Fossil Creek Planning Area – Recommended Management Changes

Recommended Management Area Changes –
On the Coconino National Forest portions of Management Area (MA) 11 (Verde Valley) located along upper and middle Fossil Creek would be converted from MA11 to MA 12 (Riparian and Open Water) and would be managed under the current emphasis and direction of MA 12 with some specific standards and guidelines related to Fossil Creek. See map.

On the Tonto National Forest Management Area (MA) 4E, Fossil Springs Natural Area, would be expanded to include streamside areas downstream to just above Irving. The State of Arizona Parks Board has identified this MA as a potential State natural area. Management emphasis would remain as described in the Tonto Forest Plan for MA 4E. Management is directed toward maintaining as nearly as possible existing conditions and natural processes for public enjoyment, demonstration and study.

Recommended Changes to Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines (applies to areas on both Tonto and Coconino forests)-
Upper Fossil Creek area excluding Wilderness, from Irving to and including Fossil Springs Botanical Area and Natural Area.

- Convert to day use only. Prohibit camping and campfires.
- Limit vehicle access along Forest Road 708 to designated areas.
- Obliterate Flume road and trail (Trail #154). Maintain non-motorized access on the Mail (Trail #84) and the Fossil Springs (Trail #18) Trails.
- Add to the forest trail system between Fossil Springs and the current dam site, as needed, to provide access to streamside areas.

Middle Fossil Creek Area - including 2.9 miles of Fossil Creek's mid-section. Contains most of the dispersed campsites and creek access from Forest Road (FR) 502. Extends from Irving downstream to about 1 ¼ mile downstream of the junction of FR708 and 502.

- Maintain current camping capacity, but redesign access to reduce impact to the creek side and cultural resources. Provide parking and access trails for activities, such as swimming, fishing, hiking, wildlife viewing, camping, or picnicking.
- Close or relocate some dispersed campsites to minimize or eliminate impacts to riparian and cultural sites.
- Limit vehicle access near riparian areas. Obliterate some "user created" roads or convert them to non-motorized trails for creek access from FR708.
- Hydropower facilities at Irving would be removed (under the FERC decommissioning process), including the Arizona Public Service's (APS) access bridge and low water crossing. Allow primitive dispersed camping at the restored former housing area. Trailhead parking area on FR708 near Irving would serve as parking for dispersed camping and hiking downstream of Irving.
- Construct a creek side trail for non-motorized access between Irving and the junction of FR708 and FR502.
- Develop interpretation to focus on natural and cultural information about Fossil Creek.
- Develop sanitation facilities near clustered camp areas.

Fossil Springs and Mazatzal Wildernesses -

- No additional trail access unless as a last resort to address safety or resource issues.

- Limit recreation fires and camping in the Fossil Springs Wilderness to north of the junction of the Mail Trail with the Fossil Springs Trail. Recreation fires and camping would still be allowed throughout the Mazatzal Wilderness.

Recommended Road Access Management Standard and Guideline Changes –
Existing management emphasis would not change: a connection between Highway 260 and Highway 87, Childs and Strawberry (FR 502 and FR 708) will be maintained at the maintenance level 3. (Maintenance Level 3 requires the road to be open and maintained for safe travel by a prudent driver in a passenger car. Traffic volumes are minor to moderate; user comfort and convenience is not considered a priority.)

- Close and restore to a natural condition Forest Roads 9206W, 502E, and 9248C to improve watershed conditions.
- Some user-created "tracks" associated with creek and APS facility access would be shortened, obliterated, converted to trails, or added to the FS road system, as appropriate.
- Some APS maintenance access routes would be used as public trail access to interpret the remaining historic features associated with the Childs/Irving Power Plant.

Recommend Fossil Creek Eligible to the National Wild and Scenic River System -
Background: In 1993, at the request of Congress, the Forest Service prepared a preliminary analysis of Wild and Scenic River eligibility for Fossil Creek and other rivers on the six national forests in Arizona. This analysis determined Fossil Creek potentially eligible to be included within the National System. The 1993 report documenting the analysis shows the potentially eligible section beginning just downstream of the existing upper diversion dam near the springs and includes the entire creek to the confluence with the Verde River. With a decommissioning of the APS hydroproject, the eligibility could extend further up the stream as the diversion dam will likely be modified or removed; allowing unrestricted full flows to be reestablished in the creek.

Recommendation:

- Fossil Creek from the springs to the confluence with the Verde River is determined "eligible" for inclusion within the National System. This is consistent with Forest Service policy in the Wild and Scenic River Study Process when a river is free flowing and possesses one or more outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs). With the anticipated modification or removal of the Fossil Springs Dam, the entire length of Fossil Creek would therefore be eligible.
- Fossil Creek's outstandingly remarkable values include geology, botany, fish and wildlife, history and scenery.
- The upper portion of Fossil Creek be classified Wild, the middle portion be classified Scenic, and the lower section be classified as Wild.

A full suitability study (required prior to any Wild and Scenic River designation) may be completed at the time of Forest Plan revisions, anticipated to begin in 2006. Suitability recommendations resulting from forest plan revision processes would receive further consideration by the Department of Agriculture and must be presented to Congress for their consideration as additions to the National System. Only Congress is authorized to add suitable rivers to the National System. For additional information about the wild and scenic river study process refer to *The Wild and Scenic River Study Process*, a publication available at the website: www.nps.gov/rivers/publications.

Other Planning Processes underway in the Fossil Creek area -

Childs/Irving Hydropower Project Decommissioning: The FS anticipates that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) will soon prepare an environmental assessment to determine whether or not to approve power plant decommissioning and to what extent hydroelectric facilities will be removed and the area restored.

