

CHAPTERS 1 AND 2
**DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR USFS FOREST ROAD
406 EASEMENT AND UTILITY CORRIDOR SPECIAL USE PERMIT,
GILA COUNTY, ARIZONA**

Prepared by

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Chapter 1

PROJECT SCOPE

BACKGROUND

Simonton Flat, L.L.C. (Simonton Flat), has applied to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS) for improved road access and for a utility corridor to a proposed residential subdivision, known as Canyon River Ranch, located on private land within the Payson Ranger District of the Tonto National Forest (TNF). The Forest Service is responsible for conducting transportation system planning and analysis to determine the need for access, identify the infrastructure, and minimize the effects of that infrastructure on ecological processes and health, diversity and productivity of Forest System Lands. The Forest Service will assure effective protection, management, and utilization of intermingled and adjacent private and public lands, and for the use and development of the resources upon which communities within or adjacent to the National Forests are dependent.

The TNF must undertake the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process to disclose and evaluate the environmental effects of the project prior to issuing authorizations.

The portion of FR 406 under consideration in this environmental assessment (EA) is located in portions of Sections 1, 7, 9–14, and 16–18, Township 10 North, Range 9 East and a portion of Section 6, Township 10 North, Range 10 East, Gila and Salt River Baseline and Meridian, Gila County, Arizona, on the North Peak and Payson South, Arizona, USGS quadrangles.

PURPOSE AND NEED

Existing Conditions: The proposed Canyon River Ranch development is located on private land in the TNF currently known as the Simonton parcel. The Simonton parcel is accessed by Forest Road (FR) 406, a native surface single lane arterial road that extends from the Town of Payson approximately 8.5 miles west to the Mazatzal Wilderness Area; the road is not paved for approximately 6.4 miles from near the Payson Golf Course to the eastern boundary of the Simonton parcel. The unpaved road is maintained for travel by prudent drivers in standard passenger cars or trucks. User comfort and convenience are low priorities. There are several areas along FR 406 that have undergone extensive soil erosion; this erosion threatens the stability and safety of the road. In addition, there are currently no utility (electric, telephone) connections to the Simonton parcel.

The USFS does not hold a road easement across the Simonton parcel to maintain public access needs to other local private land owners, area trailheads, dispersed camping areas, wilderness areas, and other resource management activities.

Desired Future Conditions: The desired future condition is public access to private and National Forest System lands through a safe paved road that provides for a moderate degree of user comfort and convenience. The lands have access to utilities for development of community resources.

The project area (FR 406) is located in the Payson Ranger District Management Area 4A (USFS 1985a). Per the TNF Plan, the USFS will “respond to requests for rights-of-way grants for roads and trails” (1985a: 47) and “requests for utility corridors will be coordinated to locate needed facilities within

existing corridors where feasible” (1985a: 46). The plan also stipulates that the TNF is required to “provide a serviceable road and trail transportation system to meet public access, land management, and resource protection needs” (USFS 1985a:30).

Objective: The desired outcome of this action is Forest Service issuance of a public road easement and utility corridor special use permit to allow for the construction of a well-designed road (FR 406) that meets the access needs of the USFS, private landowners in the area, and the general public.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Proposed Action is to authorize a public right-of-way easement, and utility corridor special use permit, along FR 406 west of Payson, Arizona. The Proposed Action is required to serve the proposed Canyon River Ranch residential development, a 116-lot, gated, equestrian-themed development on the “Simonton” parcel. The Simonton parcel is a 160-acre piece of private property within the TNF (Figure 1). The Proposed Action would authorize:

- Reconstruction of FR 406 and a 22-foot wide × 6.4 mile long public right-of-way easement between the Town of Payson and the Simonton parcel that would be issued by the Forest Service to Gila County.
- A 22-foot wide × 0.5-mile long reciprocal easement granted from the Simonton parcel landowner (Simonton Flat, LLC) to Gila County to maintain public access across the Simonton parcel and adequate access to private land in the vicinity.
- A utility corridor special use permit within the road bed of FR 406. The Proposed Action would be authorized to provide

Authorization of the aforementioned easements and special use permit would enable Gila County to improve 6.9 miles of FR 406 from the Town of Payson to the western boundary of the Simonton parcel. The Simonton parcel would be also developed as a residential development (Canyon River Ranch)¹. Improvements would meet Gila County standards for the proposed subdivision.

Improvements to FR 406, based on Gila County standards, would include paving the entire length of road between the Town of Payson and the western boundary of the Simonton parcel and improving wash crossings using concrete aprons, culverts, or box culverts, where necessary. The improved road would be 20 feet (6.1 m) wide, with 2-foot-wide (0.6-m-wide) shoulders to service two lanes of traffic. The speed limit would be 25 mph. The easement for FR 406 from the Town of Payson to the Simonton parcel would be transferred to Gila County, which would be responsible for maintenance of the road. Utilities for the proposed development would be installed in an underground utility trench within the FR 406 road alignment.

