



File Code: 1950

Date: October 14, 2015

Dear Interested Party:

The Santa Catalina Ranger District of the Coronado National Forest is announcing an opportunity to comment during a 30-day scoping period on a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for a commercially-operated shuttle system within the Sabino Canyon Recreation Area (SCRA). The SCRA is located just outside the northeast city limits of Tucson, Arizona. It is approximately fifteen (15) miles northeast of downtown Tucson. The 1,422 acre SCRA is completely bordered by the Pusch Ridge Wilderness Area to the north and east and residential areas to the west and south. Access to SCRA is via East Sunrise Drive (a county road) traveling east-west, and North Sabino Canyon Road (a county road) traveling north-south. The SCRA lies entirely within Pima County, Arizona (Township 13 South, Range 15 East, Sections 2, 3, 4, 9, and 10; Township 12 South, Range 15 East, Section 35; Gila and Salt River Baseline and Meridian; see attached map).

Background and Existing Condition

The Sabino Canyon Recreation Area contains approximately six (6) miles of paved road (closed to motorized travel by the public), 30+ miles of trails, and the perennial Sabino Creek. The SCRA is a popular retreat for local residents, schoolchildren on field trips, naturalists, and out-of-town visitors. Users come to hike, bike, wildlife watch, swim/wade in the many shallow pools of water, and picnic alongside Sabino Creek. The SCRA, in its natural state, provides habitat for many species of plants and animals, including the federally-listed Gila chub, Gila topminnow, and Western yellow-billed cuckoo; and commonly seen wildlife species like rattlesnakes, deer, bobcats, and hawks. The SCRA is often considered the jewel of southeast Arizona, attracting over 1 million visitors per year, with an estimated visitation of 520,000 people by private vehicle alone (Feasibility Study 2010).

In 1978, private vehicles were prohibited in the SCRA, leaving visitors to explore the main canyons, Sabino and Bear Canyons, by either foot or bicycle. In 1980, a Special Use Authorization (a permit) was issued to a private concessionaire (Sabino Canyon Tours LLC (SCT)) for shuttle operations and associated facilities that provided motorized transportation and interpretive services for visitors into Sabino and Bear Canyons. Since 1980, several Special Use Authorizations have been reissued, with the most recent permit expiring in June 2017.

SCT currently operates the shuttle service along two paved routes in Sabino and Bear Canyons. The Sabino Canyon route travels from the visitor center 3.7 miles northward through Sabino Canyon on Forest System Road (FSR) 100 crossing the Sabino Creek nine (9) times. The Bear Canyon route travels 1.9 miles eastward on FSR 100A with two (2) creek crossings in lower Sabino Canyon (see attached map). The roads and the ten water crossings were originally constructed in the 1930s as part of Depression-era work programs. The crossings themselves are



often referred to as “bridges,” but are actually vented low-water crossings. They are designed to accommodate ordinary low flows through the vents, but are inundated at higher flow events. The crossings were constructed of native materials, and have been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (Ryden 1993).

The Sabino Canyon route makes nine (9) regularly scheduled stops along the 3.7 mile route, whereas the Bear Canyon route makes three (3) stops along the 1.9 mile loop. The 1970s-era fleet includes both gasoline and diesel-powered single vehicle shuttles with a capacity of 48 passengers on two axels and combination shuttles with trailers that carry 67 passengers on four axels. In general, two combination shuttles at a time make the trip through the Sabino Canyon route, and one single shuttle makes the Bear Canyon route.

During the peak season (mid-December through June) the Sabino Canyon route operates seven (7) days per week, every 30 minutes starting at 9:00 am, with the final shuttle departing at 4:30 pm. During the off-peak season (July to mid-December) the Sabino Canyon route operates Monday through Friday, every hour starting at 9:00 am, with the final shuttle departing at 4:00 pm; and on weekends and holidays departs every 30 minutes starting at 9:00 am, with the final shuttle leaving at 4:30 pm. The Bear Canyon route operates year round, seven (7) days per week, every hour starting at 9:00 am, with the final shuttle departing at 4:00 pm. The shuttle system currently accommodates approximately 150,000 people per year (Feasibility Study 2010). SCT reports that it has served an average of 134,839 passengers annually between 2007 and 2012. Variation in service ranged from 97,253 passengers in 2007 to 143,578 passengers in 2010.

