Recreation Specialist Report

Chavez Ranch Road Project

Red Rock Ranger District
Coconino National Forest
Coconino County, Arizona
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INTRODUCTION

The proposed project area is within the Red Rock Ranger District of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Coconino National Forest (COF), approximately 1.5 miles south of Sedona (west-side), approximately 2.5 miles southwest of Sedona (uptown), and approximately 0.75 mile west of the Village of Oak Creek, Arizona. A portion of the proposed project area lies along Oak Creek in Sections 23, 24, 25, and 26, Township 17 North, Range 5 East, Yavapai County, Arizona. Recreation is highly valued in the Sedona and Oak Creek area and is recognized worldwide for its scenic views, water features such as Oak Creek (Figure 1), vegetation patterns, and cultural significance. Recreation opportunities are abundant in the Sedona area and specifically near the Chavez Ranch Road Project.

Figure 2 depicts the location and segments of the proposed project. The currently planned road improvements include an approximately 3,146-foot-long stretch of Chavez Ranch Road (Segments 1 & 2 in Figure 2) and an approximately 208-foot-long section of Hilltop Road (Segment 3 in Figure 2) on COF land. Segments 2 and 3 are connected by a stretch of Chavez Ranch Road that runs through private property. Mr. Paul Hoffenburg, the Applicant, has gained easement from private property land owners along this stretch. The project is located on the Sedona, Arizona, USGS 7.5′ quadrangle (revised 2006, USGS).

Proposed Action

The COF is analyzing a proposal from the Applicant to obtain a Special Use Permit (SUP) to widen and improve the road surface of Chavez Ranch Road. Three segments of this road, also known as Forest Road 788, pass through the COF (Figure 2). In compliance with Forest Service regulation, the Applicant has requested a SUP for activities related to road surfacing and associated safety features for these improvements that are proposed on COF land.

The total area for which the SUP is requested is approximately 4.57 acres. Yavapai County currently maintains Chavez Ranch Road and would continue to maintain the road if improvements are completed.
The Proposed Action consists of three segments as follows:

- Segment 1, beginning at the east end of the Cathedral Vista Subdivision and continuing approximately 2501 linear feet to the intersection with Chavez Crossing Road, would be paved and widened to 24 feet with 4-foot shoulders. Other improvements would include signage, and marked pedestrian/bicycle crossings at two areas where COF trails cross the existing road (Figure 3).

- Segment 2, beginning at the intersection of Chavez Crossing Road (Figure 4) and continuing approximately 645 linear feet to the COF boundary with the Rancho Chavez Subdivision, would be paved and widened to 24 feet with curb and gutter and a 2-foot shoulder on the upslope (north) side of the road. The downslope (south) side of the road would have 4-foot shoulders, a short retaining wall where necessary, and guardrail along the edge of the road to increase public safety. No safety features currently exist on this portion of the road. The last 50 feet of the road would require fill material.

- Segment 3 is a 208-linear-foot portion of Hilltop Road between two private parcels owned by the Applicant. This segment would be paved and widened to 24 feet with 4-foot shoulders, similar to Segment 1.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

This report evaluates and characterizes the effects to recreational use that would result from the Proposed Action and will determine if the proposed project would conform to the current ROS rating. The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) citation is a planning tool used by the Forest Service and other federal agencies that inventories and defines large land areas, such as a National Forest, for a variety of existing and potential recreation opportunities based on the size, distance from roads, and degree of development of a given area. Inventorying and defining recreation opportunities helps managers create and maintain appropriate recreation experiences that suit various types of lands and visitors. The ROS continuum characterizes recreation in terms of setting, activity, and experience. The U.S. Department of Agriculture presents the following classes along the spectrum: Primitive, Semi-primitive non-motorized, Semi-primitive motorized, Roaded Natural, Rural, and Urban (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1982).

The COF land within the proposed project area is designated as Rural by the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) planning tool (Figure 5). As the area is designated Rural, visitors have a high probability for encountering other recreating individuals and groups. Chavez Ranch Road provides access to Oak Creek as well as three trails; Ramshead Trail (FS Trail 202), Ridge Trail (FS Trail 208), and the Secret Slickrock Trail.
Three undesignated parking areas can be found along this road; one at the junction of Chavez Ranch Road, one at the gate leading to Crescent Moon Ranch, and one at the terminus of Chavez Ranch Road nearest to Oak Creek (Figure 6). The undesignated parking areas allow for visitors to participate in recreation opportunities near Chavez Ranch Road.