The current landowner intends to sell individual lots; this development is not master planned. All water during road construction will come from on-site wells. Additionally, construction staging areas and soil waste piles will be located on the privately owned Simonton parcel. Individual lots will be served by on-site water and septic systems.

¹ Impacts to the Simonton parcel as a result of the Proposed Action are included in the impacts discussion as a cumulative impact

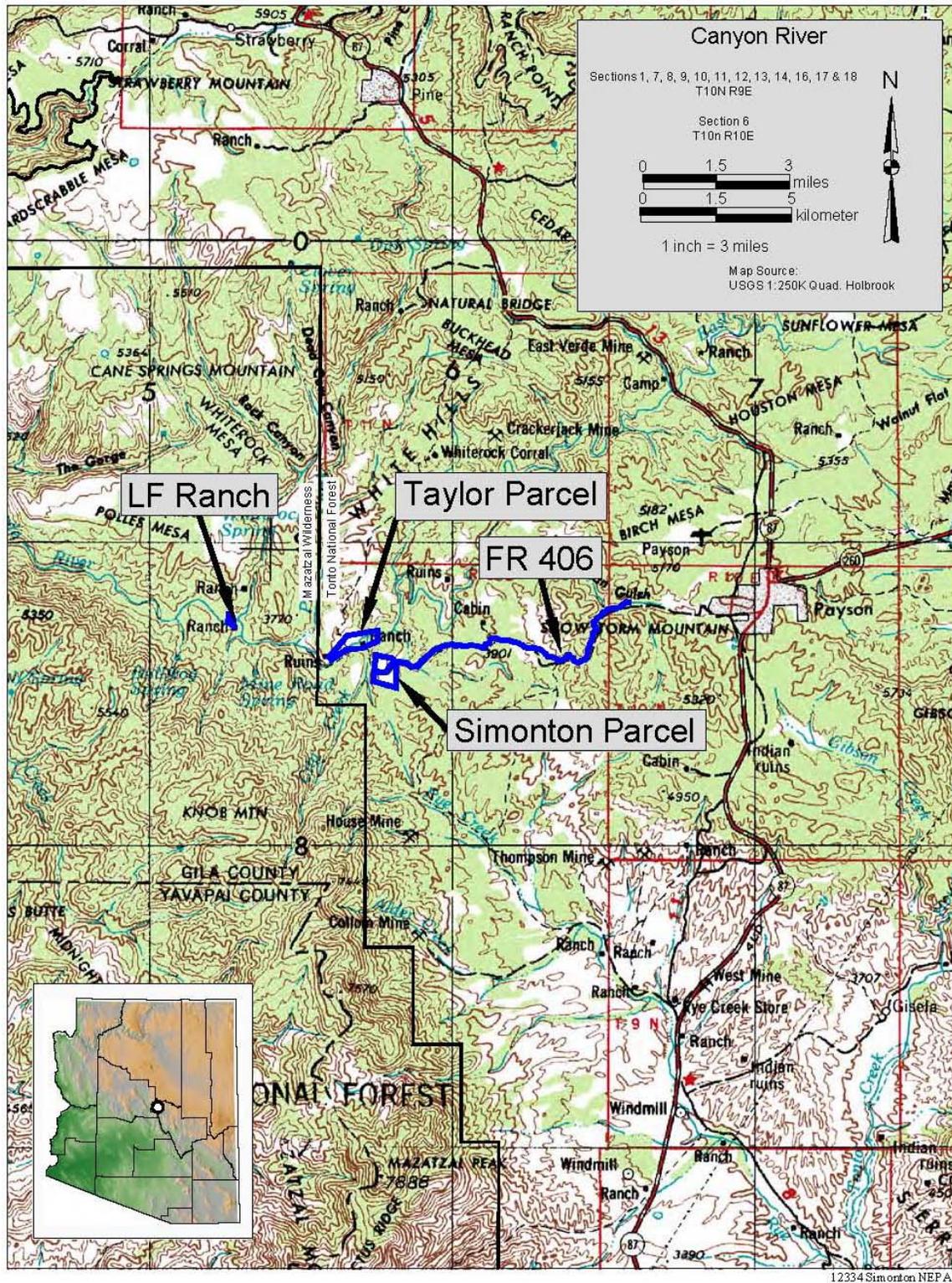


Figure 1. Location of the project area.

