

# Mail Trail Extension

## Summary of Proposed Action

### Purpose and Need

#### Background

The Mail Trail is located near State Highway 260 in the Mud Tanks Area 16 miles east of Camp Verde in Township 13 North, Range 7 East, Sections 27, 28, 33, 34 and Township 12 North, Range 7 East, Sections 3, 4, 10-14, Strawberry quadrangle in Yavapai County, Arizona. In April 2000, the Camp Verde Cavalry and the Yavapai County Trails Committee contacted the Red Rock Ranger District and suggested a project to extend the existing Mail Trail #84 from Mail Trail Tank to Hwy. 260 following the historical alignment. Additional, grass routes, support for the project was voiced by The Town of Camp Verde, the Camp Verde Historical Society, the Camp Verde Trails Committee, the Verde Valley Horseman, the Yavapai-Apache Nation, the Yavapai Trails Committee and the Kiwanis Club.

The Red Rock Ranger District proposes a trail that travels 0.7 miles west from a proposed trailhead and then turns south and continues 5.3 miles to the junction with the existing Mail Trail near Mail Trail Tank. The existing Mail Trail, which has been on the Official Forest Service Trail System since 1990, goes 2.3 miles and drops 1,200 ft. in elevation through the Fossil Springs Wilderness to the junction with Fossil Creek. The trail then meets the Fossil Springs Trail—Tonto National Forest Trail #18 which climbs towards Strawberry, AZ. The small trailhead is proposed on Forest Road 9247B, off highway 260 a small distance.

After the initial suggestion to the Forest Service by the Camp Verde Cavalry and Yavapai Trail Committee, the Trail Proposal gained further support after numerous meetings sponsored by the Camp Verde Cavalry. Some meetings had over 40 in attendance. Almost all in attendance were related to at least one person who had actually carried mail on the route during the pioneer era. Walt Murdock and Walter Cox, long time Camp Verde residents, showed Howard Parrish of the Camp Verde Cavalry the location of the trail as shown to them by their relatives who carried mail on the trail. This was confirmed by District Employees. The Red Rock Ranger District continued to seek funding for the project and finally received funding to construct the Trail in FY 2005.

The Mail Trail was used to deliver mail from the Camp Verde area to Strawberry, Pine and Payson from the 1880's to 1914. In 1884, the small frontier community once known as Union Park received its first post office accompanied by a new name, Payson. The postmaster named the community after Senator Payson, who was congressional chairman of post offices and who appointed the postmaster to his job. With the establishment of the new post office, it was necessary to extend the mail service from Camp Verde 50 miles east to Payson. This service could also meet the needs of other postal drops such as Ruterford, Strawberry and Pine as well as delivery to ranches along the route. The delivery included more than just mail. Items such as drugs, whiskey, dry goods and sundries were also delivered. The first contractor and mail rider was Ashton (Ash) Nebeker. Ash put the route together, and it remained in use for the next 30 years. It was discontinued the first winter after statehood.

The mail trail run was 104 miles round trip. A rider was in the saddle anywhere from 11 to 18 hours at a time. How long a man was in the saddle depended on the amount of mail, whether or not the rider had to go on to Rye, or the weather conditions. The rider would change horses twice

in each direction. The rider would unload Payson mail and pick up incoming mail for Camp Verde. After a bite to eat, the rider headed back to Pine, where he would lay over for the night, up early the second morning and back to Camp Verde, where the routine would start all over again.

## **Purpose and Need for Action**

The Mail Trail extension is intended to permanently mark and establish the historic route, before it is forever lost and to allow outdoor enthusiasts [hikers, equestrians and mountain bikers (outside of wilderness)] a non-motorized recreation opportunity that includes re-living the history of the pioneer Arizona Territory. Historical enthusiasts are considering annual rides on the trail to commemorate the Postal Service and Pioneer History. This action is needed at this time because the Red Rock Ranger District has financing available in fiscal year 2005 (this year) to complete the trail and trailhead construction. The Mail Trail Project is very important to the communities of Camp Verde, Pine/Strawberry and the Yavapai-Apache Nation who conceived the project as a demonstration of the historical as well as modern significance of this important inter-community connection. This is the highest priority trails project for the community of Camp Verde and their Historical Society.

