

# **Fossil Creek Wild & Scenic River – 2015 Visitor Use Data Summary**

## **Red Rock Ranger District, Coconino N.F.**

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### **I. Key Findings and Observations**

#### 2015 Statistics

- Total visitor demand in 2015: 129,562 people
- Total number of visitors turned away due to capacity closures: 43,229 people
- Total people that visited the canyon: 86,333
- Total pounds of trash collected: 11,511 pounds
- Total number of Forest Service recorded incidents: 324
- Total number of Gila County Search and Rescue incidents: 200
- Percent of all Fossil Creek visitors that were contacted by Forest Service staff 39%

#### Key Comparisons

- Between 2010 and 2015 visitor demand has doubled for access into Fossil Creek area.
- Many more visitors were not allowed access to Fossil Creek due to capacity closures, than in past years: from 5% turned away in 2011 to 33% turned away in 2015, of total visitor demand.
- Many visitors were visibly upset when denied access. Checkpoint visitor interactions and duties strained the skills and availability of Forest Service staff.
- The Forest expended nearly \$80,000 to provide Law Enforcement support at the two checkpoints and throughout the canyon during most weekends; and nearly \$100,000 for salary of 10 recreation technicians needed to manage visitation and protect resources.

#### Notable Observations

- The vehicle capacity program is working when staffing is on-site; when staffing is not on-site, capacity has been exceeded as visitors drive into the area during the evening, night and early mornings. The number of visitors entering the Fossil Creek area is not entirely controlled by the capacity activities due to visitors finding parking outside the area and walking into the area.
- Delineating parking spaces with firehose all but eliminated vehicle parking issues at the Waterfall parking lot.
- Skunk activity in the area has increased, leading to three wildlife incidents for killing skunks.
- Sanitation and fire incidents make up 83% of all recorded incidents.
- One woman broke both legs simultaneously when jumping into the pool at Sally May; a drowning occurred at the Waterfall.
- One large 50 passenger tour bus drove the entire way into Fossil Creek, getting stuck trying to turn around.

### **II. Methodology**

Visitor use data including numbers of visitors and numbers of vehicles was collected along FR502 and FR708. Data was collected by recreation technicians while on patrol in the Fossil Creek area. Data was

tallied on data sheets that were turned in at the office daily. Vehicles were counted at the two road checkpoints in hourly segments, and then totaled to show a number of cars turned around for the day and the number of vehicles allowed entry. A 3.89 person-per-car ratio, developed in previous years, was used to estimate the number of people turned away. A single vehicle counter was placed on FR 708 just before the 502 and 708 junction. The vehicle counter data reflects total use for the canyon, including the Childs/Verde River area.

### **III. Overall Management Observations**

Social media is the primary source of visitor information about Fossil Creek. Posts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and most importantly YouTube, have made the public aware of what fossil has to offer and are often lacking in accurate or helpful visitor information. Few people accessing Fossil Creek have a proper map or an idea of where they are going or how to get there. Attempts to update Google Maps inaccurate information regarding the closed section of FR708, have been made by the Strawberry Fire Department, Forest Service employees, and the visitors themselves.

The capacity program, aimed at limiting the number of vehicles parking within the canyon and at Fossil Springs Trailhead, continues to have unexpected consequences. Some visitors now park several miles outside of the entrance to Fossil Springs Trailhead and walk in. One business charges for parking spaces. One Saturday, there were roughly 90 hikers that walked into the Fossil Creek area after parking at a private business.

Forest Service recreation technicians were stationed at 2 FR708 checkpoints on all summer weekends to monitor and enforce a parking capacity. Law enforcement officers and Gila County SAR were often at these checkpoints to support the capacity and education efforts. Frequently the checkpoint on the Camp Verde side of FR708 had more than a dozen vehicles waiting for access. Most of these visitors had driven the 2 hours from Phoenix early in the day to be told that they would not be allowed entrance until after 4PM when parking was available. This situation caused a high degree of visitor frustration and numerous confrontations between Forest Service personnel and visitors.