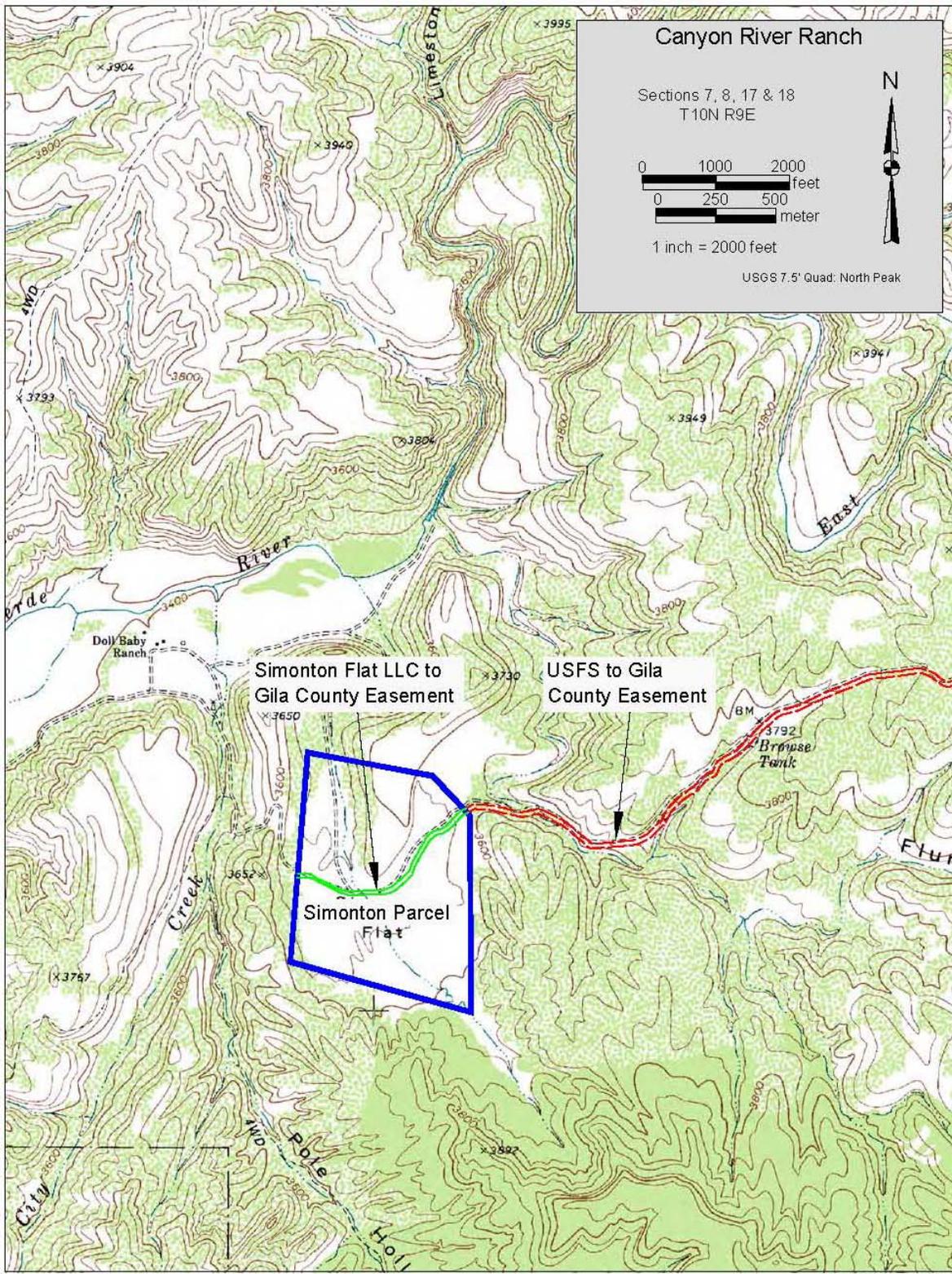


Figure 2. FR 406 at the western end of project area.

PLANNING PROCESS

Forest Service management of lands is accomplished through a two-level planning process. The first level of planning is programmatic (in accordance with the National Forest Management Act [NFMA]) and is represented by the Forest Plans and their amending documents. The second level of planning is at the project level, in accordance with NEPA. Individual project plans proposed within National Forest System lands will be analyzed for potential site-specific environmental impacts and for compliance with desired conditions and management standards set in the amended applicable Forest Plan.

This draft EA is being prepared for the site-specific road reconstruction, issuance of a public easement and utility corridor special use permit..

DECISION FRAMEWORK

The TNF Supervisor will make the final decision regarding authorizing road reconstruction and special use permit issuance, taking into account the environmental issues and their mitigation measures. The Supervisor has discretion when making decisions and will closely study the alternatives presented to determine the efficacy of each. In addition, the Supervisor recognizes the authority and place of other agencies under consultation. The Regional Forester will decide on the issuance of a public road easement to Gila County.

The NEPA process requires that the Forest Service work with an established interdisciplinary team, involve the public, and coordinate with other federal agencies. Resource specialists from the TNF and consultants provided technical data for impact evaluation. A list of the team members and consultants can be found in Chapter 5. The public scoping process is also described in detail with public comments in Chapter 5.

AGENCIES INVOLVED UNDER NEPA

The TNF consulted with the following federal and state agencies.

Arizona State Historic Preservation Office

The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) is a state office with a federal mandate. Under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), as amended, and its implementing regulations at 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 800, federal agencies are required to consult with the SHPO regarding the eligibility of historic and cultural properties for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and on determinations of effect from federal undertakings and management decisions.

