

Trails Planning 2012– Red Rock Ranger District, Coconino National Forest

Questions and Answers:

The Red Rock Ranger District has proposed studying new trails and trailheads for potential addition to the District’s official trail system. This proposal has generated discussion about trails and trails planning. Below are some questions and answers.

Why is the Forest Service studying these trails and trailheads?

The existence of user-created (social) trails, the number of trail users, and feedback from trail users indicate a need for additional trail opportunities, such as: loop trails, connector trails, and trailheads. There is also need for additional trails in general, ranging in difficulty, to serve hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians in Sedona and other Verde Valley communities. Forest Plan direction for the Sedona area calls for a robust trail system, over and above what currently exists. There is a high demand for trail opportunities from the half million visitors who use Sedona area trails each year. The current study will consider how to enhance the trail system in an ecologically sustainable way.

Isn’t every trail a Forest Service trail? What’s the difference between a “system” vs. a “social” trail? And why does it matter?

If a trail is a “system” trail it means that it has been authorized by the Forest Service for construction, marking and maintenance and has been adopted into the official agency trail system. A “social” trail, on the other hand, is a trail that is not authorized or officially part of the Forest Service system. Social trails are created by trail users. The reason why this matters is that the official trail system includes trails that have been evaluated for their engineering and design and for their effects to wildlife and plants, archaeology, and soils. System trails are consistent with Forest Plan direction, the public has had a chance to comment on them, and a decision has been made to officially construct or adopt them. Social trails have had no such design, evaluation, or public comment.

Some of the proposed trails are the result of frequent use or unauthorized construction. Why would you consider them as additions to the system?

The fact that these unauthorized trails exist may indicate a need for a trail. These trails were selected for study because they seem to be popular, are being marketed by users to users, may be causing resource impacts, and have alignments that link or loop in a way that may benefit the trail system. While their origin is a concern, their future existence must be addressed through the formal decision making process.

Any action regarding trail addition or removal must follow this process, which includes public scoping; archaeology, plant, and wildlife surveys; and soil surveys.

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What will the Forest Service do with all the “social” trails?

It is Forest Service policy to have properly planned and sustainable system trails and no unplanned and unauthorized social trails. The reality is that the landscape has dozens of social trails, some of them small and innocuous, and some constructed and even maintained without authorization. It is not possible for the District’s limited resources and manpower to close/restore every social trail, nor is it possible to inventory and make decisions on all of the social trails that exist on the District. The District is implementing a strategy that includes planning, education, signing, and enforcement. The primary emphasis at this time is on planning for an effective trail system, signing system trails, and educating trail users to stay on established trails.

Who will maintain these new trails and trailheads?

This is a major concern. Most of the trails around Sedona are built on fragile and erosive soils. Many of the trails were adopted from old roads or social routes that are too steep and are not designed to shed water or be sustainable. Frequent maintenance is necessary to limit erosion in to Oak Creek Canyon, a sensitive waterway. Maintenance is expensive and constant. The Forest Service enlists the help of volunteers and the community to meet the challenge. It literally “takes a village” to maintain our popular trail system.

How does the Forest Service determine the width of a trail and how rocky or smooth it should be?

The Forest Service implements a National Trails Classification System and assigns each trail a Trail Class. The trail is maintained to meet the guidelines under that Class including tread width and roughness, brushing width, and signage. Many local users want trails to be narrow and primitive. Unfortunately with the high level of use in the Sedona area and the kind of marketing that some trails get on the internet and in guide books, trails tend to widen over time and erode to bedrock in places, losing their narrow primitive character.

Will the District ever have single use trails, like only for hikers or bikers?

District trail users generally get along and there are relatively few conflicts when compared with other areas with similar use levels. When the Forest Service constructs non-motorized trails these are typically multi-use trails that accommodate horses, bikes, and hikers -- except in Wilderness, where bikes are prohibited. Outside of Wilderness the District may caution horse users in areas where there is precipitous slick rock (e.g., Cathedral Trail), crowds (Bell Rock Pathway), or may limit horse and hiking use on trails built for technical mountain biking.

Does the Red Rock Ranger District have a trails plan?

The District follows Forest Plan direction for management of trails in the Sedona area, while working on a more specific trails strategy. The strategy will be responsive to the high demand for trails and emphasize shared use trails. The District is working to assign trail Classes to all of its trails and to inventory all of its trails.

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Why can't everyone just go out and build their own trail? How come it takes so long for the Forest Service to get a trail authorized and built?

National Forests provide many benefits besides recreation and trails, such as wildlife habitat and archaeology. In fact, the Red Rock Ranger District has some of the highest densities of prehistoric sites in the Southwest. These resources must be considered when decisions are made regarding trails, their locations, and use. To achieve the best decisions, the trails planning process requires forest managers to work with the public and to evaluate natural and cultural resources of an area before a decision is made. This process ensures, for example, that trails do not get built through the middle of archaeological sites or endangered plant habitat. It also ensures that trails are placed and designed to be sustainable through time. This planning process can be frustratingly slow. The Red Rock Ranger District is trying to be more responsive to the demand for trails and the need for trails planning, by considering a number of trails for study each year.

Maintaining or creating non-system trails without environmental analysis or authorization from the U.S. Forest Service is an illegal activity. Here are the Code of Federal Regulations related to maintaining a non-system trail and cutting vegetation without a permit.

36 CFR 261.6(a) "Cutting or otherwise damaging any timber, tree or other forest product, except as authorized by a special-use authorization, timber sale contract, or Federal law or regulation."

36 CFR 261.10 (a) "Constructing, placing, or maintaining any kind of road, trail, structure fence, enclosure, communication equipment, or other improvement on National Forest System land or facilities without authorization, contract, or approved operating plan."

Further, there are regulations that address penalties for disturbing threatened, endangered, or sensitive plants and archaeological sites should such plants or sites be disturbed by the above activities.

Why should we be concerned about too many social trails?

There is a concern that the number of social trails may have a detrimental effect on watershed health. This is due to the amount of barren ground/vegetation loss and erosion from trails that are unplanned and not designed to be sustainable. Another concern is that social trails may impact archaeological sites, nesting raptors, or endangered plants, for example.

Is it against the rules to ride off trail?

At this time cross country travel by bike, foot, or horse is allowed (except in Wilderness where bicycles are prohibited). A prohibition against cross country travel is often raised as a solution to social trails and to address watershed protection issues.