The public has adapted to the capacity closures by visiting at off peak time (night, early, late). Many weekends in June, July and August, the day use area of the canyon had reached capacity before 7:00am. This caused Forest Service staff to direct additional day users to park in less desirable locations alongside the road at Irving and Tonto bench, along the road at the bridge area, and at Homestead.

Many people who were contacted by Forest Service rangers at the Fossil Springs Trailhead area stated that they intended on driving to Fossil Creek on FR708, unaware that that segment of road has been closed for years.

The aid of the Pine/Strawberry Fire Department and the Gila County Sherriff's Department staff were extremely beneficial in turning around visitors who believed FR708 was open from the Strawberry side of Fossil Creek. Two large signs were placed roadside, outside the Pine/Strawberry Fire Station, one

stating that the Fossil Springs hike is difficult, the other stating that the road to the waterfall is closed. This information helped educate and turn around visitors before they reached the Forest Service checkpoint.

The total number of visitor contacts made by rangers for the 2015 season was 44,650. Approximately 39% of all visitors were contacted by Forest Service staff. The total poundage of trash collected by staff was 11,511 pounds or nearly 6 tons.

The use of firehose to delineate parking spaces in Waterfall, Irving and Homestead parking lots, along with additional no parking signs, diminished the overcrowding in the lots and unsafe roadside parking (specifically in the once problematic Waterfall lot).

#### IV. Data Summary – Motor Vehicles

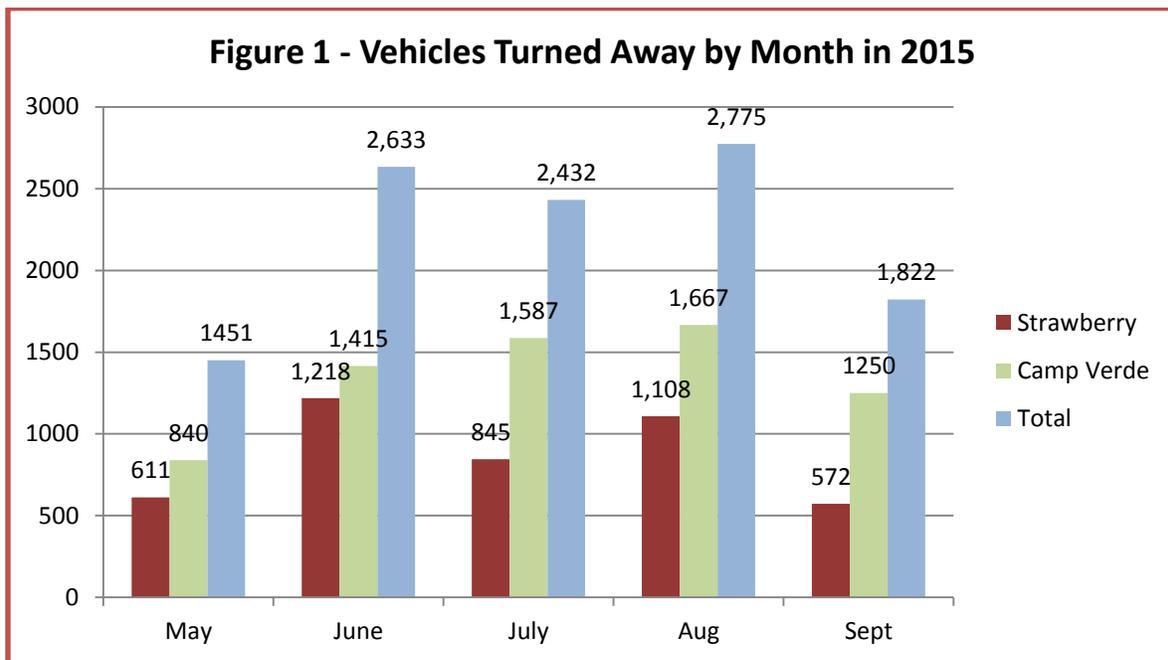


Figure 1 shows the number of cars turned away in 2015 by month. Visitor demand peaked in August with a total of 2,775 cars turned away. Counted at the checkpoints.