This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Coconino Forest Plan, and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan. The project is located within the Pinyon-juniper Woodland Management Area 7. Management emphasis from the Forest Plan is firewood production, watershed condition, wildlife habitat, and livestock grazing. This project can be managed in harmony with the emphasized resources. The Red Rock District Trail calls for the construction of the additional length of the Mail Trail from the current system trail to the Divide Tank Area. This proposal is generally consistent with the trail plan and meets its objectives.

## **Proposed Action**

The Forest Service proposes the construction of a trailhead parking lot along Forest Road 9247B. A “Low Key” Trailhead with minimal facilities and signing will be located off the Hwy. 260 along FR9247B. The Trailhead will include parking for up to twenty vehicles, including horse trailers and will include minimal improvements including parking delineation boulders, and small interpretive and directional signs within the trailhead itself. The trailhead may eventually include a toilet, although funding is not available for one at this time. The portion of FR 9247B which accesses the Trailhead and parking lot will be surfaced with “AB” gravel.

Trailhead work will be done with back-hoes, loaders, graders and dump trucks. In order to minimize casual non-trail use, there will be no trailhead or trail directional signs along the highway. Trail work will include the placement of re-assurance markers (rock and wire baskets) approximately every 500 ft. and the placement of drainage structures where necessary. Tread work will be limited to removal of large rocks where necessary and trimming grass. Tread width will be approximately 18-24 inches. The trail will be maintained as a level 2 trail which includes a narrow tread width, functional drainage, occasional obstacles and marking of the route. The trail will be designated for non-motorized use only. Motorized use will be discouraged by the rough and rocky condition of the trail. Abundant rock will be left in the tread of the trail.

## **Decision Framework**

The Red Rock District Ranger will make a decision on the project that includes the following:

- Will the Mail Trail be constructed along the proposed alignment or choose the No Action Alternative?
- Are there any extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action?
- Are there any mitigation measures to be applied to issues or circumstances related to the proposed action?

## **Public Involvement**

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions continuously from 2001 to 2005. The proposal was provided by mailing to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping in March 2001 and again in December 2004. Forty-Seven scoping letters were sent to interested individuals and agencies in March of 2001. Twelve letters of comment were received from ten persons and organizations. Another mailing of 14 scoping letters was sent in December 2004, mostly to those who commented during or after the 2001 scoping process. Only one written comment was received from the second mailing. In addition, sixteen meetings were held to discuss the project with a variety of organizations including the Communities of Pine, Strawberry and Camp Verde; the Camp Verde Historical Society, the Yavapai-Apache Nation, the Verde Valley Horsemen, the Camp Verde Kiwanis Club and the Camp Verde TV Station. In addition, three newspaper articles about the Mail Trail were published in the Camp Verde Journal.

Letters of support have been received from the Charles Ward Trust Grazing Allotment, the Back Country Horseman of Central Arizona, the Town of Camp Verde, the Camp Verde Trails Committee, the Verde Valley Horseman's Council, the Gila County Trails Alliance, the Yavapai-Apache Nation, the Thirteen Mile Grazing Allotment, the Camp Verde Cavalry and the Yavapai Trails Committee.

## **Issues**

The Forest Service separated the issues into two groups: significant and non-significant issues. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues were identified as those: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council for Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations require this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "...identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3)..." A list of non-significant issues and reasons regarding their categorization as non-significant may be found at the Red Rock Ranger District Office in the project record.

As for issues, the Forest Service identified two issues during scoping.

The first issue is not significant and is outside of the scope of the current proposal and decision to be made. During the initial public involvement, the trailhead was proposed in the highway right of way near Divide Tank. The Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) commented to the District Ranger on Apr. 9, 2001 that construction of a left turn land and right turn deceleration lane on SR 260 would be necessary to accommodate safe turning movements to the trailhead. The current proposed action has been revised to address other resource issues and therefore the turn lane at this location is outside to scope of the current project analysis.

