Purpose and Need

The Mogollon Rim District of the Coconino National Forest is proposing to increase the number of special use permit areas for group gatherings on the District from ten to eleven. The new area is named Dane Spring (Table 1 and Figure 1). Forest Service policy requires issuance of temporary special use permits for group events of 75 or more people, or for recreation events that involve a fee and that occur on National Forest System lands. Since the decision was made to designate ten special use permit areas for group gatherings in 2009, the Mogollon Rim Ranger District has been issuing special use permits for activities in these areas including, but not limited to: group gatherings, family reunions, dog trials, archery shoots, horseback rides, pioneer treks, weddings, and disc golf tournaments. Generally, the duration of these activities is a weekend, although permits are occasionally issued for group use two times per year. Experience with issuing these permits shows that on-the-ground impacts tend to be very minor and short-term.

There is demand among the public for access to special use permit areas for various types of large group activities. The addition of one special use permit area would help satisfy public demand for access to such sites by increasing the limited capacity of the Mogollon Rim Ranger District to host large group events. In addition to increasing the variety of sites available for groups who host recurring events on the Forest, the addition of the new site would help lower use pressures on existing sites in this part of the district. The proposed Dane Spring site would provide an option for group events in a more remote setting near the Mogollon Rim. A group gathering site at Dane Spring would also be close to Knoll Lake, a popular lake recreation area, providing a needed group gathering site in the southeastern part of the District.

The Dane Spring site is located partially within an existing dispersed camping corridor that allows motor vehicle camping within 300 feet of the edges of designated roads (see 2016 Motor Vehicle Use Map). In order to facilitate use of the entire area of the proposed group gathering sites, this project will also open approximately 0.15 miles of closed Forest system road 9707Q from its junction with FR321A. Permits will be issued for one group gathering at a time per site. However, other forest users may access and use portions of the group sites that fall within the existing camping corridor at any time. Group gathering permits will be unavailable during winter Forest road closure periods (typically November-March). Standard special use permit fee schedules will apply to the proposed sites and permits will only be valid during the period specified on the approved permit application. The permit application for a group activity is comprehensive. It includes an estimated number of participants and full description of the activities that will take place. Commercial and non-commercial activities may be allowed. The
Forest Service permit contains stipulations and authorizations including the number of participants, permit fee, what activities are allowed, the time period for use, and various measures including protection of archaeological, wildlife and plant resources. Other rules include compliance with fire restrictions, protection of meadows, camping away from important water sources, control of dogs and horses and rules for posting directional signs. The permit does not allow construction of fences, structures or other surface disturbances. Typical use of an individual group site varies, but most sites are used by permitted groups twice a year or less.

The location of the special use permit site is listed below in Table 1 and is shown on the location map (Figures 1 and 2).

**Table 1. Proposed special use permit areas for group gatherings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Name</th>
<th>General Location</th>
<th>Legal Description</th>
<th>Size (acres)</th>
<th>Figure (map)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dane Spring</td>
<td>On FR321A, approximately 1/3 mile from its intersection with FR321</td>
<td>Section 35, T13N, R11E, G&amp;SRM</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1. Project Vicinity Map**
Decision and Project Actions

I have decided to approve the designation of the Dane Spring Group Gathering Site for group gatherings, requiring issuance of temporary special use permits for group events of 75 or more people or for recreation events that involve a fee and that occur on National Forest System lands. Another site named FR702A was proposed for designation and was included in the information sent out to the public during scoping in June of 2016. I am not approving the designation of the proposed site at FR702A for the following reason: the site did not meet our original intended objectives for large groups and permitted activities due to adjacent local land owner concerns.

My decision also includes the following actions and mitigation measures for the Dane Spring Group Gathering Site to avoid and/or minimize impacts to the greatest extent possible.

Public Health and Safety

- Group site permits will comply with trash disposal, portable toilets and potable water requirements for the duration of the group site use. Recreation staff and law enforcement officers will visit the site before, during, and/or after the group use to ensure that health and...
safety regulations are met, all trash is removed, and the site is returned to its original condition after use.

- No permits will be issued for archery or firearm shooting events at the Dane Spring site because of its proximity to the Dane Spring trail, remoteness and unsuitable topography.

**Noxious or Invasive Weeds**

- An invasive weed survey has been completed prior to the final decision on the proposal and no noxious or invasive weeds were found and no treatments have been implemented. Monitoring and treatment of noxious weeds will be implemented at the group site as needed during implementation of this decision using approved Forest Service eradication methods. If invasive weeds are found, a mitigation and treatment plan will be developed to address and prevent additional spread in accordance with best management practices as outlined in Appendix B of the “Final Environmental Impact Statement for Integrated Treatment of Noxious or Invasive Weeds” (USDA 2005).

**Site Boundaries**

- The boundaries of the new site will be marked in the field and on permit maps to ensure that the permitted group activities occur within the designated sites.

**Hazard Trees**

- Periodic assessment will be made of hazard trees at the group use site. Hazard trees may be removed regardless of age and size following agency protocols to prevent personal injury and property damage.

**Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision**

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable category of actions is identified in agency procedures as Categorical Exclusion 36 CFR 220.6(d) (8): Approval, modification, or continuation of minor, short-term (1 year or less) special uses of National Forest System lands. This category of action is applicable because permitted occupation and use of the sites will have little-to-no impact on resources and will be of short duration (typically less than one week).