In November 1999, APS and an environmental coalition signed an agreement in principle to restore full flows to Fossil Creek and abandon the Childs/Irving Hydropower Facility. APS has submitted a surrender application to FERC that includes decommissioning of the hydropower facility and restoration of full flows to Fossil Creek, beginning in 2005. This facility, currently operated by APS, has been in place for nearly a century. The hydropower facility and its historic elements are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and are part of a National Historic District. APS has proposed removal of facilities at Irving, most of the flume, and removal of Stehr Lake. However, some facilities at Childs will remain and be adapted for National Forest uses and public interpretation. Although the hydropower project is located entirely on National Forest, FERC is the agency that will make decisions related to facility decommissioning. Additional information can be obtained from Judy Adams, at (928) 282-4119.

Verde Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive River Management Plan: The Tonto, Prescott, and Coconino NF's are working together to develop a plan for management of the Verde Wild and Scenic River. The Childs Campground and Verde Hot springs area are within the Verde Wild and Scenic River planning area. Decisions related to camping and recreation use in this area will be made in this process. Decisions are expected in June 2004. For more information about this planning effort contact Carl Taylor at (602) 225-5230 or e-mail to: cataylor@fs.fed.us.

BOR Native Fish Restoration Planning: The native fish restoration proposal involves the Tonto and Coconino National Forests and the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR). The BOR is taking the lead role in cooperation with the Forest Service in conducting an environmental analysis on the installation of a fish barrier on Fossil Creek and reintroduction of native fish into Fossil Creek. Decisions on this project are expected early in 2003. For more information about this planning effort contact John McGlothlen, Bureau of Reclamation, Phoenix Area Office, P.O. Box 81169, Phoenix, Az. 85069-1169 or e-mail: JWMCGLOTHLEN@lc.usbr.gov

Grazing Allotment Management Plans: Allotment management plans are to be completed on active allotments (Pivot Rock/Hackberry and Fossil allotments) in the area within the next few years. Only small portions of these allotments are within the planning area and actions related to grazing activities must be considered in relation to the entire allotment. A review of current forest plan direction indicates it is sufficient to address known resource issues. Allotment plans and annual operating instructions will use resource condition data in future decisions relating to grazing management.

Summary of Existing Resource Conditions:

The outstanding scenery, abundant wildlife, and water offered by Fossil Creek have created a demand for recreation in the area. However, there is a lack of basic recreation facilities, management and public information and interpretation in key locations. Dispersed camping has denuded and compacted soils and damaged archaeological sites in some places near Fossil Creek and the springs. More than 200 dispersed campsites have been inventoried within the planning area. Campsite condition surveys show large areas of denuded soils, tree damage and poor sanitation.

Fossil Creek currently provides outstanding riparian and aquatic habitat for a variety of fish and wildlife. Fossil Creek has one of the few reproducing populations of the sensitive lowland leopard frogs on the Coconino NF and has the highest population density on the forest. Fossil Creek also provides habitat for five native fish and a portion of the creek that has been designated as critical habitat for two additional native fish species. Above Irving, the creek contains predominantly native fish, one of few places in Arizona where this occurs. Below Irving, non-native species predominate. Impacts to wildlife occur from dispersed recreation, off road vehicle travel, grazing and the invasion of non-native plants, fish, and crayfish.

Several grazing allotments and numerous pastures exist in the planning area. Most of the upland slopes less than 40 percent are classified as unsatisfactory resulting from the loss of ground cover, plant composition changes, bare and compacted soils and increased runoff during storm events. These conditions have damaged upland soils and impaired two tributaries that flow into the middle portion of Fossil Creek. Livestock grazing uses and activities have historically impacted the flat terraces adjacent to the creek and its two tributaries. These same terraces also contain the remains of prehistoric ruins. While recent livestock management has restricted and eliminated livestock use adjacent to the creek and terraces within the middle reach, some grazing impacts are still evident.

Watershed conditions vary throughout the area as a result of long-term grazing pressure, recreation impacts, and roads. Numerous road segments are connected to the drainage network of Fossil Creek. This can cause sediment to move from roads directly to the creek during rainfall storm events. Most road culverts are not functioning properly.

Fossil Creek riparian habitat was assessed to be in proper functioning condition except for a middle reach of approximately 2.5 miles, which has unstable stream banks and sedimentation as a result of grazing and recreation impacts. Dispersed recreation uses and activities have resulted in damage and removal of stream bank vegetation. Grazing activities in the uplands is resulting in accelerated runoff and sedimentation that adds to impacts on stream banks and riparian plants.

With restoration of natural flows to Fossil Creek it is expected that a new equilibrium of pools, runs, and riffles will establish, influenced by travertine deposits.

Historic resources are associated with the Childs/Irving power plants and are designated a National Register Historic District. Previous surveys and predictive models suggest that prehistoric ruins are found in extremely high densities throughout the planning area. All alluvial flats currently used for dispersed camping and picnicking are likely to contain prehistoric resources. Modern access to many cliff and hilltop ruin and pueblo sites has developed as recreationists explore the area. Ruins have been degraded as a result.

The Fossil Springs Botanical Area receives concentrated recreation use for approximately 6 months of the year. An estimated 2200 day hikers and 1000 backpackers visit the Botanical Area and Fossil Springs Wilderness each year. Except near Fossil Springs, the Fossil Springs Wilderness receives very low levels of visitor use. Impacts to Fossil Springs Botanical Area and Wilderness are concentrated in areas used for camping and livestock grazing.