The trailhead was moved to Forest Road 9247B, which is a primary access point to the Mud Tanks Area. The proposed trailhead would be built several hundred feet down a forest system road that has existed for years and the already receives moderate use for camping and parking. Developing a trailhead located on a Forest Development Road with minimal improvements ,not highly visible from the highway and no signs on SR260 to attract unintentional visitors should remedy the need for a turn lane. The trailhead will not generate an increase of use requiring a turn lane and the highway at this location has good sight distance and visibility both directions.

The only significant issue is related to effects to threatened and endangered species. There is concern that with the construction of the trail and trailhead, equestrian trail users will travel away from the designated trail in search of water sources for their animals and impact the habitat and populations of Chiricahua Leopard Frog near the project area. The Proposed Action alternative was specifically designed by its locations and other measures to reduce potential effects to this species.

# Alternatives

This section describes and compares the alternatives considered for the Mail Trail project. It includes a description and map of each alternative considered. This section also presents the alternatives in comparative form, sharply defining the differences between each alternative and providing a clear basis for choice among options by the decision maker and the public. Some of the information used to compare the alternatives is based upon the design of the alternative (i.e., helicopter logging versus the use of skid trails) and some of the information is based upon the environmental, social and economic effects of implementing each alternative (i.e., the amount of erosion or cost of helicopter logging versus skidding).

## **Alternatives Considered by not analyzed in Detail:**

An alternative was considered that included construction of a trailhead and the trail connection near Divide Tank and Highway 260. The trailhead was to be constructed within and immediately adjacent to the Highway 260 Right-of-way and next to Divide Tank. The proposed trail corridor was adjacent to stock tanks that contain habitat and populations of Chiricuhua Leopard Frog. The trail location would have followed approximately one quarter mile more of the original Mail Trail Route than the proposed action. However, due to ADOT concerns related to highway intersections and concern about impacts to Chiricuhua Leopard Frog this alternative was eliminated from further consideration. The Proposed Action addresses these concerns as well as meets the purpose and need and therefore this alternative is not be evaluated in detail.

## **Alternatives Considered in Detail**

### **Alternative 1**

#### **No Action**

Under the No Action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. No trail or trailhead construction activities would be implemented to accomplish project goals. This opportunity to interpret and preserve portions of the historic trail would not be completed and this historic trail access would be limited to its existing designated segment.

### **Alternative 2**

#### **The Proposed Action**

The Forest Service proposes to the following activities to meet the purpose and need. The project will include the construction of a trailhead parking lot along Forest Road 9247B. A “Low Key” trailhead with minimal facilities and signing will be located off the Hwy. 260 along FR9247B. The trailhead will include parking for up to twenty vehicles, including horse trailers and will include minimal improvements including parking delineation boulders, and small interpretive and directional signs. The trailhead may eventually include a toilet, although funding is not available for one at this time. The portion of FR 9247B which accesses the trailhead and parking lot will be surfaced with “AB” gravel. (See Map Alternative 2).

Trailhead work will be done with back-hoes, loaders, graders and dump trucks. In order to minimize attracting unintentional use, there will be no trailhead signs along the highway. Trail

work will include the placement of re-assurance markers (rock and wire baskets) approximately every 500 ft. and the placement of drainage structures where necessary. Tread work will be limited to removal of large rocks where necessary and trimming grass. Tread width will be approximately 18-24 inches. The trail will be maintained as a level 2 trail which includes a narrow tread width, functional drainage, occasional obstacles and marking of the route. The trail will be designated for non-motorized use only. Motorized use will be discouraged by the rough and rocky condition of the trail. Abundant rock will be left in the tread of the trail.

Alternative 2 best addresses the purpose and need for the project while mitigating the effects of the project on Hwy. 260 and the Chiricahua Leopard Frog. This alternative will provide a “low key” alternative trailhead that will not attract un-intentional visitors. The trailhead will be located on an existing forest development road (9247B), will include no signs on Hwy. 260 to attract visitors and will have minimal facilities. A highway turn lane will not be necessary because of good site distance, expected light use of the trail (use is expected to be less than 1500 visitors per year) and minimal improvements. This alternative will provide a parking area to restrict use to the immediate trailhead vicinity and a higher standard gravel surface parking to prevent getting stuck in the mud.