The Crescent Moon Ranch Day Use Area and Crescent Moon Cabin are located less than one mile south of the proposed project area and is commonly used for hiking, mountain biking, birding, swimming, fishing, picnicking and photography (Figure 7). Weddings are also common at Crescent Moon Ranch during spring and summer months.

The portion of COF land in the proposed project area falls within the Rural designation (Figure 5). The Rural designation is described as having high probability for encountering other recreating individuals and groups. Human interactions and convenience of sites are usually more important than the setting of the physical environment. Opportunities for wildland challenges, risk-taking, and testing of outdoor skills are generally unimportant as defined by the Rural designation of the ROS planning tool (USDA, 1982). According to Amendment 12 of the COF Land Resource Management Plan (LRMP), the objective for social encounters in an area defined as Rural is 15 social encounters per hour. Each social encounter is defined as one vehicle or 6 or fewer people. The Setting Characterization for Rural designation is defined as an area with a substantially modified natural environment. Interaction between users is moderate to high and sights and sounds of humans are readily evident. Facilities are designed for use by a large number of people and are often provided for special activities. Moderate densities are provided far away from developed sites. Facilities for intensified motorized use and parking are available (USDA, 1982).

The landscape of the proposed project area is generally natural with modifications evident. Concentration of users is low to moderate where multiple trails and undesignated parking areas exist. Users have equal opportunity to interact with other groups or be somewhat isolated from the sights and sounds of humans. Challenge and risk opportunities are generally unimportant. There are several developed recreation sites within or immediately adjacent to the proposed project area. These include several hiking trails (Figures 8, 9, and 10), scenic viewing areas (Figure 11), three undesignated parking areas and Crescent Moon Ranch Day Use Area and Cabin. These recreation sites all fall within the R designation on the ROS planning tool.
Chavez Ranch Road provides access to opportunities for a variety of recreational activities including hiking, mountain biking, birding, swimming and fishing. The Ramshead Trail (FS Trail 202) and Ridge Trail (FS Trail 208) intersect the proposed project area in Segment 1 (Figures 8 and 9). Secret Slickrock Trail runs parallel to the southern portion of Segment 1 (Figure 10). The proposed project area can be viewed from Cathedral Rock Trail which is located south of Oak Creek. Trails are moderately used in this area, but use is increasing as Sedona is recognized as an international destination for use of trails and scenic vistas.

At the terminus of Chavez Ranch Road, there is an informal parking lot that has been created by public use of the area to access Oak Creek (Figure 6). From this parking area, recreationists have immediate access to Oak Creek, to swim in slow-flowing pools, fish, and hike through the lush riparian vegetation. The summer months bring in a high use of the informal parking areas along Chavez Ranch Road when recreationalists are seeking to access Oak Creek. Traffic and parking issues are typical at this time of year due to the seasonality of use within the proposed project area.
A large portion of recreational users of the area are local residents of Sedona who are accustomed to unrestricted access and use. The Oak Creek access near Midgley Bridge has been patrolled more frequently in the recent years. This has deterred recreationists seeking Oak Creek access from the Midgley Bridge area. These recreationists are moving to other access points along Oak Creek, such as Chavez Ranch Road. The users of Oak Creek are looking for an area to socialize and swim (Mike O'Neil, Law Enforcement Office, USFS Red Rock Ranger District, personal communication, August 2015). Chavez Ranch Road, especially at its terminus, is used for undesignated parking for access to Oak Creek. As use of the informal parking areas increase in the summer months, the USFS has noticed increase of sedimentation as a result of use of social trails near Oak Creek which is a growing concern (Jennifer Burns, Recreation Staff Officer, USFS Red Rock Ranger District, personal communication, August 13, 2015). Chavez Ranch Road is not designated by the Forest Service for river access; therefore is more likely to be used by locals than by tourists visiting the area who would be more reliant on published information.

Very limited information is available on traffic volume on Chavez Ranch Road. Traffic count data is available from Yavapai County Public Works-Roads Division on Red Rock Loop Road and Red Rock Crossing both of which lead to developed recreation areas. Between 2006 and 2013, five traffic counts were taken near Red Rock Loop Road. These traffic counts averaged 1036 daily trips. Six traffic counts were taken at Red Rock Crossing, averaging 196 daily trips from 2005 to 2013 (Yavapai County Public Works, 2015). These two areas are highly publicized recreation areas and use is expected be of a magnitude greater than that of Chavez Ranch Road.

