



Date: February 10, 2017

Dear Friends of the Coconino National Forest,

As the District Ranger on the Mogollon Rim Ranger District, I am writing to inform you that we are considering a proposal to reroute three sections of the Arizona National Scenic Trail (AZNST) totaling 18 miles. This proposal includes improvements to the AZNST by realigning the trail off existing forest roads and onto a single-track non-motorized trail. Other improvements include repair, replacement, or installation of new gates at range fence lines.

All work proposed will occur on Coconino National Forest Lands north of State Highway 87 and east of County Road FH3 (Lake Mary Road) between Hay Meadow Trailhead and Gooseberry Springs Trailhead.

This letter is to inform you that we are initiating public scoping for the AZNST Reroute Project. This notice supports requirements for 36 CFR 220.4(e) where scoping is required for all Forest Service proposed actions, including those that would appear to be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement. A brief description of the Proposed Action and project location maps are included with this letter.

Background

The AZNST is one of 11 National Scenic Trails in the United States. Designated by an act of Congress through the National Trails System Act of 2009, the AZNST extends approximately 807 miles across the state of Arizona from the Mexico international border to the Arizona-Utah border. The Act directs National Scenic Trails be “so located as to provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass” (sec 3.(a)2). The Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) directs the AZNST ‘to be a non-motorized pathway’ (USDA Forest Service 1987). Currently 18 miles of the AZNST shares a route with forest system roads open to motor vehicles.

The Forest Plan states

“This trail will be a non-motorized pathway. The route will use public lands to ensure public access; use existing trails, where use of the trail as part of the Arizona Trail does not cause substantial negative impacts; allow day-long, weekend, or week-long travel segments; accommodate hikers, equestrians, cross-country skiers, and back-country bicyclists where physically possible and where management permits; provide representation of the various life zones, geologic features, native vegetation, wildlife, cultural resources and resource management practices of the Coconino National Forest; be in harmony with other federal, state, and local government entities, and private landowners; and allow for continued production of outputs from forest resources as stated in the Forest Land Management Plan. Final trail location, design, construction, and signing to be accomplished by Forest staff and private sector/volunteer partnerships” (Forest Plan Replacement Page 52).

The National Trails System Act also states that ‘the use of motorized vehicles by the general public along any national scenic trail shall be prohibited’ {SEC. 7. [16USC1246](a)(1)}.



Proposed Action

The following Proposed Action has been developed to meet the projects purpose and need. The Proposed Action consists of the following components:

1. New Construction and Alignment of the Arizona National Scenic Trail.

Construct approximately 18 miles of trail designed for pack and stock. This will provide a quality non-motorized trail experience through the project area. The new alignment will blend with the terrain by taking advantage of the natural topography and vegetation. A combination of machine and hand crew construction is preferred. Machine construction will be conducted outside of Mexican Spotted Owl (MSO) and northern goshawk breeding seasons where the new alignment passes in or near Protected Activity Centers (PACs) for MSO or post-fledgling family areas (PFAs) for northern goshawk. The new alignment and construction will avoid any archeological or heritage sites.

2. Removing signage and delineation of the AZNST along Forest System Roads.

Remove existing trail-related signage and delineation along Forest System Roads where the trail is decommissioned. Remove trail signage from FSRs: 9727H, 93D, 93, 697, 93J, 6082, 93A, 294, 135D, and 92A. Signage will likely be removed from other “closed” but signed roads. Removing AZNST signage along portions of the decommissioned trail where the trail follows FSRs will avoid confusion.

3. Decommission unneeded segments of the AZNST.

Approximately ¼ mile of existing trail will be decommissioned near the Pine Springs Trailhead to link to the new trail construction and alignment. Approximately ¼ mile of existing trail will be decommissioned north of FSR 6048 to link new trail construction and alignment.

4. Repair, replace, or construct existing range fence lines and gates where new construction and alignment of the AZNST occurs.

Repair or replace approximately 15 gates as needed at range fence line crossings for trail user access. Gate specifications will be large enough to allow passage of stock animals. Gates will be constructed from the same material used for the attached fence. In some instances metal gates may be used.

5. Reconstruct the Pine Springs Trailhead adjacent to the new alignment of the AZNST.

Relocate the Pine Springs Trailhead sign and register box to new trail alignment at FSR 294 near Bargaman Park. The sign will be placed at the trailhead to meet the needs of the user and management.

6. Construct a kiosk and hitch rail at the Gooseberry Springs Trailhead.

Install a three panel educational kiosk illustrating forest wildlife, local history, and the AZNST. Install a hitch rail for pack and stock users. Improve existing parking area with aggregate surfacing. The existing trail head is located on FSR 92 near FH3.

7. Construct a Share the Trail Kiosk at the Gooseberry Springs and Hay Meadow Trailheads.

Construct a single panel kiosk at the Gooseberry Springs Trailhead located on FSR 92 near FH3 and Hay Meadow Trailhead on FSR 138 near State Highway 87. The purpose of the Share the Trail Kiosk is to explain the importance of trail etiquette and safety.

Compliance with Law, Regulation and Policy

Our preliminary analysis indicates that there are no extraordinary circumstances to resource conditions as outlined at 36 CFR 220.6(b). Based on this, we anticipate that this project will be categorically excluded from analysis in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement using 36 CFR 220.6(e)(1) – *Construction and reconstruction of trails.*

This project appears on the Coconino National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) Current Projects webpage: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=50810> . Input has been considered from an interdisciplinary team to guide this preliminary project proposal. The proposed project will require additional review and analysis to ensure compliance with the Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act and other policy and guidance. Public input is welcome, and will be considered and analyzed before a final decision is made.

Public Involvement and How to Comment

I value your input and encourage you to become involved with us in the planning process. To be most helpful in the planning process, please provide your comments by March 10, 2017. I will consider all comments that I receive including those submitted anonymously, but only those who provide contact information will be notified of my decision.

Input received in response to this letter, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection.

Written or oral comments may be submitted via mail, fax, telephone, or in person to:

Mogollon Rim Ranger District
Attn: Brady VanDragt, Recreation Planner
8738 Ranger Rd
Happy Jack, AZ86024
Phone: 928-477-5052
Fax: 928-477-5057
Email: comments-southwestern-coconino-mogollon@fs.fed.us

The office business hours for hand-delivered comments are: 7:30 am to 4:00 pm, excluding holidays.

Sincerely,



for

LINDA L. WADLEIGH
District Ranger

Attachment