

Email messages from Peter Waser to Reed Peters (posted with permission from Waser), Doug Ruppel to Peter Waser (posted with permission from Ruppel), and Peters to Waser (posted with permission from Peters)

From: Peter Waser

To: Reed Peters

Cc: Doug Ruppel, Dirk Sigler, Eskild Petersen

28 May 2020

Subject: Concerns about FOCCC

Dear Reed,

In previous years, receiving a request to renew my FOCCC membership has been a no-brainer. But when I received this year's letter from Rick Beno a few days ago, it instead provoked a great deal of hesitancy and soul-searching. I have decided to renew my membership, but with serious misgivings that I'll try to explain in this letter -- which I request you to discuss with the rest of the FOCCC board. FYI, I'm copying this letter to Dirk Sigler, Eskild Petersen, and Doug Ruppel.

When FOCCC was formed, one of the reasons I enthusiastically signed on was its inclusive approach. Our community is unique in our shared love of Cave Creek Canyon. The unique natural and human history of the Canyon is what brought most of us here, and for some of us it's also responsible for our economic livelihood. Most of FOCCC's projects -- the book, Willow Tank, restoring and manning the VIC, introducing local schoolkids to the Nature Trail -- have been enormously successful because they have tapped our shared enthusiasm for the aspects of the natural world that make this place special.

There has always been an underlying tension: each of us is proud of this place, we don't hesitate to tell our friends how wonderful it is, but we don't want all of them to move here. We're acutely aware of the dangers of loving the place to death. FOCCC has been able to walk that tightrope pretty well until this year.

But anyone who attended the March USFS hearing and the follow-up FOCCC meeting knows that that tension is now very close to the breaking point. At that time, my personal concerns were that some aspects of FOCCC's South Fork plans would seriously compromise its unique status as a Zoological and Botanical Area. But as things have progressed, I have also become increasingly concerned about the destructive consequences for our community. There's increasing distrust of FOCCC out there, and a lot of that comes from a perceived lack of transparency and openness in the process.

For example, no one reading the follow-up FOCCC Newsletter would guess the level or nature of concerns about the South Fork project that were raised at the March meetings. Many attendees expressed alarm over increased vehicular traffic or over vegetation destruction associated with infrastructure development. My strong impression is that the view of most attendees was, "development that does not NEED to be in South Fork should occur elsewhere". The FOCCC board members, and also its membership, need to understand this.

And more recently, I have heard that the USFS personnel involved in their required surveys of South Fork were attended by members of FOCCC. If this is true, it is horrible PR for FOCCC, as Doug Ruppel stated explicitly in the March meeting that he was not taking further public input at this stage of the process. The last thing we need from our organization is any appearance of back-room deals.

FOCCC cannot pretend to be the voice of our community unless it leans over backwards to listen to the range of voices that our community includes. I want to emphasize that concern over South Fork is not simply nay-saying: many of the opposing individuals have contributed to FOCCC's goals in the past, and I have no doubt that many

of us would contribute both hours and dollars to those goals in the future, if FOCCC can return to its original, inclusive vision.

Sincerely,
Peter Waser

From: Ruppel, Douglas T -FS <douglas.ruppel@usda.gov>

To: Peter Waser

Cc: Reed Peters

28 May 2020

Subject: RE: Concerns about FOCCC

Peter,

Thanks for copying me on your letter to Reed Peters. I am concerned that this process has resulted in this level of distrust in the community out there. I would like to provide a couple comments on your letter.

When I said at the community meeting a couple months ago that I wouldn't continue at that point to accept comments, that was only in reference to that point in the process. When we have a fully developed proposed action and a DRAFT EA to release, we will again accept additional comments from the public. I believe that when the community has the opportunity to see the revised proposal they will see that we have significantly changed the proposal after we heard your concerns.