Alternative 2 locates the trail and trailhead away from stock tanks that contain the Chiricahua Leopard Frog. References to stock tanks that contain Chiricahua Leopard Frog will be removed from any Forest Service sponsored signs and brochures that describe the trail. This alternative provides a multiple purpose trail which follows at least one and one half mile of the original Mail Trail. It offers an opportunity for trail enthusiasts to experience the open range as viewed by the pioneers and most importantly captures and preserves the Mail Trail for generations to come as an example of the cultural heritage of Arizona. The communities of Camp Verde, Strawberry, Pine and Payson consider this an important link to their cultural heritage as the first Mail Service connection in the area. This important link connects to the existing Mail Trail that drops off of the Fossil Creek Rim Trail #84 and connects to Tonto NF Trail #18 and the top of the Rim. Plans exist for the trail to continue on to Strawberry and Payson.

The trail will be primitive and narrow and retain a rocky condition to discourage use by motorized vehicles. It will be designated as a non-motorized trail. Rock and wire, inter-visible cairns similar to the ones on the General Crook Trail will mark the trail. Small interpretive and directional signs will be provided in the trailhead and a trail logo will be developed to use along the trail at major road and trail locations. The Camp Verde Cavalry has agreed to adopt the trail and assist in the construction. The Yavapai-Apache Nation supports the idea of the trail and believe (according to Vincent Randall) their ancestors used the trail for generations.

## **Mitigation Measures Common to All Alternatives**

In response to public comments on the proposal, mitigation measures were developed to ease some of the potential impacts the various alternatives may cause.

## **Mitigation Measures Specific to Alternative 2**

- ❖ Trailhead signs will not be posted along the highway and interpretive signs would be limited to the trailhead and trail itself to avoid unintentional use and trailhead improvements will be minimal.
- ❖ Trail will be designated as a non-motorized trail.

- ❖ Brochures and maps which pertain to the Mail Trail produced by the USDA Forest Service would not include the location of stock tanks where Chiricahua Leopard frog habitat and populations exist.
- ❖ Interpretive signs relative to the importance and preservation of the Chiricahua Leopard Frog.

## **Comparison of Alternatives**

This section provides a summary of the effects of implementing each alternative. Information in the table is focused on activities and effects where different levels of effects or outputs can be distinguished quantitatively or qualitatively among alternatives. (See Table 1).

**Table 1. Alternative Comparison**

	<b>Alternative 1 No Action</b>	<b>Alternative 2 Proposed Action</b>
Cultural Resources	No impacts to cultural resources however may result in loss to historic trail interpretation and preservation opportunities.	Opportunity to interpret and experience a historic trail. Other cultural resources would be avoided.
Management Indicator Species	No loss of MIS habitat; no additional disturbance to MIS species.	Slight alteration of MIS habitat from trailhead construction. Anticipated use of trail may cause slight disturbance (low intensity, short duration) to MIS species. Overall, no change in Forest-wide trends to MIS populations.
Special Status Species	Existing management would continue; some impact to species from existing activities.	Despite mitigation measures that greatly reduce effects to Chiricahua leopard frog, this alternative may adversely affect the frog and consultation with USFWS is required. Impacts to other special status species are mitigated or inconsequential.
Soil & Water	Existing management would continue.	Vegetative removal and reduction in soil productivity would occur on approximately 1.75 acres.
Vegetation/Invasive Species	No additional modification of vegetation beyond that occurring from existing activities (mainly off-road OHV use).	Slight modification of pinyon juniper vegetation where trailhead is to be constructed. Modification of vegetation along trail will be inconsequential since trail tread delineation is limited to removal of large rocks and trimming of grass and drainage features. Use of trail is expected to be limited and non-motorized only.
Other Land Use Issues	No changes in traffic in any location.	Access to the trailhead will be from the existing Mud Tanks Road (FR9247B) without any directional signage to minimize use. Minimal increase in traffic is anticipated.