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Submitted to: comments-southwestern-coconino@fs.fed.us

June 11, 2014

Re: Fossil Creek Wild and Scenic CRMP Alternatives

Dear Coconino National Forest,

American Whitewater is pleased to review and comment on the three alternative management scenarios proposed for Wild and Scenic Fossil Creek. American Whitewater is a national non-profit organization representing conservation-oriented whitewater kayakers, canoeists, and rafters. Our primary emphases are river conservation, restoration, management, and safety.

We believe that Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP) processes are critical steps in ensuring that the values that caused a stream to be designated as a Wild and Scenic River are protected and enhanced, while ensuring the public's connection to these streams remains intact and strengthened through designation. With this goal in mind, we offer the following interests and comments.

#### **CRMP's Should Maintain Connections with Communities and Conservationists**

Rivers are protected by the members of the public that know them best, and it is vital for the fate of both protected and yet-to-be protected rivers that the public connection to rivers be maintained, protected, and celebrated through CRMP's. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is not about kicking people out of rivers, it is about celebrating special rivers, and ensuring they stay special for current and future generations to enjoy. It is a flexible piece of legislation that requires sustainable and inclusive management. Because of this it is popular, and while over 70,000 large dams exist in this country, less than 2% of rivers are protected from dams by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. It is our opinion that the balance is not yet struck between conservation and development and we feel strongly that the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act must remain a popular and viable river conservation tool. For this to be the case agencies and the CRMP's you create must protect rivers without unduly alienating or disenfranchising would-be river enthusiasts. The experiences our current voters and youth have today in wild streams (not looking at them from an upland trail or car) will shape the future of river conservation and the fate of freshwater ecosystems nationwide.

Elements of the proposed alternatives B and C would diminish that vital connection through closing trails and roads that connect visiting recreationists and communities with Fossil Creek. Alternatives B and C would encourage people to look at the Creek from afar rather than sitting on the banks, taking a swim, or paddling down the stream's

waterfalls and across its pools. Fossil Creek is more than scenery to its community of enthusiasts: it is a special place that offers refreshing, unique, and literally *immersive* river-recreation experiences. Especially strange to us is the proposal to build visitor centers but then prevent people from visiting the river itself in various ways.

We propose that all alternatives should strive to encourage direct experiences of Fossil Creek, but do so with sufficient capacity and other management tools to protect the stream's many values. We do not argue that recreation should be allowed to degrade the river or substantially interfere with other values, but rather we argue for nuanced management that supports recreation *and* other values.

### **Paddling is a Rare, Unique, and Exemplary Value of Fossil Creek that should be Protected and Enhanced**

As American Whitewater and others have commented in the past, Fossil Creek's waterfalls, deep pools, rapids, geology, scenery, water quality, and flow regime combine to make it a rare, unique, and exemplary whitewater paddling resource. A big highlight for paddlers is that Fossil Creek is runnable for a longer season than other regional streams. Another highlight is the waterfalls: fun, relatively safe, and great for a wide variety of paddlers. One of the primary elements of a river is of course its bed, and every type of rock offers different types of rapids for paddlers to experience. Travertine is a relatively rare type of riverbed, and a high quality one for paddlers to enjoy. Paddling is an ancient, healthy, sustainable, immersive way for the public to experience the recreational, scenic, and other values of Fossil Creek, and is in fact one of the Creek's special values itself. It should be recognized as such in the CRMP and should be protected and enhanced under the plan.

Regardless of its specific status in the plan, we greatly appreciate the implicit acknowledgement that paddling Fossil Creek is an acceptable activity, as it is on Wild and Scenic Rivers throughout the country. The paddling community has a deep connection to Fossil Creek, and we are glad the Forest Service respects that connection.

### **Oak Trail Must Remain Open to Allow Paddling and other Forms of Enjoyment**

Closing the Oak Trail as proposed under Alternative C would effectively prohibit paddling the iconic waterfalls that make Fossil Creek such a special recreational resource for paddlers. It would also foreclose viewing and other forms of recreational enjoyment. In short, closing this trail would severely impact the recreational values that caused the river to be designated Wild and Scenic (referred to as Outstandingly Remarkable Values or ORVs by the Forest Service).