I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist (36 CFR 220.6(b) (i-vii)):

1. **Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species**

   A biological evaluation was conducted for the project and is included in the project record. The Dane Spring site is located within relatively close range (less than 1 mile) of Mexican Spotted Owl Protected Activity Center (PAC) and a northern goshawk post-fledging family area (PFA). The report determines that the new group site would not have any significant impact on these species. The site is already used for dispersed camping and other recreational activities. Additionally, understory vegetation is limited at the Dane Spring site because of current
recreational use, and no improvements would be made (addition of campfire rings, removal of trees, etc.). Based on this information, it was determined that no potential effects to Mexican spotted owls or northern goshawk PFAs from noise disturbance or human presence would be anticipated by permitting use of these sites. Likewise, there would be no potential effects or modification of their habitats or components of critical habitat from permitted use of these sites.

The Dane Spring site is approximately 0.15 miles from a population of Dane or Mogollon thistle (*Cirsium parryi* ssp. *mogollonicum*). Mogollon thistle is a Southwestern Region 3 Forest Service Sensitive plant. Individual plants have been documented in the bottom of Dane Canyon west of the group site. Since these plants are located outside of the group site and in the bottom of a steep drainage, it was determined that no potential impacts to Mogollon thistle would be anticipated by permitting use of this site.

The conclusions of the biological evaluation are as follows:

- This project would have no effect on any federally threatened, endangered, proposed or candidate species or designated critical habitat.
- This project would not impact any Forest sensitive species nor would it alter habitat conditions for these species.
- This project would have no effect to the forest-wide trends of any Management Indicator Species, nor would it change available habitat for these species.
- This project would not result in take of bald or golden eagles as described under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.
- This project would not result in a change in population trend for any migratory bird species.

ii. **Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds**

A hydrologist has determined that the site is not located near any flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds, and thus no effects on water-dependent ecosystems or provision of water-related services are anticipated. In addition, the site is already used for dispersed camping and other recreational activities, and no improvements would be made under this decision (addition of campfire rings, removal of trees, etc.) that might further alter hydrologic processes at the sites.

iii. **Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas**

The proposed site does not occur in or near congressionally-designated, protected areas.

iv. **Inventoried roadless area or potential wilderness area**

No roadless areas or potential wilderness areas exist near the proposed group site.

v. **Research natural areas**

There are no research natural areas in the vicinity of the proposed group site.

vi-vii. **American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites and archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas**

The authorized group site does not occur in or near any known religious or cultural sites.

An archaeological survey was completed for the Dane Spring site and there will be no effects to any sites.
Public Involvement

This action was originally listed as a proposal on the Coconino National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions in April 2014 and was updated periodically during analysis. Comments from the public were solicited via the Coconino National Forest website, publication in the High Country Informant (a local newsletter), and through email and postal mailings of the proposed action to local officials with the Arizona Game and Fish Department and nearby land and business owners on June 29, 2016. The comment period ran from June 29 through July 31, 2016. In addition, internal scoping of Mogollon Rim District resource specialists was conducted during that time to identify potential impacts of the proposed action. Concerns identified during internal scoping were addressed by adding mitigation measures as described above.

Four comments were received during the comment period. Two comments were from Arizona Game and Fish Department officials and were supportive of the proposed action. The third comment, from a forest user, expressed concern about potential impacts of the proposed action on the area around Dane Spring. The District IDT reviewed this comment and noted that the permit site area is located along the FR321A ridgetop and is not close to Dane Spring. The public will have access to the Dane Spring and U-Bar Trail during any group site use of the area. The fourth comment came from a local landowner and expressed several concerns about the proposed group site along FR702A. In response to the comments and because the site did not meet our original intent, I withdrew the FR702A site from the proposed action.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

Forest Plan Compliance - This decision is consistent with the Coconino National Forest Land Management Plan 1987 as amended. The project was designed in conformance with Recreation Planning and Inventory standards and guidelines requiring that the Forest “Issue and administer dispersed recreation special-use authorizations to provide needed recreation opportunities, minimize user conflicts, and ensure public safety and resource protection.” (Coconino National Forest Land Management Plan, p.51)

Endangered Species Act (1973) – A Biological Evaluation has been completed for this action, which indicates that no federally listed threatened or endangered species will be adversely affected by this activity.

National Historic Preservation Act (1966) – The Forest Service program for compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act includes locating, inventorying, and nominating all cultural sites that may be directly or indirectly affected by scheduled activities. This activity has been reviewed by a qualified archeologist and a determination made that no known cultural resources will be adversely affected by this activity.

Environmental Justice (E.O. 12898) – The project is consistent with the Executive Order 12898, Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, since permits may be issued to any group abiding by standard permit issuance guidelines, including those specified herein. In addition, issuance of permits to applicants would not preclude other forest visitors from using the area.

Clean Water Act – Based on discussions with the interdisciplinarian team concerning hydrology, this decision is consistent with the Clean Water Act and amendments. No permits are required for implementing this activity.
Clean Air Act – This decision is in compliance with the Clean Air Act, which defines the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for various sources of pollutants that must be met to protect human health and welfare, including visibility.

Administrative Review (Appeal) Opportunities

This decision is not subject to an administrative review or appeal as a result of two recent statutes: the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (Pub. L. No. 113-76), signed into law on January 17, 2014, and the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Farm Bill) (Pub. L. No. 113-79), signed into law on February 7, 2014. The Forest Service will no longer offer notice, comment and appeal opportunities as previously provided pursuant to 36 CFR 215 for categorically excluded projects.

Implementation Date

This decision may be implemented immediately.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Brady Van Dragt, Recreation Planner, Mogollon Rim Ranger District, 8738 Ranger Rd., Happy Jack, AZ 86024, Phone: (928) 477-5052, Fax: (928) 477-5057, email: bvandragt@fs.fed.us

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