Arizona Game and Fish Department

The Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) is responsible for managing and protecting Arizona's fish and wildlife resources. One of AGFD's strategic plans, *Wildlife 2006*, provides goals, objectives, and strategies for the management and use of Arizona's wildlife and fish populations and habitat. The strategic plan calls for collaboration between agencies to enhance nongame and endangered wildlife habitats and biotic communities to prevent avoidable losses and to mitigate unavoidable losses. Agency documents, such as *Wildlife of Special Concern in Arizona*, identify species with population viability

issues. In addition, the AGFD Heritage Data Management System (HDMS) provides information regarding occurrences of sensitive species in the vicinity of a given project.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Project scoping letters were sent to 48 parties, including relevant government agencies, adjacent property owners, public-interest groups, and other interested stakeholders. Public notice of the project was placed in the *Payson Roundup* and *East Valley Tribune*, and the period for scoping comments was open between 10 May and 1 June 2007. Copies of the scoping letter and each public notice can be found in Appendix A.

ISSUES

Specific impact topics were developed to allow for comparison of the environmental consequences of each alternative. Impact topics were then subjected to detailed analysis based on substantive issues and environmental statutes and regulations. A summary of the impact topics and rationale for selection or dismissal are given below. Generally, impact topics are included if they have the potential for direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts.

Issues Analyzed in this Document

Following are the key issues that are pertinent to the Proposed Action.

Effects on Access and Travel Management. The Proposed Action includes paving and realignment of a road. Changes in the quality and character of access to the area may affect recreational and wilderness users as well as landowners beyond the Simonton parcel.

Effects on Wildlife, Threatened or Endangered, and Other Special-Status Species.

Information obtained from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the AGFD HDMS, and site visits was used to develop a list of species of concern that are evaluated for the project area (Table 1-1). Effects on wildlife, threatened or endangered or other special status species could occur as a result of increased siltation during or immediate after construction, increase visitation and human presence in the area that might result in noise impacts.

Effects on Livestock Grazing. Impacts to active grazing allotments adjacent to the project area could occur because vehicle speed would increase along FR 406 as a result of road improvements such as paving the road.

Effects on Heritage Resources. The NHPA, as amended, NEPA, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 require consideration of impacts on cultural resources. Arizona State Revised Statute (A.R.S. 41-865) also protects the disposition human remains on lands within the state of Arizona. The Proposed Action has the potential to affect heritage (archaeological) resources located along FR 406.

Effects on Geology and Soils. Alteration of geologic processes and features is not proposed in any of the alternatives however road improvements could impact slope stability and safety as well as effect soil erosion.

Table 1-1. Special-Status Species with the Potential to Be Affected by the Proposed Project, Based on Known Occurrences or Habitat Preferences

Common Name	Scientific Name	Current Status*	Project Vicinity Occurrence
Chiricahua Leopard Frog	<i>Rana chiricahuensis</i>	T, WSC	No documented occurrences within 25 miles. Potential habitat occurs along the East Verde River, which is 850 m (2,788 feet) from the project area.
Razorback Sucker	<i>Xyrauchen texanus</i>	E, WSC	This species was introduced into the Verde River and individuals are known to occur there. No razorback suckers are known from the East Verde River.
Headwater Chub	<i>Gila nigra</i>	C	Known to occur in the East Verde River upstream of Payson, which is approximately 20 river miles away.
Common Black-hawk	<i>Buteogallus anthracinus</i>	USFS Sensitive, WSC, MIS	No documented occurrences. Potential habitat occurs along the East Verde River.
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	USFS Sensitive, MIS, EPA	No documented occurrences within 15 miles. Potential foraging and roosting habitat occurs along the East Verde River.
Lowland Leopard Frog	<i>Rana yavapaiensis</i>	USFS Sensitive, WSC	No documented occurrences along the East Verde River. Potential habitat occurs along the East Verde River.
Mexican Garter Snake	<i>Thamnophis eques megalops</i>	USFS Sensitive, WSC	No documented occurrences within 12 miles. Potential habitat occurs along the East Verde River.
Narrow-headed Garter Snake	<i>Thamnophis rufipunctatus</i>	USFS Sensitive, WSC	No documented occurrences within 15 miles. Potential habitat occurs along the East Verde River.
Arizona Southwestern Toad	<i>Bufo microscaphus microscaphus</i>	USFS Sensitive	No documented occurrences within 12 miles. Potential habitat occurs along the East Verde River.
Comstock's Hairstreak Butterfly	<i>Callophrys comstocki</i>	USFS Sensitive	Not known to occur in the TNF. Potential habitat exists in the project area.
Evan's Brigadier	<i>Agathymus evansi</i>	USFS Sensitive	Not known to occur in the TNF. Host plant not present in the project area.
Cow Path Tiger Beetle	<i>Cicindela purpurea cimarrona</i>	USFS Sensitive	Not known to occur in the TNF. Potential habitat may occur in the project vicinity.
Tonto Basin Century Plant	<i>Agave delamateri</i>	USFS Sensitive	No documented occurrences within 25 miles. Potential habitat may occur in the project vicinity.
Arizona Phlox	<i>Phlox amabilis</i>	USFS Sensitive	No documented occurrences within 25 miles. Potential habitat may occur in the project area.

