

Recreation User Group
Meeting 35
July 14, 2021
MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Attendees

Representative	Organization
Greg Waterman	Sun City Anthem Hiking Club / LOST
John Bricker	Tonto Recreational Alliance (TRAL)
Rich Smith	Tonto Recreational Alliance (TRAL)
Jim Schenck	Rebuild Superior, LOST & CWG
Mila Besich	Mayor, Town of Superior
Todd Pryor	Manager, Town of Superior
Bill Scott	Sun City Anthem Hiking Club / LOST
Erik Filsinger	Queen Creek Coalition
Chris Burkhart	Sun City Anthem Hiking Club
Sheryl Cormack	Tonto National Forest
Adam Bromley	Tonto National Forest
Dallas Lane	Fire Marshall, Town of Superior
John Godec	Godec, Randall & Associates (GRA)
Sydney Uphouse	GRA

Welcome and Introductions

John Godec welcomed everyone and asked that they introduce themselves. Some of the group attended the meeting in-person, while the rest joined via Zoom. Godec introduced Dallas Lane, the Fire Marshall for the Town of Superior. The group welcomed him.

Post-Fire Updates

Godec asked Adam Bromley for the Tonto National Forest (TNF) for an update on fire damage, particularly on known damage to the Picket Post trail, the Arizona trail, and Arnett Canyon. Bromley stated that all trails had previously been closed during the Telegraph fire, but everything west of 177 has since reopened to the public.

There is not a legally designated trail to the top of Picket Post, and the Forest Service still has to figure out how to route a new trail in the wake of the fire. However, this area is accessible to the public. The Arizona trail was not damaged heavily, but TNF still needs to perform an assessment. Bromley explained that TNF did do a prescribed burn off of the Arizona trail to help minimize future wildfires. A small portion of Arnett Canyon burned. However, firefighters did avoid using flame retardant in this area which means they were able to avoid covering the area with retardant. Portions of Telegraph Canyon also burned. TNF is seeing some post-fire effects on trails, effects like flooding, are expected in these areas, meaning that there is the potential to lose these trails at any time. While all trails are currently open to the public TNF may have to

reassess the safety of the trails after rain to evaluate flood risk. Bromley shared a map displaying soil-burn severity in the affected areas. While most of the vegetation burned, the soil did not burn/burn severely in most of the Superior area. Telegraph Canyon did not burn entirely, but the areas surrounding it did.

Godec asked Bromley if the fires killed a lot of the Saguaro cacti in the area. Adam responded that yes, saguaros are the one plant species that cannot withstand fire well. TNF expects to lose a significant number of saguaro as a result of the fires. However, they will not know how many are actually dead for 1-2 years. Adam explained that moisture will be important for vegetation to return. Due to low soil burning in most areas, TNF expects the rest of the ecosystem to recover quickly.

Mayor Besich asked how things are looking in the Pinal Mountain Range. Bromley responded that most of the Pinals burned at moderate severity, and less than 1% burned at high severity. However, with so much of the area burning at moderate severity, there is no vegetation left. The burn in the area was so complete that it is acting like a high severity burn. They are seeing flooding and ashy waters, and on the 4th of July, flooding took out 15 houses. TNF is unconcerned about the Town of Superior, as the fires only burned the upper portion of Queen Creek, and that will not feed into the town. Because of the burn and reduced vegetation Superior residents may see a slight increase in water flows. A group member indicated that a rancher had reported debris in Arnett Canyon drainage, implying severe flooding. Bromley explained that with debris flow, flooding looks worse than it is. The soil is unburned and will continue to absorb moisture; the vegetation is just not holding the debris.

Todd Prior said that he surveyed major washes prior to the meeting that morning, and he does not foresee Superior having a flooding issue this year. He stated that he is working with Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management (DFFM) on applying for grants for firebreaks. However, he wants to get in touch with TNF to make sure there are not any lines being crossed before he begins the application process.

TNF again shared a map of soil-burning to show damage on the Pinals. The map displayed widespread moderate burns, some spots of high severity burn, and high severity vegetation burn.

Mayor Besich asked about burning at Top of the World. TNF stated that Top of the World is generally fine. They are seeing a bit of moderate severity burning, but mostly low severity burning and unburned areas. Bromley explained that fire is more natural in the environment at Top of the World, so it is less impacted by wildfires. Adam said that a small group of trail representatives can do reconnaissance of Top of the World and Telegraph Canyon. Permission is not needed. Rich Smith stated that he and John Bricker would like to go out and do some assessments. He invited other members of RUG to join.

Dallas Lane shared that he and other search-and-rescue personnel took aerial photos of post-fire damage. They are working to get more photographs to show changes in the landscape.