I also can assure you that rumors about specialists being accompanied by FOCCC members as they have conducted surveys are not factual. I met out at the proposed location with members of FOCCC, shortly after the public meeting in March, to explain our concerns about some aspects of the original plan. I have also met out at the proposed location and had discussions with community members who are opposed to the proposal. I will continue throughout this process to engage in those discussions on both sides of this debate.

As the specialists on the Interdisciplinary Team conduct their research and analysis into this proposal they are quite aware that I will not accept improper influence from either side of the debate. In addition, under guidelines related to the current COVID outbreak, I have provided clear guidance to employees to limit personal contact with the public in order to limit potential spread of the virus.

Doing nothing in this situation is also making a decision. It is making a decision to accept more traffic than we want in the canyon, it is deciding to accept unsanitary conditions and water quality issues due to that traffic, it is making a decision to continue allowing degradation of habitat quality for key species. We will need to address these and other issues somehow. Change is not inevitably bad. We can improve the situation in the canyon as a result of this process.

I hope that members of the community on both sides of this discussion can focus on the things that you have in common in your love of this unique and special part of the southwest. The process of reaching consensus on such issues can be frustrating. That is the nature of public land management and public policy debates. But make no mistake, the intent is to reach consensus if at all possible. Please don't let that process destroy the unique connections your community is known for. I continue to believe that when this is all over, you will all feel that your concerns have been heard and that the end result will be something you can all be proud of.

Doug

Doug Ruppel
District Ranger
Forest Service
Coronado National Forest, Douglas Ranger District

From: Reed Peters
To: Peter Waser
Cc: Doug Ruppel
29 May 2020
Subject: Re: Concerns about FOCCC

Dear Peter,

Thank you very much for your thoughtful letter. I appreciate your concern and your candor.

I too am very distressed at the tension which this South Fork replacement picnic area proposal has generated in the community. I am so grateful for your past support, and also for the support of many members of the community.

I saw Doug's response to you, which addressed some of your points, particularly denying the rumors that FOCCC had met with USFS survey personnel, and also that FOCCC has an inside track. We do work with the Forest Service on many projects, but after the March public meeting we have to wait and see, like everyone else, what the Forest Service and USFS come up with as a proposal.

I gathered from Doug's comments at the meeting that the original intention to have facilities at the berm is probably history. If anything is approved, it sounds like it would be a quarter mile or so up from the paved road, which is a full mile below the original picnic area.

I honestly don't think a picnic area with three tables, a bathroom, some parking, and a handicapped accessible trail, especially so far downstream from the old picnic area, and so close to the paved road, would compromise the unique status of South Fork as a Zoological and Botanical Area. In fact, when South Fork was first so designated, there was a campground as well as a picnic area, and much more traffic than we have seen in the past 20 years. The campground was later removed, but if the picnic area and its traffic had been thought to compromise the new status, it would have been removed also.

FOCCC has been trying to deal with the reality of South Fork having always been the most visited part of the Chiricahuas, partly due to the level terrain and easy nature of the road and trail, and also to the beauty and peacefulness accessible to even the elderly and infirm. Cave Creek became polluted because the bathroom was out of order. Even though there were no longer any amenities after the flood, South Fork continued to draw the most visitors. We are trying to deal with that reality, that people will come, and need a restroom and a place to sit down.

You make a very good point about the newsletter not going into the range and intensity of the comments at the meeting. I think we should send out another one detailing the concerns brought up at the meeting, and the status of the project. I will make that a priority.

You mentioned the word inclusive several times, but does that not also include the general public? The majority of our members do not live here, but have joined because they, too, love the canyon. They have seen the plans as this process has unfolded, and have been supportive of putting some amenities back into South Fork. Literally the only concerns we have heard have been from some local residents, and I had hoped that as we and the Forest Service listened and modified the plans (jettisoning having two locations, reducing the footprint, and moving it $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile downstream) there would have been some reduction of tension.

Peter, thank you so much for your note. If you want to meet about this, I would be very happy. I do not want to have the community divided over this, either. I will get working on a new newsletter just about this possible project.

Best regards,
Reed