During the peak season, the shuttle service runs a minimum of 16 round trips per day on the Sabino Canyon route, while during the off-peak season a minimum of eight (8) round trips per day are made. The shorter Bear Canyon route makes a total of eight (8) round trips per day throughout the year. This results in approximately 4,500 round trips in Sabino Canyon each year and approximately 3,000 round trips in Bear Canyon each year. Additional operations include: evening rides during the months of April, May, June, September, October, and November, three times per month; and on a limited basis, group/charter rides for special events. Round trips vary in that the company adds or subtracts shuttles to accommodate the number of riders seeking the service on any given day.

One shuttle traverses the vented low-water crossings on the Sabino Canyon route 18 times per round trip. During the peak season, there are 16 round trips per day, traversing the vented low-water crossings 288 times per day. During the off-peak season, there are eight (8) round trips per day, traversing the vented low-water crossings 144 times per day. This results in approximately 81,000 trips over the vented low-water crossings per year, for the Sabino Canyon route. One shuttle traverses the vented low-water crossings on the Bear Canyon route four (4) times per round trip, year round. There are eight (8) round trips per day, making 32 trips over the vented low-water crossings per day. This results in approximately 12,000 trips across the vented low-water crossings per year, for the Bear Canyon route. In total, this equates to approximately 93,000 trips across the vented low-waters crossings per year for both Bear and Sabino Canyons, for the current operations of SCT. As stated above, trips vary due to SCT adding or subtracting shuttles to accommodate the number of riders seeking the service on any given day.

Sabino Creek regularly overtops the roads as the discharge from the creek exceeds the maximum capacity of the vents. The frequency of overtoppings vary in any given year based on precipitation amounts, duration, and location in the Sabino Creek drainage basin. Under current conditions, approximately half of the crossings on the Sabino Canyon route will overtop on 13% of days in any given year (Cissel 2015). These crossings retain sediment as it moves through the creek during high flow events. To avoid buildup of sediment in a manner that impacts operations, shuttle personnel remove the sediment by shovel from the vented low-water crossings and deposit it either up or down stream of the crossing in or adjacent to the ordinary high water mark of the creek.

During periods of high stream flows after a storm or spring run-off event, the shuttle often reduces service to areas that do not require stream crossings. These changes in service are known as “whitewater” tours. There is no definitive flow measurement at which shuttle operations shift to whitewater tours. The decision is made by the concessionaire upon inspection of the crossing based on owner’s professional judgement and experience.

Over the past 40 years, visitation to the SCRA has increased and resulted in noted conflict between the shuttle and non-motorized transportation users (hikers and bicyclists), with some visitors complaining about the exhaust of the diesel engines and the audio emanating from the loudspeakers during the interpretive message (Feasibility Study 2010). Furthermore, one species of native fish (Gila chub) was listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act in 2005, and a second species (Gila topminnow) previously listed for protection has been reintroduced into Sabino Creek in 2015. Shuttles passing through overtopped crossings may have consequences to these aquatic organisms during high water events.

Current Management Direction

The Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (CNF LRMP, 1986), as amended, provides the overall guidance for management activities by specifying goals and objectives, desired future conditions, management direction, and standards and guidelines. The SCRA is within Management Area 3A/B (Developed Recreation).