Lane thanked the group for keeping him updated on recent findings and assessments post-fire. Smith stated that one of TRAL's main programs involves actively monitoring the OHV trails via GIS, and he is happy to share this data.

It was asked if the group wanted to discuss firewise meetings and grant opportunities. However, the group agreed to schedule a future meeting to discuss this topic.

Godec asked Bromley if RUG could expect to receive a more complete Burn Area Emergency Response (BAER) Report from TNF and when? Could this be a public presentation? Bromley responded that TNF can send out copies of the BAER Reports which would contain a series of individual reports on hydrology, wildlife, vegetation, etc. GRA committed to distribute the reports it receives to group members. Mayor Besich asked if it would be possible to plan a public presentation on the BAER Reports to explain its findings. TNF committed to working with the Town on a live public BAER report and presentation. Mayor Besich suggested livestreaming the presentation and selecting locations for the meeting that are accessible to all those in the burn scar area such as ranchers, outdoor recreationalists, and others will be interested.

It was asked if any case studies exist looking at how other communities who are heavily reliant on tourism and recreation dealt with recovering from fire. It was suggested looking into the Arapahoe Forest Community in Colorado, who experienced fires last year, and who are 100% reliant on recreation. Bromley will reach out to colleagues to see if they know of any resources, however large fires are relatively new to everyone.

TNF said there will not be much of an effect on the planned Superior Tourism and Recreation Team (START) effort and recent events will not change what is allowed. Recreationalists may change how they want to use certain areas but it's expected that people will generally go back to normal in terms of recreational habits.

TNF will have to look at impacts to endangered species in fire-affected areas. They will need to make sure wildlife did not sustain too much habitat loss, as this could affect trail placement. Bighorn sheep habitat will be important to pay attention to because they are a flagship species. There were already stresses on the population due to drought. However, bighorn sheep are fire-reliant. As long as the area continues to receive moisture, the fire may actually help the population. Some places may be off-limits or have pet-restrictions during lambing season.

The next step for the START program is to establish a timeline and set up a meeting. START needs to get the ranching community involved because recreation and ranching are frequently at odds. Some land allotments from TNF have been closed for grazing to protect cattle, and recreational impacts on grazing are considered too high. This could create a potential hiccup in introducing recreation to the area. It is important to acknowledge rancher's concerns and invite them to planning efforts. Mayor Besich said the ranching community is generally supportive of trails in her experience, but there's a lot of passion in protecting their livelihoods.

The next step to START is working with Jason and Sheryl (Tonto National Forest) to set up a meeting and get invites out. The role of TNF in START is to facilitate discussion and planning efforts, rather than doing the planning themselves. It will also be up to TNF to do the NEPA for any projects unless the group chooses to go through a third party. This may take time due to short staffing and first-come-first-serve design. TNF does not have a full staff due to lack of funding, so they have to pick and choose what they can do. CWG and RUG need to advocate for themselves and figure out what their priorities are.

Mayor Besich stated that fire has proven that TNF needs more resources. A conversation recently came up during a land manager's meeting about how starved for resources the TNF is. Mayor Besich said there are sincere intentions to have conversations with the Arizona congressional delegation to get more resources for the Tonto. Bromley thanked Mayor Besich for the support and stated that if anyone knows of someone they think should be at START meetings, let him know.

A member of the group stated that while they appreciate the participation of TNF, they are concerned that, as a federal agency, they may not always be able to respond how RUG would like. It's clear that RUG needs to work with TNF, but the group may also need to move forward without TNF to complete necessary work. The group agreed that it is important to make sure that START is successful and is maintaining the mission of the original RUG group to hold Resolution Copper accountable. Godec stated that given the limitations of START, RUG will likely still exist. Bromley said that RUG needs to stay separate from START because of ties to Resolution Copper. START may choose to use original work tied to RUG to avoid duplicating efforts, but this is the only relationship the two groups should have. Corporate and extraction groups may offer to support START with volunteer work in the community and resources, but there should be no mitigation occurring. This would muddy the waters and could limit recreation opportunities.

Looking Ahead

Bromley stated that START will begin talking about their new fiscal year and program of work. A good plan will help get things done and help convince people to move in the right direction. Rich Smith forwarded an email containing a flow chart on how to partner-plan with FS and suggested using this as a starting plan.

TNF needs to review Forest Road 4 trail and sign off on the proposed projects. A golf course grant is moving forward, and they are starting to close on a law enforcement grant for OHV patrollers. Sheryl said she may have some connections with a nursery that could help the Boyce Thompson Arboretum with replanting and rehabilitation. There was some discussion on whether or not saguaros could be transplanted to replace those burnt in the fire.

TNF asked the group to come up with days in the next few weeks for a public meeting on the BAER Reports. And TNF will discuss next steps for START and contact the group with more information.

Next Meeting

Wednesday, October 13 @ 10am