***Status Definitions**

C = Candidate. Candidate species are those for which USFWS has sufficient information on biological vulnerability and threats to support proposals to list as endangered or threatened under the ESA. However, proposed rules have not yet been issued because they are precluded by other listing activity that is a higher priority. This listing category has no legal protection.

E = Endangered. The ESA specifically prohibits the take of a species listed as endangered. Take is defined by the ESA as to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to engage in any such conduct.

EPA = Eagle Protection Act.

MIS = TNF Management Indicator Species.

T = Threatened. The ESA specifically prohibits the take of a species listed as threatened. Take is defined by the ESA as to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to engage in any such conduct.

USFS Sensitive = On TNF Sensitive Species list.

WSC = Wildlife of Special Concern in Arizona (AGFD draft 16 March 1996).

Effects on Visual Quality. The Forest Service has established visual quality objectives for the TNF. The proposed project has the potential to alter the appearance of the project area in the short term during construction and in the long term once the road is reconstructed.

Effects on Air Quality. The Proposed Action has the potential to alter air quality in the project area over both the short and long term as a result of construction and long term use of the road.

Effects on Noise. Road improvements associated with the Proposed Action have the potential to alter noise levels in the project area over both the short and long term.

Effects on Noxious Weeds. Proposed Executive Order 13112 mandates all federal agencies to examine the impacts of their activities on the status of invasive species. Proposed ground disturbance along FR 406 could create conditions favorable to exotic vegetation and noxious weeds. In addition, construction equipment could spread existing populations of exotic vegetation and noxious weeds.

Effects on Water Quality. Road improvements associated with the Proposed Action have the potential to affect local runoff; and therefore water quality.

Effects on Water Quantity. The Proposed Action has the potential to alter the availability of water resources in the project area or the region.

Effects on Recreation. FR 406 provides access to dispersed camping areas along the East Verde River in the TNF as well as to several trails to the Mazatzal Wilderness; therefore, changes in the character of the road and the nature of access to the area could impact recreationists and recreational opportunities in the area.

Effects on Fire and Fuels. Road improvements associated with the Proposed Action have the potential to have cumulative impacts for fire risk to real property with the additional proposed residential development and improved access to public lands.

Effects on Wilderness. The Mazatzal Wilderness is adjacent to the project area; therefore, changes in the character of the road and the nature of access to the area could impact recreationists and recreational opportunities in the area.

Issues Considered but Eliminated from Further Analysis

Effects on Socioeconomic Environment. The socioeconomic environment consists of local and regional businesses and residents and the local and regional economy. The local economy and most businesses in the local communities are based on tourism, retirement, and construction industries. There may be short-term benefits to the local and regional economy resulting from construction-related expenditures and employment; however, no significant long-term benefits, or adverse impacts, are expected for the area. The homes that will be built on the Canyon River Ranch development are expected to be seasonal second homes; therefore, the development will not result in a significant population increase. Based on the relatively small population associated with the development, local and regional businesses would be negligibly affected in the long term.

The public submitted a comment during the scoping period that stated adding up to 116 lots and homes in a rural area would place a significant financial and resource burden on local services such as police, fire, and waste services and requested that a comprehensive, quantitative study be performed to understand the impact. The provision of local services will be provided by Gila County and Town of Payson. Provision of these services will not affect National Forest resources; further there is not expected to be a significant

increase in population therefore there is not expected to be a significant impact on local services. Therefore, this topic is not within the scope of the federal action is not addressed in this document.

Effects on Environmental Justice. EO 12898 requires federal agencies to identify and address disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority and low-income populations. Neither of the alternatives or any past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future actions would have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on any minority or low-income population or community. Therefore, this topic is not within the scope of the federal action is not addressed in this document..

Effects on Wildlife, Threatened or Endangered, and Other Special-Status Species. Table 1-2 lists special-status species that were eliminated from further consideration because their known geographic ranges are distant from the project vicinity or the project vicinity does not contain conditions similar to those known to be necessary to support these species, or both.

Effects on Management Indicator Species. As required by the NFMA, an MIS report was prepared in November 2007 and is included in Appendix B of this report. The analysis showed that there would be no significant impacts on any MIS species. The area of disturbance is small relative to the amount of habitat available forest-wide. MIS species are therefore not considered in detail here.

Effects on Migratory Bird Treaty Act Analysis. A Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 analysis was prepared for this project in November 2007 and is included in Appendix C of this report. A Wildlife Specialist report is included in Appendix D. Impacts on migratory bird habitat are not expected; however, temporary disturbances could occur during periods of construction. The area of disturbance is small relative to the amount of habitat available forest-wide

Table 1-2. Federally Listed or USFS Sensitive Species Not Considered in this Analysis