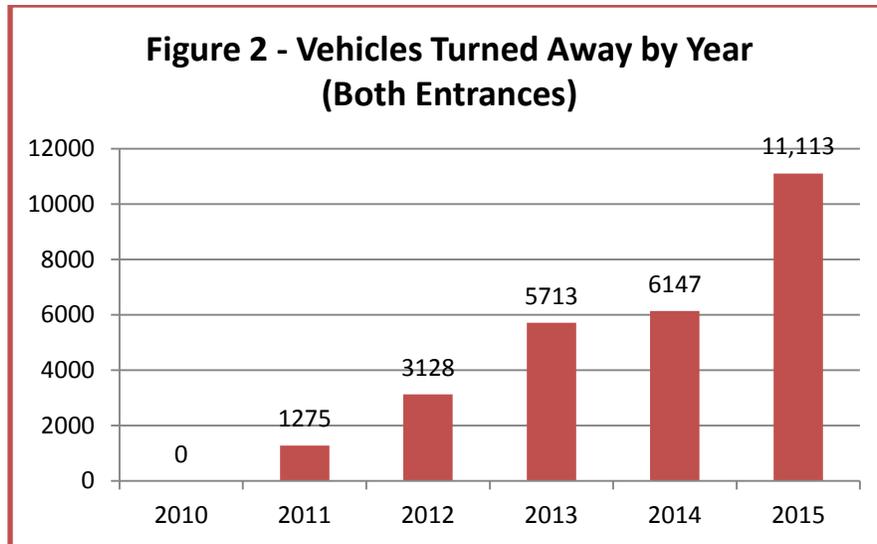


Figure 2 shows the yearly number of cars turned away at both the Fossil Springs trailhead entrance in Strawberry and the Camp Verde entrance off Rout 260. (Direct count at checkpoints)

During the 5 summer months of 2015, a total of 11,113 vehicles were turned away at the two entrances to Fossil Creek (Figure 1). In 2011, 5% of visitors attempting to drive into the Fossil Creek area were turned away; in 2015 37% of visitors attempting to drive into the area were turned away. The capacity is remaining the same between the years, but the overall demand/visitation is growing. As the trend in the data shows, the number of visitors being turned away from Fossil Creek due to capacity is increasing each year as the location becomes more popular (Figure 2).

Capacity data includes an estimation of the number of vehicles turned around at the fire department. Countless rescues along the closed section of FR708 and the Fossil Springs Trail were prevented by education provided on site at the Fossil Springs Trailhead by the Gila County Sheriff Department personnel. Groups of 2-6 members were stationed at the Trailhead on Saturday and Sundays, and occasionally during the week, to inform hikers on the difficulty of the trail.

## V. Data Summary - Visitor Use

Visitor use data was collected from two sources. The first is the visitor use data sheet filled out daily by staff (Figure 3). This data count includes the visitors seen and counted by staff at various recreation sites within the canyon. This represents an undercount of the number of people and cars. Additionally, the data collected by staff includes number of contacts and pounds of trash collected.

Refer to Figure 1 – Total Visitor Demand. The “total visitor demand” is estimated from the second source of visitor use data is from the road counter placed on FR708. This counter measures traffic going into Fossil Creek area and also traffic that goes to Childs recreation site on the Verde River. Road counter data was used to calculate total people from Camp Verde side, capacity data and visitor use data from the data sheets were used to calculate total people from the Springs TH. These numbers were

added to get the estimated total people for the canyon. One reason why 2014 estimated total visitor demand is so low is due to missing road counter data. From May 30-July 14 there is no data, and the road counter was broken from July 26th to Aug 15th. Visitor use data from the data sheets for June 2014 was used as a substitute for the missing road counter data for May 30-July 14th. However, June 2014 was during a complete closure of the area for fire hazard, so this resulted in a substantial undercount for 2014.

