

**Decision Memo
For
Equality Cave Closure and Cave Gate Construction**

**USDA – Forest Service
Shawnee National Forest
Hidden Springs Ranger District
Saline County, Illinois
T10S, R7E, Section 34**

Proposed Action

Equality Cave is a limestone cave located on lands administered by the Shawnee National Forest in Saline County, Illinois. Equality Cave has been open to year-round and unrestricted public access for many years, resulting in damage to cave resources.

Beginning in the spring of 2006, the District received several reports from the public of observations of clusters of “small brown-colored bats” within Equality Cave. In response to these reports, Forest Service wildlife biologist Rod McClanahan conducted follow-up surveys to verify these reports and to identify the species of bats using Equality Cave. These surveys subsequently documented the presence of up to 75 Southeastern Myotis (*Myotis austroriparius*) roosting on the ceiling of one of the chambers within Equality Cave. Forest Service wildlife biologists followed-up these summer surveys with harp trap surveys in October 2006, which resulted in the capture of 18 Southeastern Myotis, consisting of males, females, and young of the year. Harp trapping provided further verification that Equality Cave is serving as a roosting site for Southeastern Myotis, possibly both in the summer as well as in the winter. The Southeastern Myotis is classified by the US Forest Service as a “regionally-sensitive species”. Winter roost sites (“hibernacula”) are somewhat rare in Illinois and on the Shawnee National Forest. Equality Cave represents a new roost site for this species in Illinois.

The proposed action is to restrict year-round public access to Equality Cave, through the construction and placement of a steel cave gate across the entrance to Equality Cave, for at least a two year period. The purpose of this action is to: 1) prevent further resource damage to Equality Cave; and, 2) reduce disturbance levels and improve roosting habitat conditions within Equality Cave for Southeastern Myotis and potentially other rare bats species.

The 2006 Land and Resource Management Plan for the Shawnee National Forest (the Forest Plan) directs that in caves with documented summer use by Southeastern Myotis, to prohibit access as necessary to prevent disturbance of bats between March 15 and October 31 and, in those with documented winter use, to prohibit access as necessary to prevent disturbance between September 15 and April 30 (Appendix H, pages 286 and 295). Since the cave is located in a research natural area, the Forest Plan directs that all caves are to be closed to recreational use from August 31 through April 15 unless allowed by the Forest Supervisor or specified official. This is to protect migrating and hibernating bats (all bats) from direct and indirect harassment by humans (Appendix D, page 197). Fairly heavy and sustained public use during the summer months has made it difficult to determine the number of Southeastern Myotis using Equality Cave.

I am closing the Equality Cave to year-round unauthorized public entry to provide a trial period to determine the number of bats using the cave, the species of bats using the cave, and the time of year that the cave is being utilized. The two year closure period will hopefully provide for a long enough

period to allow individuals of Southeastern *Myotis*, as well as possibly other rare bat species, to use the cave without public disturbance. After a two year closure period, I will review the information collected and reassess the closure period. I may decide to open the cave to restricted and limited seasonal access. However, if it is determined that the cave is being used during both summer and winter months as a roosting site, then the cave will remain closed year-round on a permanent basis.

The cave gate will be constructed at a time and in such a manner so as to not adversely affect any bats present within the cave. The gate will be constructed so as to provide access into the cave by Forest Service personnel and other authorized representatives. The design of the cave gate will be such so as to minimize the alteration of air currents and temperatures in Equality Cave, minimize potential adverse disturbance to bats present within Equality Cave, and of a design that does not alter the flow of water and organic debris into the cave. Temperature and humidity levels within Equality Cave will be monitored throughout the year, using data loggers which were placed in the cave during late summer of 2006. Forest Service wildlife biologists will conduct periodic bat surveys during winter and summer months for the next two year period to document use of the cave, as well as any changes in diversity and abundance.

Materials and equipment used to construct the gate may be transported to the gate using rubber-tired or rubber-tracked motorized equipment, carried by foot, and/or lifted to the site using a helicopter. Access routes when using rubber-tired equipment will be marked and approved by a Forest Service botanist so as to avoid the potential for any damage or disturbance to any rare plant species. Should a helicopter be used, a site will be selected above the cave to be used as a drop zone. Equipment and materials may also be transported using existing roadways extending from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Saline County Conservation Area.

The project area is displayed on the attached map.

Decision

It is my decision to implement this action as proposed. Implementation of this decision may begin immediately.

Public Involvement

This project was listed in the July 2006 Shawnee Quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA), which appeared in the Harrisburg, IL newspaper. A newspaper article appeared in the Daily Register newspaper on July 17, 2006, which informed the public that the Forest was considering the closure of Equality Cave to public access. A television story also aired on Channel 3 TV in September 2006 discussing the project and the possible closure of the cave. Comments were received from two private organizations.

Other Findings:

The proposed action is consistent with Standards and Guidelines described in the 2006 Shawnee National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. This decision implements the standards and guidelines for lands to be managed under the "*Natural Areas Management Prescription*", as well as for cave resource protection.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment. Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, WO Amendment 1909.15-2004-3, effective 7/6/2004, provides direction on compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act; Revised Policies and Procedures. Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12, this decision is not subject to a higher level of review. While this action meets the conditions for Category Six: “*Wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction*”; it is not subject to appeal under 36 CFR 215 rules since it does not fall under one of the types of activities agreed to under the Earth Island Institute, Case No. CIV F-03-6386 JKS, that is subject to appeal. This action does not propose to create or maintain wildlife openings, conduct prescribed burning, nor does it propose to cut trees on greater than five acres.

Environmental analysis of this specific action indicated that there will be no adverse effects to extraordinary circumstances as defined in FSH 1909.15 30.5. There is no road construction associated with this project. This project will have no adverse effects on threatened or endangered species or their habitat. Analysis has determined that there will be no significant effects on the environment in regard to Congressionally designated areas, floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds. No inventoried roadless areas, Native American religious or cultural sites, historic properties will be affected by this decision.

Detailed records of the environmental analysis are available for public review at the Hidden Springs Ranger District Office, Vienna, Illinois (Phone: 618-658-2111). Questions regarding this decision can be addressed to Jeff Seefeldt, District Ranger. Questions regarding specific aspects of the project itself can be referred to Rod D. McClanahan, Wildlife Biologist.

February 9, 2007
Date

/s/ Jeff Seefeldt
District Ranger
Hidden Springs Ranger District
Shawnee National Forest

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