The following Forest Plan guidance pertains to shuttle operations:

- “Continue and expand as needed the Sabino Canyon Shuttle System.” (CNF LRMP, 1986, pg. 59)

In 2010, a Transportation Analysis and Feasibility Study for the SCRA was prepared for the forest by the U.S. Department of Transportation. The analysis was conducted, in part, to support an update to the 1993 Sabino Canyon Recreation Area Concept Plan. The Feasibility Study provided an overview of historic and current visitation in the SCRA, and environmental and infrastructure conditions. Based on that information – and on the analysis of comments collected from public meetings, recreation area users, and interviews with user and stakeholder groups – Feasibility Study goals and criteria were developed and specific potential solutions were identified in areas such as access management; infrastructure; and bicycle, pedestrian,

equestrian, and motorized uses. These goals and criteria focused on the need to (1) reduce user conflicts between the shuttle, non-motorized users, and the natural environment; (2) maintain and improve the quality of the ecosystem (soil, water, air, vegetation, and wildlife); (3) reduce noise emanating from the shuttle and improve the quality of the interpretation given by the shuttle; (4) reduce air pollution; and (5) protect the vented low-water crossings (bridges).

In April 2014, a group of Forest Service resource specialists began the process of updating the 1993 Concept Plan. The Forest Service received over 700 comments on ideas proposed in the initial draft. Many of those comments were incorporated into the Sabino Canyon Sustainable Recreation Concept Plan, finalized in September 2015. As it relates to shuttle operations, the final Concept Plan (2015) calls for (1) minimizing conflicts between shuttles and bicyclists/pedestrians; (2) reducing exhaust and noise pollution; (3) improving shuttle narration content and delivery method, and silent or quieter shuttle narration; (4) improving access for visitors with disabilities; and (5) providing commercial activities that support nature-based experiences, without degrading the experiences of others.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this action is to accommodate current and anticipated visitation levels and uses, enhance visitor experiences, and protect natural and cultural resources in the Sabino Canyon Recreation Area in concert with the Sabino Canyon Sustainable Recreation Concept Plan (2015). There is a need to address a request to authorize a permit and associated terms and conditions for a commercially-operated shuttle system within the Sabino Canyon Recreation Area in a way that complies with the Forest Plan (1986) and the Concept Plan (2015), improves vehicle safety, reduces noise, meets State and local emission standards, and protects water quality, federally-listed species, and historic properties.

Proposed Action

The Santa Catalina Ranger District of the Coronado National Forest proposes to issue a 20-year term Special Use Authorization for operation and maintenance of a commercially-operated shuttle system in July 2017, permitting operations and frequency of service consistent with current levels as described above (see Existing Conditions). Passenger shuttle operations would be limited to the six (6) miles of paved road (FSRs 100 and 100A) within Sabino Canyon Recreation Area. The Authorization would also permit the operation of and access to (along FSRs 804 and 804A) a vehicle storage and maintenance yard, approximately one (1) acre in size and a space to provide information and sell tickets. A change in the location of these facilities are not proposed under this NEPA analysis, and no ground disturbing activities would occur.

The issuance of the new Special Use Authorization will be consistent with the Forest Plan (1986); goals and objectives in the 2015 SCRA Sustainable Recreation Concept Plan; and existing laws, regulations, and policies. The shuttle service fleet will be modernized to include new vehicles with improved emission control technologies, improved energy consumption, a shorter wheelbase for improved turning radius, and improved safety features. The shuttle service

operation will provide an audio distribution system that delivers and promotes the appreciation of natural and cultural resources of Sabino Canyon, while reducing or eliminating auditory impacts to non-shuttle users and protecting ecosystem integrity.

Design Features

The following would be implemented under the Proposed Action. These are considered to be effective at avoiding or reducing resource impacts and user conflicts. They are consistent with applicable Forest Plan (1986) standards and guidelines, and stated goals and objectives in the SCRA Sustainable Recreation Concept Plan (2015).

- (1) Minimize the potential for user conflicts and accidents with the shuttle service and other Sabino Canyon Recreation Area users service by modernizing existing 1970s era shuttle fleet;
- (2) Reduce auditory impacts emanating from interpretive narration service and protect ecosystem integrity by modernizing existing 1970s era shuttle fleet and improving audio distribution system;
- (3) Ensure shuttle operations are in accordance with State and local emissions standards by modernizing existing 1970s era shuttle fleet;
- (4) Protect water quality by minimizing point-source pollution from shuttle service by modernizing existing 1970s era shuttle fleet;
- (5) Protect and reduce impacts to the federally-listed Gila Chub and its designated Critical Habitat found within Sabino and Bear Creeks, and the federally-listed Gila topminnow by modernizing existing 1970s era shuttle fleet and improving sedimentation removal procedures from vented low-water crossings;
- (6) Avoid adverse effects to historic vented low-water crossing within the Sabino Canyon Recreation Area.