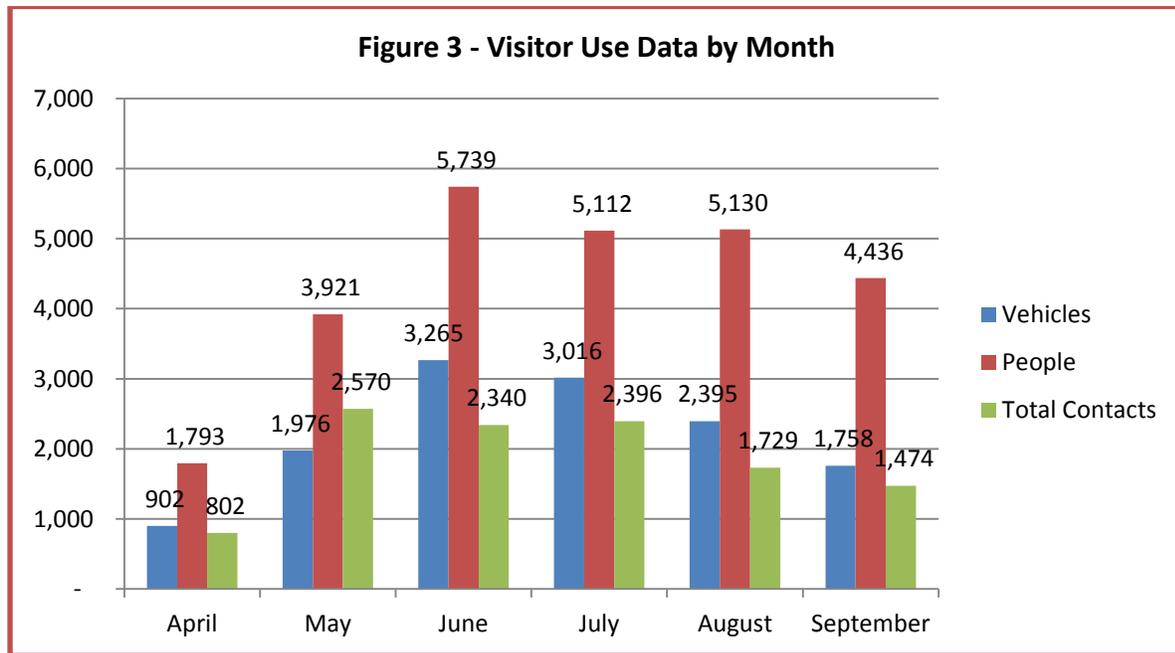


Figure 3 shows monthly total of vehicle, people, and contacts counted at recreation sites along forest roads 708 and 502. Data is from the daily visitor use data sheets.

The data sheets show where the highest day use and overnight use was in the canyon. The highest count for an occupied day use area was the Waterfall. The largest occupancy count collected at the waterfall was an estimated 275 people on Saturday August 22<sup>nd</sup>. Typical Saturday occupancy is around 100-200 people at the waterfall location. The most visited camping area was Homestead, with a record occupancy of 342 people on August 9<sup>th</sup>. The Homestead camping area typically has between 100-250 people camping there each weekend. There has been a notable increase in the number of visiting family groups with high numbers of family members, from 20-35 people per group, specifically in Homestead.

Total visitation, along with total turn away, is defined as the total estimated visitor demand (Table 1). For the 2015 season there was a total visitor demand of 129,562 people. Between 2010 and 2015, visitor demand has more than doubled (Figure 4). Yearly occupancy (the actual number of visitors who gained access to Fossil Creek) has stayed roughly consistent at around 80,000 people since the capacity program began, but the number of visitors turned away has been increasing steadily.