Common Name	Scientific Name	Current Status
Birds		
Arizona Bell's Vireo	<i>Vireo bellii</i>	USFS Sensitive
California Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis californicus</i>	E
Eared Quetzal/Trogan	<i>Euptilotis neoxenus</i>	USFS Sensitive
Southwestern Willow Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax traillii extimus</i>	E
Mexican Spotted Owl	<i>Strix occidentalis lucida</i>	T
Yuma Clapper Rail	<i>Rallus longirostris yumanesis</i>	E
Western Yellow-Billed Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus americanus occidentalis</i>	C, USFS Sensitive, WSC
American Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus anatum</i>	USFS Sensitive
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentiles</i>	USFS Sensitive
Northern Gray Hawk	<i>Asturina nitida maxima</i>	USFS Sensitive
Western Snowy Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus</i>	USFS Sensitive
Mammals		
Mexican Gray Wolf	<i>Canis lupus baileyi</i>	E, WSC
Lesser Long-Nosed Bat	<i>Leptonycteris curasoae yerbabuena</i>	E
Desert Bighorn Sheep	<i>Ovis Canadensis mexicana</i>	USFS Sensitive
Southwestern River Otter	<i>Lutra Canadensis Sonora</i>	USFS Sensitive
Reptiles		
Sonoran Desert Tortoise	<i>Gopherus agassizii</i>	USFS Sensitive
Arizona Night Lizard	<i>Xantusia vigilis arizonae</i>	USFS Sensitive
Maricopa Leafnose Snake	<i>Phyllorhynchus browni lucidus</i>	USFS Sensitive
Fish		
Apache (Arizona) Trout	<i>Oncorhynchus apache</i>	T
Colorado Pikeminnow	<i>Ptychocheilus lucius</i>	E
Gila Topminnow	<i>Poeciliopsis occidentalis occidentalis</i>	E
Gila Chub	<i>Gila intermedia</i>	E
Gila Trout	<i>Oncorhynchus gilae</i>	E
Loach Minnow	<i>Tiaroga cobitis</i>	T
Spikedace	<i>Meda fulgida</i>	T
Roundtail Chub	<i>Gila robusta</i>	USFS Sensitive
Bonytail Chub	<i>Gila elegans</i>	E, WSC
Desert Pupfish	<i>Cyprinodon macularius macularius</i>	E, WSC
Flannelmouth Sucker	<i>Catostomus latipinnis</i>	USFS Sensitive

Table 1-2. Federally Listed or USFS Sensitive Species Not Considered in this Analysis (Continued)

Common Name	Scientific Name	Current Status
Invertebrates		
Hairy-Necked Tiger Beetle	<i>Cicindela hirticollis corpuscula</i>	USFS Sensitive
Maricopa Tiger Beetle	<i>Cicindela oregona maricopa</i>	USFS Sensitive
Tiger Beetle	<i>Cicindela praetextata pallidofemora</i>	USFS Sensitive
Net-winged Midge	<i>Agathon arizonicus</i>	USFS Sensitive
Parker's Riffle Beetle	<i>Cylloepus parkeri</i>	USFS Sensitive
Fossil Springsnail	<i>Pyrgulopsis simplex</i>	USFS Sensitive
Hoary Skimmer	<i>Libelula nodisticta</i>	USFS Sensitive
Arizona Snaketail	<i>Ophiogomphus arizonicus</i>	USFS Sensitive
Neumogen's Giant Skipper	<i>Agathymus neumogeni</i>	USFS Sensitive
Arizona Copper	<i>Lycaena ferrisi</i>	USFS Sensitive
Spotted Skipperling	<i>Piruna polingii</i>	USFS Sensitive
Obsolete Viceroy Butterfly	<i>Limenitis archippus</i>	USFS Sensitive
Plants		
Arizona Hedgehog Cactus	<i>Echinocereus triglochidiatus</i> var. <i>arizonicus</i>	E
Arizona Agave	<i>Agave arizonica</i>	E
Arizona Cliffrose	<i>Purshia subintegra</i>	E
Hohokam Agave	<i>Agave murpheyi</i>	USFS Sensitive
Ripley Wild Buckwheat	<i>Eriogonum ripleyi</i>	USFS Sensitive
Arizona Alum Root	<i>Heuchera glomerulata</i>	USFS Sensitive
Eastwood Alum Root	<i>Heuchera eastwoodiae</i>	USFS Sensitive
Mapleleaf False Snapdragon	<i>Mabrya acerifolia</i>	USFS Sensitive
Gila Rock Daisy	<i>Perityle gilensis</i> var. <i>salensis</i>	USFS Sensitive
Gila Rock Daisy	<i>Perityle gilensis</i> var. <i>gilensis</i>	USFS Sensitive
Fish Creek Rock Daisy	<i>Perityle saxicola</i>	USFS Sensitive
Aravaipa Sage	<i>Salvia amissa</i>	USFS Sensitive
Mogollon Thistle	<i>Cirsium parryi</i> ssp. <i>mogollonicum</i>	USFS Sensitive
Arizona Bugbane	<i>Cimicifuga arizonica</i>	USFS Sensitive
Arizona Giant Sedge	<i>Carex ultra</i>	USFS Sensitive
Fish Creek Fleabane	<i>Erigeron piscaticus</i>	USFS Sensitive
Mogollon Fleabane	<i>Erigeron anchana</i>	USFS Sensitive
Chiricahua/Blumer's Dock	<i>Rumex orthoneurus</i>	USFS Sensitive
Chihuahua/A Sedge	<i>Carex chihuahuaensis</i>	USFS Sensitive
Alamos Deer Vetch	<i>Lotus alamosanus</i>	USFS Sensitive
Sweet Cicely	<i>Osmorhiza brachypoda</i>	USFS Sensitive
Flagstaff Beardtongue	<i>Penstemon nudiflorus</i>	USFS Sensitive

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T = Threatened. The ESA specifically prohibits the take of a species listed as threatened. Take is defined by the ESA as to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to engage in any such conduct.

