

access at the current level of maintenance. FR's 9206W and 9248C would be closed and restored (decommissioned). Camping and campfires would be permitted downstream of the existing Irving power plant facility in locations consistent with resource needs. Sanitation facilities would be installed in the Middle Fossil and/or Irving areas. Most alternatives would include creation of a creek side trail linking the Middle Fossil area with the FR 708 bridge. The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) would attempt to preserve a semi-primitive character along Fossil Creek, with as few signs of development and management presence as possible. In the Middle Fossil Creek area, the ROS would allow for developments such as vault toilets, information signs, trails, and traffic barriers, with frequent management presence.

The following preliminary alternatives are currently under consideration:

1. *Alternative A (Proposed Action)*—Alternative A would attempt to strike a balance between recreational needs and resource protection. A road access system would be created in the Middle Fossil Creek area to help facilitate parking and creek access in some locations. The Flume Road and trail would be closed, and the footbridge removed. Camping and campfires would be prohibited from Fossil Springs to Irving. A portion of Management Area (MA) 11 (Verde Valley) on the Coconino NF would be identified as MA 12 (Riparian).

2. *Alternative B*—Under this alternative, management within the Fossil Creek area would continue under existing direction and regulation. No new actions would be taken, and no changes to existing Forest Plan direction would be made.

3. *Alternative C*—Alternative C would emphasize the needs and desires of camping and recreation. The Flume trail would be maintained, with the footbridge removed. Dispersed camping and campfires would be permitted in the Middle Fossil area. Designated dispersed camping would be permitted at Irving, along the Flume trail and at Fossil Springs, although no campfires would be allowed. Management area changes would be as in the Proposed Action (Alternative A).

4. *Alternative D*—Management direction in Alternative D would be more restrictive than other alternatives in terms of access for recreation. FR 708 would not remain open in its entirety—the portion of the road between the Deadmans Mesa Road and the parking area just north of Irving (Flume trail

parking area) would be closed. This stretch (approximately 3 miles) would be converted to a non-motorized trail. A creekside trail linking the Middle Fossil area with the FR 708 bridge would not be created. The Flume Road and trail would be closed and revegetated (decommissioned). No camping or campfires would be permitted from Fossil Springs down to and including Irving. Camping and campfires would be allowed in designated areas downstreams of Irving, with parking limited to along FR 708. A special closure area would be established between Irving and the Fossil Springs dam for wildlife and riparian protection. A new Fossil Creek Conservation MA would be created, and a recommendation made to Congress for a minor expansion of the Fossil Springs Wilderness.

5. *Alternative E*—Management directives in this alternative would emphasize day use of the Fossil Creek area. FR 502E would be narrowed and converted to a motorized trail. The Flume Road and trail would remain in use. The footbridge would remain. Camping and campfires would not be allowed from and including Fossil Springs, downstream to and including the Irving housing area. A new Fossil Creek Conservation MA would be created, incorporating the Fossil Springs Botanical area (Coconino NF) and the proposed State Natural Area (Tonto NF).

Responsible Official

The Coconino and Tonto National Forest Supervisors will be the officials responsible for making management decisions, non-significant Forest Plan Amendments, and recommendations to Congress via the Forest Plan Amendments for special designations if needed.

Nature of Decision To Be Made

Within this analysis and planning process, programmatic decisions will be made for the Fossil Creek Planning Area. The scope of these decisions includes the development of Forest Plan desired conditions, standards and guidelines that would provide for the protection and enhancement of fish and wildlife habitat, riparian values, scenic values, and historic and cultural values. These conditions, standards, and guidelines will also determine the character, type, and location of recreation opportunities, roads, trails, and facilities. Site-specific decisions will be made concerning road and trail management.

There will be one environmental analysis documented in an EIS. These amendments are considered to be non-

significant Forest Plan Amendments, affecting only a minor portion of either involved national forest.

Scoping Process

In October 2002, the Forest Service sent out a scoping letter and a description of the proposed action for the Fossil Creek planning process. This letter was followed by a public open house in Pine, Arizona in December 2002, and a question and answer session with interested groups in Phoenix, Arizona in January 2003. News releases and articles requesting comments have been published as well. In response to these efforts and the information provided, the Forest Service has thus far received approximately 57 letters and over 330 substantive comments concerning this analysis.

Preliminary Issues

The issues and concerns voiced in comment letters and other communications, along with those expressed at public meetings, have been taken into consideration in the identification of significant issues and in the development of the preliminary alternatives described above.

Primary Issue

Despite the considerable amount of agreement regarding protection of the natural and cultural values associated with Fossil Creek, there remains disagreement as to the amount, type, and location of recreation access and restrictions needed. Some believe that current levels and locations of access should be left unchanged, including all roads and trails, and that there should be no camping or campfire restrictions. Others believe that access should be substantially reduced to best meet resource protection goals, specifically suggesting a reduction in access along the riparian corridor.

Sub-Issues

- Proposed camping and campfire restrictions and trail/road closures limit the public's use of the area more than necessary to protect resources.
- Camping, trails, and vehicle access could result in impacts to soil, water, cultural resources, wildlife, vegetation, and travertine.
- Location of access and use, including roads and trails, could impact natural and cultural values and recreation opportunities.

Comments Requested

This notice of intent initiates the scoping process that guides the development of the environmental impact statement. Please provide