**Table 1 --- Estimated Visitor Demand (2010-2015)**

Year	Estimated Total People	Estimated Total People Turned Away	Total Estimated Demand (People)
2010	72,694	-	72,694
2011	85,486	4,463	89,949
2012	90,396	10,407	100,803
2013	88,552	22,224	110,776
2014*	34,602	23,911	58,513
2015	86,333	43,229	129,562

Table 1 shows the visitor demand for years 2010-2015. \*In 2014 there was a complete closure of the area during the month of June, due to wildfire hazard. Road counter data was used to

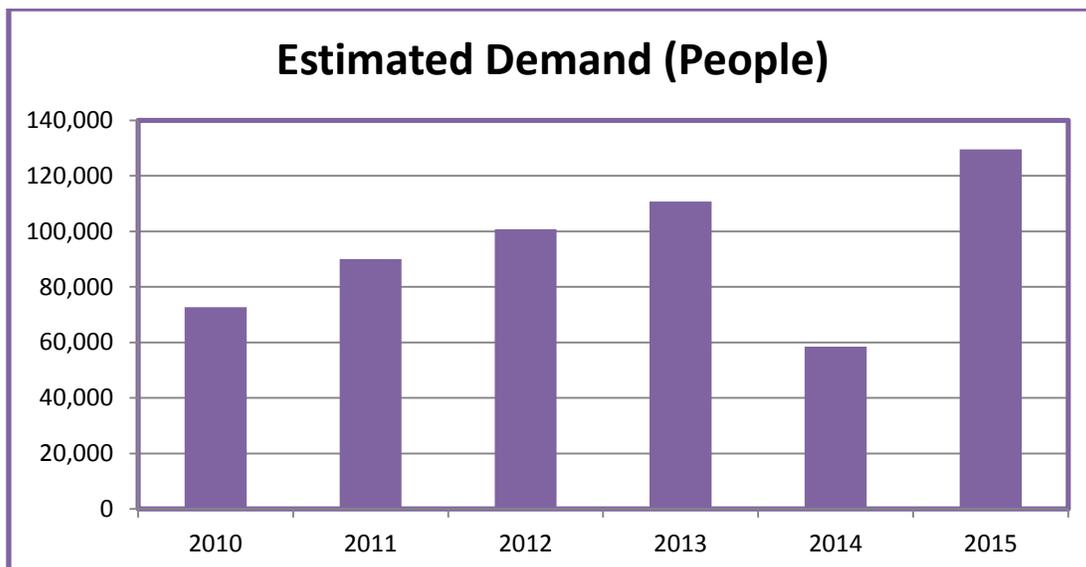


Figure 4 shows the trend in visitor demand from 2010 to 2015. \*Visitor demand in 2014 was decreased due to the fire closure.

## VI. Data Summary - Incidents

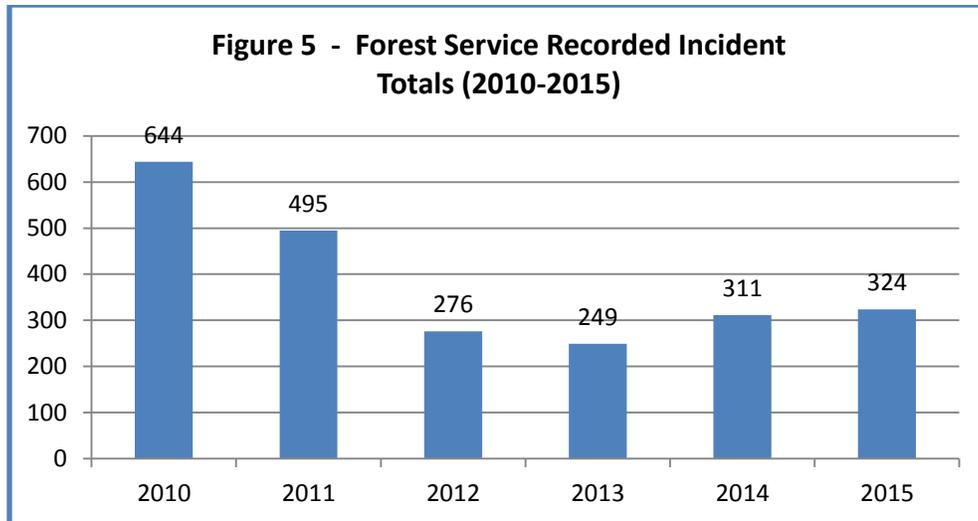


Figure 5 shows the total number of incidents recorded by FS over the past 6 years.