Comments

Comments should be received by November 13, 2015. Please make your comments as specific as possible. If you provide recommendations for changes to the Proposed Action, please include the reasons for your recommendations. This information will help us identify the need for alternatives.

After the Preferred Alternative and any other alternatives have been fully developed, an analysis of environmental effects related to the alternatives will be completed in a preliminary *Environmental Analysis (EA)* anticipated to be completed in Spring 2016.

Specific written comments must be submitted via email, mail, fax, or in person (Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., excluding holidays):

Send comments via e-mail to:

<https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?project=47916>

Send comments via mail to:

U.S. Forest Service, Coronado National Forest
Santa Catalina Ranger District
Attn: Rudy Bowen, District Recreation Staff Officer
5700 N. Sabino Canyon Road
Tucson, AZ 85750

Send comments via fax to: Attn: Rudy Bowen, 520-749-7723.

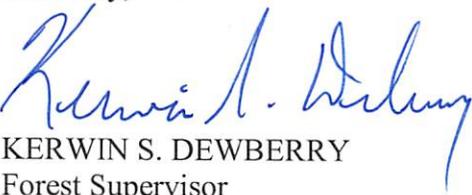
Specific written comments (§218.2) on the proposed project will be accepted for 30 calendar days following publication of this notice in the *Arizona Daily Star*. If the comment period ends on a Saturday, Sunday or Federal holiday, comments will be accepted until the end of the next Federal working day. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Only individuals or entities (as defined by 36 CFR 218.2) who submit timely and specific written comments (as defined by 36 CFR 218.2) about this proposed project or activity during this or another public comment period established by the Responsible Official will be eligible to file an objection. Other requirements to be eligible to submit an objection are defined by CFR 218.25(a)(3) and include name, postal address, title of the project, signature or other verification of identity upon request, and the identity of the individual or entity who authored the comments. Individual members of an entity must submit their own individual comments in order to have eligibility to object as an individual. A timely submission will be determined as outlined in 36 CFR 218.25(a)(4). It is the responsibility of the sender to ensure timely receipt of any comments submitted. Names and contact information submitted with comments will become part of the public record and may be released under the Freedom of Information Act.

Comments should be within the scope of the Proposed Action, have a direct relationship to the Proposed Action, and must include supporting reasons for the Responsible Official to consider (36 CFR 218.2).

If you have questions concerning this process, please contact Rudy Bowen at 520-749-8700.

