



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Red Rock
Ranger District

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Dear Outfitter-Guide and Interested Citizen,

We are writing to solicit your comments, issues and suggestions on the ***Proposed Action*** for an Outfitter-Guide Management Plan for the Red Rock Ranger District. This is our next step in implementing new regulations at 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 251.50 requiring outfitters-guides to have Special Use Permits to operate on the National Forest.

We have issued permits and supported outfitter-guides on the National Forest in the greater Sedona area for over 20 years, but the limited availability of new or expanded permits in recent years has become a very contentious issue.

The issue is easy to understand. The greater Sedona area is a one-of-a-kind place. Some call it “the most beautiful place in the world”. The surrounding National Forest lands have unusual and spectacular scenic quality, fascinating geology, and easy access. They support a wide variety of year-round recreational opportunities, are known for their restorative, spiritual and inspirational value; and have a popular, thriving and tourism-based community in the midst of it all. Literally millions of people visit annually. Predictably, the area stimulates immediate and long-lasting personal, community, and commercial interests and expectations. With the thriving tourism industry, the competition for opportunities to conduct outfitting and guiding on the National Forest is unrelenting.

For the Forest Service, it constitutes a major challenge. Providing visitor opportunities (which outfitter-guides do) and supporting local communities in search of a healthy economy (to which outfitter-guides contribute) are National Forest management objectives. So are the protection and sustaining of the National Forest’s natural and cultural resources. Ironically, the pursuit of one is not necessarily in harmony with the pursuit of the other.

This is not a new issue. The Forest Service has been wrestling with it for several years. Amendment 12 to the Coconino Forest Plan, specific to the greater Sedona area, made a number of decisions about outfitter-guide activity. It concluded that current levels of outfitter-guide service are about right considering everything else. An increase in outfitter-guide use would meet more public demand and give more support to the local economy, but also competes with general unguided public use and increases total use and its effects. Amendment 12 sets limits on outfitter-guide use and favors the general public uses over outfitter-guide use (i.e. non-commercial use over commercial use) to retain greater number of opportunities for the general unguided public and mitigate adverse effects on the National Forest resources and adjacent private lands. Favoring an increase in outfitter-guide services in the greater Sedona area as is strongly being advocated by the local outfitter-guide industry would require an adjustment in the



themes of Amendment 12. We need to find out if this reversal is what is best for the National Forest visitor and the local community.

The greater Sedona area is relatively small. Heavy visitation takes its toll on the Forest's infrastructure, natural and cultural resources, and on the visitor's quality of experience. Visitors tell us that too many encounters with other visitors decrease their quality of experience. Outfitter-guides can be a solution. Conversely, too many outfitter-guides can add to the problem. How many interests and expectations can or should the National Forest support? What changes in current permit operations, if any, should be made to mitigate community or National Forest issues? What protections need to be applied to sustain the value and benefits of the natural and cultural resources and the quality of the visitor's (including the residents) experiences in light of projected increasing visitation? Decisions are needed. They are the focus of our current efforts, and the purpose and need for an outfitter-guide management plan.

So, how did we approach the development of this plan and where are we in that process? With the competition and contention involved, we wanted a strong foundation. First, we needed a fresh understanding of the intensity of public (visitor) need, or demand, for outfitter-guide services. A strong visitor need is a prerequisite and a compelling reason for commercial use of the National Forest. Second, we needed an estimate of the land's capability to support outfitter-guide services. We researched known methods for these determinations and ran some calculations. We evaluated current use—outfitter-guides and general public—and potential use considering both physical and social capacity factors.

We presented these preliminary findings to the public for comment in the fall of 2004 and at an open house in January, 2005. Clearly, the demand for existing outfitter-guide services is strong. We also established capacity and opportunities for new outfitter-guide activities and services, although not generally in the traditional and popular greater Sedona locations. Also, we recognized and affirmed the existing and potential stewardship advantages of having outfitter-guides on the National Forest.

Using our preliminary findings and the comments we received from the public, we developed a short-term (interim) strategy, and a long-term strategy. For the short term, we offered temporary outfitter-guide permits with a set of terms and conditions designed to regulate environmental and social consequences. The terms and conditions spelled out locations, types of outfitter-guide activities, volume of use, frequency of tours, etc. These permits allow the Forest Service to test some of the preliminary findings, and in some measure, support commercial interests while a NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process proceeds for the long-term decisions. We had 35 proposals in response to the solicitation, and ultimately issued 19 new short-term temporary permits and 7 amendments to existing permits.

For the long-term, an interdisciplinary team was chartered to design the *Proposed Action* required for the NEPA process. The scope of the decision was confirmed to be an outfitter-guide management plan for the Red Rock District for the next 10 years, with only a few specific connected actions affecting unguided, non-commercial recreation use.

So where are we now? We have lots of information. We have tried to organize it to facilitate your review. An overview with less detail is enclosed; a detailed, step-by-step report is available on the web www.fs.fed.us/r3/coconino/nepa and in hard-copy for a more in-depth review. We want your constructive critique, comment, and suggestions. The proposal is detailed and complex. If you have questions, please don't hesitate to call William Stafford at 928-203-7529.

The following timeline and description of steps for the remainder of the process is provided to help you understand how and when you can participate:

<u><i>When</i></u>	<u><i>What</i></u>
January—February, 2006	Public review and comment on Forest Service Proposed Action for Outfitter-Guide Management Plan
February 9, 2006; 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., Elks Lodge No. 2291, 110 Airport Road, Sedona, AZ	Second Public Open House and Meeting
June-July, 2006	45-day Public review and comment on Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)
December, 2006	Final EIS issued
February, 2007	Prospectus issued

It is important for you to comment if you want to stay involved. Comments, to be most effective, need to be received by March 2, 2006.

Thank you for your interest in the National Forest. Please read on for the enclosed overview. If you are interested in more details, a step-by-step report is available on the web www.fs.fed.us/r3/coconino/nepa or in hard-copy from the Ranger Station.

Sincerely,

/S/ KEN ANDERSON

KEN ANDERSON
District Ranger