**Figure 6 - Ratio of Incidents by Violation Type for 2015**

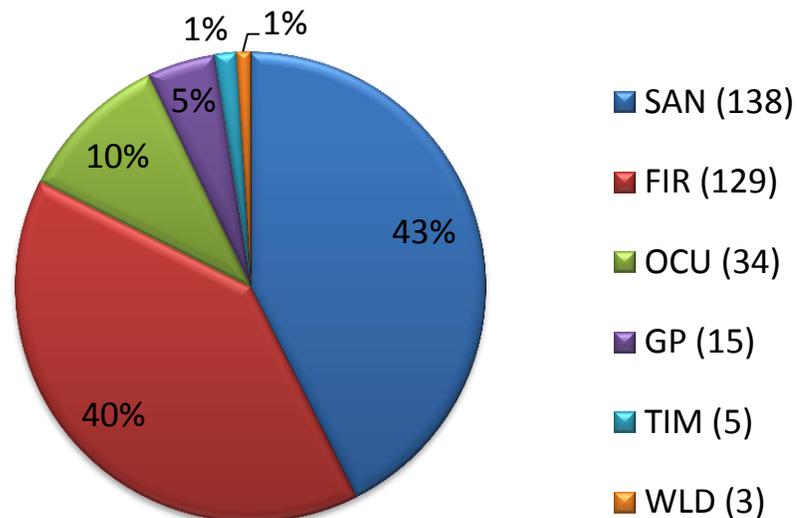


Figure 6 shows the frequency of an incident type for the 2015 season, along with the total number of incidents in each category. This includes Sanitation (SAN), Fires (FIR), Occupancy (OCU), Government Property damage (GP), tree damage (TIM), and Wildlife harassment (WLD). Data gathered as part of FS patrols.

The incident record for 2015 showed an increase from the past 3 years (Figure 5). The total number of incidents, 324, increased slightly from 2012, 2013, and 2014. The most common incident was a sanitation incident having to do with abandoned trash (Figure 6). On two separate instances, over 200 lbs of trash were left in camps in homestead. Other notable incidents were three instances of skunks being shot and killed. An increase in skunk activity in Homestead and Old Corral has increased the

instances of their contact with visitors. Additionally, despite abundant signage, fire incidents make up 40% of all incidents: primarily charcoal grills or fires at campsites.

Other incidents reported by Gila County Search and Rescue

Data indicates that most incidents were due to unprepared visitors and occurred on the Fossil Springs Trail or Fossil Creek Road area. Most accidents occurred at the “waterfall” or at the Fossil Springs area (such as the old dam site).

2015: 49 Total calls	
Search & rescue	20
Medical	18
Citizen assist	2
Reckless driving	2
Suspicious act	2
Extra patrol request	1
Lockout	1
Motorist Assist	1
PI incident (car accident)	1
USFS Unknown violation	1

49

Type of Incident	People	Incidents
Dehydration/Unprepared	36	14
Lost or Missing	25	13
Severe accidents	8	9
Minor injuries	9	9
Other	11	10

89 55

Location of Incidents	Total
Fossil Springs Trail	25
Fossil Creek Rd.	11
Waterfall	7
Fossil Creek General Area	4
The Bowl	2
Dam	1
Flume Trail	1
Irving Lot	1
M3 TH	1
Sally Mae	1
Waterfall Trail	1

55

1 death due to drowning.  
Helicopter used 4 times.

**Discrepancy between total calls and total incidents:**

49 total calls vs. 55 types of incidents - Types of incidents overlap, such as someone may have been both dehydrated and had injured ankle.

49 calls vs. 55 locations - Separate incidents at different locations stemming from the same call.