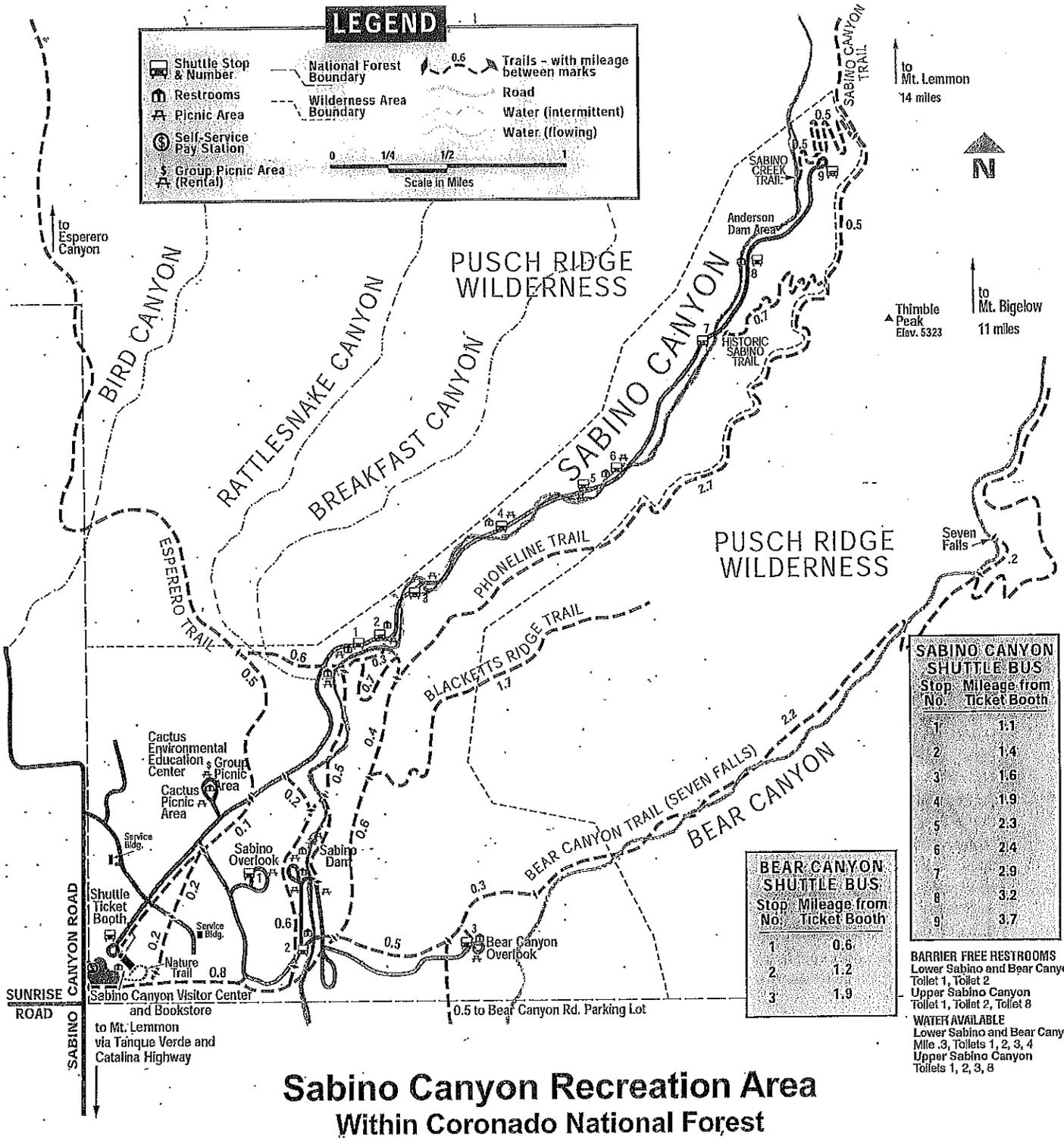
Sincerely,



KERWIN S. DEWBERRY
Forest Supervisor

cc: Kenneth C. Born, District Ranger; Rudy Bowen, District Recreation Staff Officer

Bicycling hours: Before 9 a.m. and after 5 p.m., Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday. Bicycling is prohibited on Wednesday and Saturday.



Sabino Canyon Recreation Area Within Coronado National Forest

One of the premier natural areas in southeastern Arizona, Sabino Canyon is located within the Santa Catalina Ranger District, on the edge of Tucson's expanding urban residential development. Outstanding scenery abounds, featuring steep rock cliffs and foothills covered with unique desert vegetation adjacent to riparian corridors. Annual visitation to the canyon is estimated at 1.25 million people. The canyon is within

easy walking, biking and driving distance by local residents, and a 30-minute drive from the heart of downtown. The canyon itself has been closed to private vehicle access since 1978. For a century, Sabino Canyon has been a popular destination for local residents and their families and friends, as well as for international visitors. Popular contemporary uses of the area are walking, jogging, hiking, bicycling, shuttle riding, nature study, wildlife viewing and photography.

Receipts from fees collected under the Coronado Recreation Fee Program will be used for recreation operations and deferred maintenance, trail maintenance, visitor center operations and interpretive services, road and parking lot maintenance, habitat enhancement, security and compliance. Your Coronado Recreation Fee Pass is valid at Mt. Lemmon and Sabino and Madera Canyons.



The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY). To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TTY). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.