In March 2011, Shephard Wesnitzer, Inc. completed trip generation analyses using the Institute of Transportation Engineer’s *Trip Generation Manual, Eighth Edition* (ITE) for the Chavez Ranch Road near its eastern terminus. According to the analysis, Chavez Ranch Road is considered a local, low-traffic-volume road and sees an estimated 97 existing daily trips. It is predicted that 77 daily trips along this stretch are due to the eight homes located along the road, while 20 of the daily trips can be attributed to the existing creek access point (Cortes, 2011). There is also a human safety concern regarding the drop off in slope at the intersection of Chavez Crossing Road and Chavez Ranch Road. The slope drop off provides for a decrease in visibility for those traveling to the undesignated parking area at the terminus of Chavez Ranch Road. Other traffic safety concerns include cars parked alongside Chavez Ranch Road when undesignated parking areas are filled.

The Yavapai County Sheriff (2015) reported 22 automobile-related incidences along Chavez Ranch Road since 2005. Of these incidences one DUI was reported in November 2013, two “hit and run” accidents occurred in August 2008 and January 2010, one pedestrian accident was reported in August 2006, sixteen traffic stops were reported between April 2011 and May 2011, one traffic offense occurred in September 2010, and most recently one traffic hazard was reported in March 2015.

**APPLICABLE LAWS, REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS**

The following documents contain specifics that are addressed in the analysis of recreation impacts of the proposed action.

- Red Rock Trails Planning 2013-2014
- Coconino National Forest Land and Resources Management Plan
- Coconino National Forest Land and Resources Management Plan, Amendment 12
ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The area of effects analysis for recreation consists of the three road segments described in the Proposed Action and the effects to recreation from the resulting road improvements. The area of analysis serves as the geographic basis for assessment of impacts resulting from the Proposed Action.

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented; therefore no new direct, indirect, or cumulative effects on recreation would occur.

The No Action Alternative would allow for current recreation to continue and the proposed project area’s designation as Rural would remain. Concentration of users would remain low to moderate and users would continue to have equal opportunity to interact with other groups or be somewhat isolated from the sights and sounds of humans.

Proposed Action during Construction Activities

During construction, the Proposed Action will likely have direct effects on a few recreational activities and consist mostly of slightly increased traffic and diminished recreation opportunities in the immediate vicinity of construction and on the roads associated with providing access to the construction area. Recreationists and other persons using the roadway would experience delays from traffic management that includes traffic stoppage and one-way travel during construction activities. The Proposed Action may impact the flow and access to the three trails that are located in the proposed project area. Improvements to the area include signage, and marked pedestrian/bicycle crossings at two areas where COF trails cross the road.

Increased traffic caused by construction activities may impact recreational traffic on nearby roads. Conflicts between operational and recreational traffic may pose short-term public health and safety issues along more heavily travelled roads. In addition, short-term decreased air quality from project construction activities could potentially impact individuals recreating in the area.

Decreased visual quality during construction activities is expected. The public could become aware of this impact while recreating near construction zones, hiking or biking along the FS Cathedral Rock Trail, Ramshead Trail (FS Trail 202), Ridge Trail (FS Trail 208), and Secret Slickrock Trail, or swimming and fishing in Oak Creek near the proposed project area. The proposed project is most visible where Ramshead Trail (FS Trail 202) and Ridge Trail (FS Trail 208) cross Chavez Ranch Road and Secret Slickrock trail begins. Construction activities would be of short duration (less than 6 months) and are planned to occur throughout the fall to early spring which is when the area is likely subject to fewer recreational users.

Proposed Action after Construction Activities

General:
The Proposed Action may cause an increase in traffic on Chavez Ranch Road, Forest Service Trails, and Oak Creek access as the road improvements and future residential development may occur on private lands accessed by the road. As previously stated, the current traffic estimates are 97 daily traffic counts, with 20 (or approximately 25%) of those trips attributed to the existing creek access point. This estimate also does not reflect the seasonality of those
users of Chavez Ranch Road as local traffic is lower than ITE model predicts for the Sedona area. The lower estimate is due to second home ownership and demographics and the Sedona area has seen counts that are typically less than the 9.57 predicted daily trips per household (Cortes, 2011). The undesignated parking area at the terminus of Chavez Ranch Road may be evaluated by the Forest Service in the future under a separate analysis for an appropriate level of access. Paving of the three segments of road in and of itself is not anticipated to result in a substantial influx of traffic or visitors to recreate in the area. On the other hand, combined with an overall increase in residential development and tourism, there may be substantially more traffic than current.

The Proposed Action may have beneficial impacts on human safety for those traveling on Chavez Ranch Road. The proposed project may provide a safer roadway for those traveling to the Cathedral Vista and Rancho Chavez Subdivisions because there would be less roadside parking. The addition of a curb and gutter would deter visitors from parking in areas along the road. However, paved surfaced roadway may induce higher vehicle speeds than currently experienced in this area.