We request that the Oak Trail be adopted as a system trail to facilitate the sustainable enjoyment and appreciation of the waterfalls on Fossil Creek, including enjoyment by hike-in paddlers. Alternatives A and B would adopt this trail as a system trail.

As an additional matter renaming the Waterfall Trail to the Oak Trail is presumably a means of obscuring the scenic and recreational values of Fossil Creek as an indirect use limit. We support the exhaustion of indirect limits prior to introducing direct limits

as is required by the Forest Service Manual, and can support this name change if that is indeed the intent and if the Forest Service deems it essential. In general however Wild and Scenic designation should lead to the celebration of a river's values, not to obscuring those values from the public.

### **FR 708 From Homestead to the Oak Trailhead Provides Valued River Access**

Closing FR 708 from Homestead to Oak Trailhead as proposed under Alternative B would require paddlers to hike that ~2-mile length of road / trail with their boats and gear often totaling over 70 pounds, just to reach the takeout for the waterfall run, after which they must hike farther yet to reach the put in. This hike will be physically prohibitive for some paddlers and will undoubtedly be a use deterrent that favors only the strongest of individuals. Rather than creating a backcountry experience, this closure seems largely artificial as the road will physically remain and be subject to administrative use.

Unless there are well-documented reasons that FR 708 must be closed to protect and enhance Fossil Creek, we request that it remain open as under Alternatives A or C.

### **Reopening 708 between Strawberry and Fossil Creek Benefits Community and Paddler Access and Enjoyment of Fossil Creek.**

Modern protected area management celebrates connecting nearby citizens and communities with the recreational and natural amenities in their back yards. We request that FR 708 between Strawberry and Fossil Creek be managed as open in the selected alternative for these reasons, and also to allow more reasonable river access for many paddlers in the region. If there are compelling biophysical reasons why vehicular use of this road would lead to substantial interference with protected river values we look forward to reviewing those reasons in the EA or EIS.

### **Capacity Selections Should be Explained Well in an EA or EIS and Possibly Expanded**

Proposed capacities in the alternatives range from 308 PAOT to 412. It is unclear what the limiting capacity factor(s) are that led to these proposed capacities. We ask that the EA or EIS describe in detail whether the limiting factor is parking, sanitation, encounter standards, or some other factor. As a general comment the ranges of capacities seem overly narrow for a robust NEPA analysis. We suggest a broader range of capacities may help the public and the agency understand benefits and consequences of a spectrum of capacities and limits.

We also ask that the EA or EIS separate out capacities for the immediate river corridor from the larger WSR corridor. It may be for example that visitor centers, roads, and upland trails have a larger and more flexible capacity than direct and proximal experiences with Fossil Creek. As we have stated elsewhere in these comments there is significant public demand for swimming, paddling, and other river dependent activities on Fossil Creek. These river-dependent activities are at the heart of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. It appears that all the action alternatives would limit those activities to some degree. We hope that at least one alternative will explore ways of

meeting a significant portion of the recreational interest in river-dependent recreation while protecting the stream itself. Clearly the parking, sanitation, and trail formalization elements of proposed alternatives strive to accomplish this, but we wonder if through a limiting factor analysis and modifications to an alternative, capacities could be expanded. Most often for example, biophysical impacts like sedimentation can be best addressed through infrastructure upgrades rather than use reductions. We also wonder if segmenting the analysis into three categories, 1) Upland Frontcountry, 2) Riverside Frontcountry, and 3) Backcountry could help establish capacities that work for both people and place.

**FR 502 must remain open to protect public paddling access to the Wild and Scenic Verde River**

It is not entirely clear what gating and requiring a permit means for access to Childs under Alternative B. We want to ensure that paddlers have vehicular access to the Verde River for the enjoyment of that river's many values. Please ensure that no actions unduly limit paddler access to the Verde.

Conclusions

Without an accompanying environmental analysis it is difficult to understand the intent and consequences of the three proposed alternatives. What is clear is that several elements of the alternatives would either eliminate entirely or pose significant limits on paddling Fossil Creek. We hope that these comments help you as planners understand and avoid those impacts in future and preferred alternatives. On our end we will review the forthcoming EA or EIS with an open mind, a stalwart conservation ethic, and an appreciation for the value of keeping people directly connected with wild rivers.

Sincerely,



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American Whitewater