped Trail: Speaking for a 96-year-old Portal resident – loved the old picnic area. Would like at least 2-3 benches along the road. #1 goal – handicapped trail from Berm to original picnic site. Short handicapped trail anywhere would be good.

Consider all views: Speaking as an FOCCC Board member: She is in VIC at least 1 day/week. We are not elitists. Need to be responsible to those who come to the forest. FOCCC considers views of community, visitors, kids. Everyone has a right to be here.

Wild Character: Works on Trails – in South Fork – runs into hikers who like wildness. This is an opportunity to continue wild character. Excessive use is a risk to wild character.

Debby Kriegel : She likes that everyone likes Cave Creek Canyon. Proposed facilities are a small footprint. Small parking area, toilet, 1-3 picnic tables. Small trail. This will concentrate impact. Minimize impact on the Canyon. NEPA process will be analyzing “no action” alternative, as well as ONE other alternative.

Doug Ruppel:

In NEPA process, identify no action and proposed action, otherwise, have multiple alternatives and too much work is required. Can't have more than one proposed action to evaluate.

Debby Kriegel: 1997 Concept Plan – has development near main road – this is the only other alternative that is remotely feasible. Sustainable Recreation: first reaction from administrators – oh no, more facilities. Long term maintenance is more upsetting to USFS than original construction. Having FOCCC to help build and maintain infrastructure is necessary. Accessibility means different things to different people. Here it would be a path or trail with an aggregate surface – USFS guidelines – low cost to maintain; suitable for wheelchairs, canes, walkers.

Dana Backer: Stakeholders don't get to “vote” for favorite option. Option gets analyzed for impact on the environment as we move through the process.

Doug Ruppel:

NEPA process – elicit input from public—this is what doing and why we are having this meeting. Take input and respond to indicate we have heard input and decide how to go forward and why. Decision will be made by Doug. Nature of Decision – almost never perfect decision. Always objections.

Walt Keys: Amazing how much people and public love South Fork, Cave Creek Canyon and Chiricahuas. Each would have different ideas about how to use unlimited funds if they were available. Trusts Doug to make best decision for us, public, what USFS requires. Walt was involved in road project 1991-92. People objected then, but now the road is accepted. People are inclined to oppose change; but some changes are good.

Comments by community members:

Put everything at FR2 junction: South Fork is good from the beginning at the FR 42 junction – why not put everything there. Then traffic on the road would be decreased. Whole road is fabulous.

Doug Ruppel:

Issue to address: Facilities were destroyed. Trying to strike a balance for all the people who are using South Fork. Actual Wilderness is farther up the trail. Not everyone will get exactly what they want out there. Hopes to come as close to consensus as possible. Finished with formal presentation.

Comments by community members:

VIC restrictions? What are the restrictions around VIC for adding trails and restrooms?

Doug Ruppel:

Heritage area – culturally sensitive. Additional work being done there brings problems. State Historical Preservation Office does not want to see massive changes. This was the site of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) activity. Infrastructure that we lost is important because of where it was – can't replace it somewhere else. Grateful to FOCCC for supplying porta-johns for 2 years. Need to go through process to identify where infrastructure should be. Can't let current situation go on for long period. Porta-johns are not a permanent fix to the problem. Need to replace infrastructure and deal with the issues that have been raised.

Comments by community members:

ZBA Restrictions? If South Fork is Zoological/Botanical Area (ZBA), how can you add trails, etc.

Doug Ruppel:

Replacing infrastructure that was already there when ZBA was formed is okay.

Comments by community members:

VIC as staging area: Is educational component at VIC precluded? Use as staging area. If bathrooms were winterized, that would support more visitors. In proposal, could amphitheater be moved to VIC area?

Doug Ruppel:

Yes, amphitheater could be moved. Bathrooms at the VIC for year-round use is a problem – septic field at that site is an issue, because a heritage site.

Comments by community members:

VIC septic system: Septic field is questionable now, concern about adding more pressure. Would need to rip out parking lot.

Productive Meeting: This has been a productive meeting. All closer than we think. FOCCC was formed to respect forest. Don't want Disneyland. Not as far apart as one might think.

What's next? Please provide a brief outline of remaining steps:

Doug Ruppel:

USFS will take input (FOCCC's proposal, local alternative proposal, comments today, emails) and craft what ID (interdisciplinary team) thinks is a reasonably good plan. They will then analyze that plan in the NEPA process and produce a Draft Environmental Assessment – hopefully by fall. When Environmental Assessment comes out, there will be a formal comment period (Doug will provide contact info today). Then document comes back to Doug Ruppel to make a final decision. Wild Card: Has to go to USFWS – no telling how long this will take. There are 4 people who handle all USFS requests in the Region. They could hang onto it for months – need Biological Opinion from USFWS. Doug Ruppel will work with FOCCC (or other entity) to keep community informed about status of the project.

Based on today's conversation, he will work on a plan with minimal footprint, low in canyon, with input from hydrologists and Walt Keys.

Reed passed around tablet to collect contact information from attendees. Doug Ruppel will send email with his contact information.

Doug will stay as long as needed to talk with people individually.

Meeting concluded (no time was recorded).

Notes recorded and edited by Bonnie Bowen and Rolf Koford