USFS Sensitive = On TNF Sensitive Species list.

WSC = Wildlife of Special Concern in Arizona (AGFD draft 16 March 1996).

Chapter 2

ALTERNATIVES

This document analyzes the Proposed Action alternative as well as the required No-Action Alternative (Alternatives 1 and 2). Analysis of the No-Action Alternative (Alternative 1) is required under NEPA (40 CFR 1502.14[d]). It provides a baseline for assessing the potential impacts of the Proposed Action. Under the Proposed Action (Alternative 2), FR 406 would be improved, underground power and telephone utilities would be installed. Development of the Simonton parcel is not a federal action although it is analyzed in the impacts discussion as a cumulative impact.

Two alternatives have been considered, but eliminated from detailed analysis (Alternatives 3 and 4). Alternative 3 would include reconstruction of FR 209 and 209A (Crackerjack Road) which like Alternative 2, would require USFS authorization of a road easement and utility corridor special use permit. Alternative 4 was developed in response to scoping comments from the public regarding impacts to the Mazatzal Wilderness Area from possible increased equestrian use of the wilderness.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

Two alternatives have been considered in detail in this document with respect to resources within the affected environment and possible impacts on these resources from each alternative.

Alternative 1—No-Action Alternative

Under this alternative, the Forest Service would not issue public easements for FR 406 or special-use permit for the utility corridor to Gila County; additionally, Simonton Flat, LLC would not issue a reciprocal easement to Gila County for the 0.5 mile long segment of FR 406 that crosses the Simonton parcel. No road improvements would occur and no utilities would be installed. Public and private land access to areas beyond (west of) the private parcel would remain in the current condition.

Alternative 2—Proposed Action: Reconstruction of FR 406 and utility construction

Under the Proposed Action, a road easement (FR 406 between the Town of Payson and the Simonton parcel [a private inholding within the TNF]) and a utility corridor special use permit along the road would be authorized; the road easement would be issued to Gila County for the reconstruction of FR 406 and a special-use permit would be issued to authorize the utility corridor. Additionally, Simonton Flat, LLC would issue a reciprocal easement to Gila County for the 0.5 mile long segment of FR 406 that crosses the Simonton parcel, therefore the Proposed Action would be authorized to provide public access across the Simonton parcel and adequate access to other private lands in the vicinity.

FR 406 would be improved for 6.9 miles from the Town of Payson to the western boundary of the Simonton parcel to meet Gila County standards. These standards are required in order for Simonton Flat, LLC to develop the Simonton parcel as a residential development. Improvements to FR 406 would include paving of the entire length of the road between the Town of Payson and the Simonton parcel and improving wash crossings using concrete aprons, culverts, or box culverts where necessary. Road design plans (Appendix E) include the installation of 26 new culverts, the replacement of four culverts, and the replacement of four cattle guards along the road. The improved road would be 20 feet (6.1 m) wide and

would have 2-foot-wide (0.6-m-wide) shoulders to service two lanes of traffic; road improvements do not include significant widening of the road or realignment. One exception is that the road would have to be slightly realigned and/or stabilized per engineering and USFS standards, approximately one mile east of the Simonton parcel to avoid a large, existing gully along the south side of FR 406; this realignment and/or stabilization would be necessary to address the long term stability concerns of the road. The road has been maintained over the years and is currently bladed and 22 to 40 feet wide. Utilities for the proposed development would be installed in an underground utility trench within the FR 406 road alignment.

Crackerjack Mine Road, which enters the adjacent private land parcel from the north, would be maintained as a traversable road following TNF road standards; however no easement is requested, or analyzed, in this document. Maintenance would be conducted on the road once a year by the county or the Canyon River Ranch Homeowners Association. In addition, the portion of FR 406 that is west of the Simonton Parcel would be maintained as a traversable road, though not paved, in accordance with TNF road standards.

The following mitigation measures and best management practices (BMPs) would be included as part of the Proposed Action:

- 1) Prior to entering or leaving the site, all earth-moving and hauling equipment will be washed to help prevent the spread of noxious weeds.
- 2) All disturbed soils that are to be seeded will be planted with native species to help prevent the re-establishment of noxious weeds in the future. Seed lots to be used in revegetation will be tested at a state lab for presence of noxious weed seed before the lots are mixed.
- 3) Water will be used throughout the construction period, as necessary, to reduce fugitive dust and particulate matter.
- 4) All equipment used for the Proposed Action will meet all applicable emissions standards.
- 5) There will be archaeological data recovery of the significant heritage resources that will be adversely affected by the project; these resources include the four prehistoric sites located within the Simonton parcel.
- 6) There will be avoidance of all significant heritage resources identified along FR 406.
- 7) Clearing Limits: Limits of clearing shall be irregular by varying the width of the area to be cleared or by leaving selected clumps of vegetation near the edge of the clearing limit.
- 8) Seeding: Reseed all disturbed areas to the limits of clearing with native seeding mix. Seeding shall be implemented on all finished slopes as they are completed.
- 9) Slope Rounding and Slope Warping: Slope rounding and slope warping shall occur at the intersection of cuts and natural grades (as shown in attached drawing) to blend two surface edges for a natural-appearing transition.
- 10) Vegetation: Preserve and protect vegetation outside of the specified clearing limits.
- 11) Paint: Paint all culverts and concrete that are visible to the public with a color that matches the native soil.
- 12) Slope Roughening: All 2:1 or flatter slopes must be roughened by tilling or ripping between 12 to 18 inches deep, unless otherwise noted (i.e. where blankets might be required). Soil capping must be corrected following precipitation events and prior to final seeding.
- 13) Rock Staining: All exposed rock, on cut slopes capable of holding a stain, will be evaluated for staining with simulated desert varnish in the field unless otherwise noted.

- 14) Noxious Weeds: Surveys for noxious weeds shall be completed on all highway projects; noxious weed surveys for this project will be conducted prior to any ground disturbance along FR 406. Should noxious weeds be found, the Forest Service would coordinate with the contractor the best manner of treatment. Construction equipment will be pressure washed at designated areas before coming onto project area and before leaving project area.
- 15) Erosion Control: Temporary and permanent erosion control measures shall be incorporated.
- 16) Concrete Staining: All concrete visible to the traveling public will be painted to match the color of native soil.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM FURTHER ANALYSIS

Two alternatives have been considered, but eliminated from detailed analysis.

Alternative 3—Reconstruct FR 209 (Cracker Jack Road) and FR 209A

Under this alternative, the Forest Service would include authorization of a road easement and special use permit for a utility corridor, on Forest lands; the easements would be authorized for FR 209 and 209A. FR 209 and 209A are very primitive, two-track 4WD roads; FR 209 extends west from State Route (SR) 87, connecting to FR 209A heading south to cross the East Verde River to the Simonton parcel for a stretch of approximately 15 miles.

Alternative 3 would include improvements to FR 209 and 209A such as paving of the entire length of the road between SR 87 and the Simonton parcel and improving wash crossings using concrete aprons, culverts, or box culverts where necessary.

Reconstruction and improvements to FR 209 and 209A would have to include substantial vegetation thinning along the road, a significant amount of grading and ground disturbance along the road and crossing the East Verde River to access the Simonton parcel and Canyon River Ranch development. The East Verde River is suitable for designation as a Wild and Scenic River; if easements to improve FR 209 and 209A are authorized to provide adequate access, this action could directly impact the East Verde River in terms of forest resources, and in terms of impairing its eligibility for future designation as a Wild and Scenic River.

Engineering and improving the road to provide adequate access to the Canyon River Ranch development would not be possible, given the engineering, environmental, logistical, and cost constraints. The objective of NEPA is to help the lead agency to approve well planned projects, by selection of a preferred alternative that effectively avoids and minimizes potential adverse environmental impacts. The preferred alternative is defined in the regulations as the "least environmentally damaging practicable alternative." The term practicable in this definition means a project that is feasible and can be done within logistical, engineering, cost, and environmental constraints.

Therefore, Alternative 3 does not meet the objective of NEPA, in terms of the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative, within logistical, engineering, cost and environmental constraints. Alternative 3 also does not meet the purpose and need of the proposal, which is to provide a safe, well-constructed road to access the proposed Canyon River Ranch residential development. For these reasons, Alternative 3 was eliminated from detailed study.

Alternative 4—Improvements to and Realignment of FR 406 and Closure of the Mazatzal Wilderness Area

To address concerns posed by the public during scoping, Alternative 4 was considered but eliminated from further analysis. Under this alternative, the Forest Service would include authorization of a road easement and special use permit for a utility corridor along FR 406. Alternative 4 would be the same as described under Alternative 2, however equestrian use of the Mazatzal Wilderness Area would be restricted altogether. The TNF management emphasis for this wilderness area is to “manage for wilderness values, wildlife habitats and natural ecological processes while allowing livestock grazing and recreation opportunities that are compatible with maintaining these values and processes” (USFS 1985a). Only OHV use is prohibited in the wilderness area, per the TNF plan for the Mazatzal Wilderness Area. Equestrian use of the wilderness area is a recreational opportunity that is compatible with maintaining wilderness values, wildlife habitats and natural ecological processes. Alternative 4 does not meet the objects of the TNF plan and management prescriptions for the Mazatzal Wilderness Area and therefore eliminated from detailed study.

LITERATURE CITED

U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS). n.d. *Environmental Policy and Procedures Handbook: Forest Service Handbook 1909.15*. National Headquarters, Washington D.C.

———. 1985a. *Tonto National Forest Plan*. Forest Service, Southwestern Region.