Marked pedestrian/bicycle crossings will also assist with public safety of those accessing FS Trail 202 (Ramshead Trail) and 208 (Ridge Trail). The addition of a guardrail would increase public safety at the junction of Chavez Ranch Road for homeowners and recreationists. Additional trail marking and road signage will ensure that the established Forest Service trails are accessible and known to the recreating public.

Recreation Opportunity Spectrum:
This evaluation has determined that the ROS designation in the proposed project area would continue to conform to the current ROS designation as Rural and will not increase to the designation of Urban. Urban designation setting characterization is described as a substantially urban environment. Vegetative cover is often exotic and manicured. Humans predominantly make up the sights and sounds of the area. Facilities for highly intensified motor use and parking are available with forms of mass transit that are often able to carry people throughout the site (USDA, 1982). Improvements to Chavez Ranch Road will change the character of the visual and recreation environment and affect the recreational user experience with the addition of a more developed road. However, it is not anticipated that the addition of paving and other improvements to Chavez Ranch Road as described in the Proposed Action would change the ROS designation to Urban from Rural as defined in the USDA Recreation Opportunity Spectrum User Guide (1982).

Under the Proposed Action and No Action Alternative, the ROS designation in the proposed project area would continue to be considered Rural. Under both the Proposed Action and No Action Alternative, future recreation opportunities will continue to be available similar to what they currently are.

Trails:
Trail opportunities that currently exist will continue to be available. There is expected to be an increase in user conflict between pedestrians (hikers, bikers, equestrians) and motor vehicles using the newly paved road. Traffic will be faster and increase in volume. This conflict will occur where trails cross the paved roadway and at times when pedestrians use the roadway itself to travel between forest trail routes.

There is expected to be an increase in use of and parking at the undeveloped and unpaved parking areas associated with the back entrance to Crescent Moon Ranch. There will likely be
an increase in the number of visitors to Oak Creek via this location and social trails that have
developed from this location. Currently there can be as many as 12 – 20 vehicles parked in this
vicinity on a weekend day, with users accessing Oak Creek.

Trail users opportunity to use roadside parking access in some locations will be curtailed by the
curb/gutter design of the roadway. Trail users in the vicinity of the road (on lower Ridge Trail,
lower Ramshead and Secret Slickrock trails) are likely to experience more traffic noise as a
result of increased traffic on the paved roadway.

The paved roadway will generate less dust during dry seasons. This is considered a benefit to
pedestrians.

End of Chavez Ranch Road Recreation Site:
It is anticipated that there will be an increase in vehicle traffic to and parking at and near this
location where Oak Creek is accessible. However, there is a limited parking capacity that is
quickly reached. Thus the impact will be three-fold: more vehicles parking at this site when
parking is available; and more traffic to and from this site along Chavez Ranch Road; and more
visitors to Oak Creek. Additional road traffic will occur when parking is full and visitors travel
back out. There may also be an increase in roadside parking in front of residential properties in
this area. Overall, there is an expectation that there will be more visitor use of this location once
Chavez Road is paved.

SUMMARY OF MITIGATION RECOMMENDATIONS
The following are resource protection measures identified in the purpose and need and
Proposed Action.

- Provide for public safety during construction activities by using traffic control, signing, or
temporary road closures.

- Install a 2-vehicle roadside parking area at the junction of Ramshead Trail with Chavez
Ranch Road to mitigate the loss of roadside parking in that vicinity. This small trail
access point should be paved and include a 2-panel trail information kiosk. The Forest
Service will work closely with the contractor during construction to design the parking
area.

- Define a parking capacity; provide boulder boundary barriers to confine the growth of
unmanaged parking associated with the area of the junction of Chavez Ranch Road and
the back road to Crescent Moon Ranch. Move gate closer to Chavez Ranch Road, and
pave to the gate, including the roadside parking. The Forest Service will work closely
with the contractor during construction to design the parking area.

- Provide safe and adequate trail crossings for the Ramshead and Ridge Trails. The
Forest Service will work closely with the contractor during construction to design the trail
crossings.

- Provide dust abatement on construction areas and haul roads.

- Increase signage for access to established Forest Service trail systems for recreation
users. Specifically install STOP/CAUTION signs at all road/trail crossings.
REFERENCES


Yavapai County Sheriff’s Office. 2015. Law Incident Address History Report: Chavez Ranch Road from 2005 to 2015.