

Recreation User Group
Meeting 34
June 22, 2021
MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Attendees

Representative	Organization
Fred Gaudet	Arizona Trail Association
Greg Waterman	Sun City Anthem Hiking Club
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
Pete Casillas	Superior Chamber of Commerce
Lynne Nemeth	Boyce Thompson Arboretum
Brian Stulz	Wild Arizona
Erik Filsinger	Queen Creek Coalition
Hesston Klenk	Resolution Copper Company
Elizabeth Butler	East Valley Backcountry Horsemen, Friends of the Tonto
John Godec	Godec, Randall & Associates (GRA)
Sydney Uphouse	GRA

Welcome and Housekeeping

John Godec welcomed everyone and asked Mayor Besich to provide an update on the status of the Telegraph and other wildfires affecting the area. Mayor Besich explained that prior to the fires, Superior was busy planning ahead for recreational development and opportunities, but the fires have changed this entirely. Nobody expected the level of devastation the fires would bring. They previously wanted to start developing areas north of 60 out to Top of the World. However, they no longer know what areas are still available or safe to recreate in, nor what areas the Tonto FS will allow users to recreate on. In addition, irresponsible forest-users have been destroying the forest post-fire, making the devastation worse. Mayor Besich expressed concern over economic fallout as a result of the fires and a lack of attention to detail over what needs to be done going forward. She also posed the question, "What does rural Arizona get for economic development?" Ranchers all over the area have been negatively impacted by the fires and lack of post-fire response, making the devastation worse. Economic fallout as a result of the fires is serious and a lack of detailed attention over what needs to be done going forward makes the issue worse.

Godec asked if the forest service (FS) has been able to do any meaningful assessments of the damage. Todd Pryor said old growth trees have burned. However, he has not received any other significant information. No real damage had been done to the Boyce Thompson Arboretum, and Mayor Besich was thanked for her last minute help in getting the resources to stop the fire before it reached BTA. There is frustration with what firefighters consider “values at risk”. Firefighters did not consult with the community on what areas were important to save, and it was believed that they were going to let certain valuable areas burn. It’s suggested that firefighters need to engage with communities on priorities.

Moving Forward Post-Fire

People are still going to come Superior and the surrounding areas to use the recreational trails, and RUG needs to continue to move forward with everything the group has previously planned. Superior will recover and RUG needs to help reestablish what we can going forward. TRAL will be going out to assess soil and runoff as well as roads and trails asap.

Superior used Forest Road 230 as a break to stop the fire from reaching the town. There is a need to clean up and improve features of the road, but the FS is downgrading road systems. Proper fire-breaks have not been developed for Superior, and the town will be discussing the need to establish and maintain fire-breaks in the future. The FS has established a team to evaluate the damage to the area, the FS is mainly focusing on clearing large trees and debris and preventing flash flooding, but are not necessarily thinking about preventing fires in the future. Part of the planned \$100 million set aside for mitigation will go to the county for things like debris removal and flood prevention.

It was suggested that the FS may not be in a position to talk about recreation anytime in the near future and there is some frustration that the FS is not available today to discuss how to move forward. RUG may have to continue on without the FS if they are not going to take on the role originally planned. People are still going to want to recreate, and RUG needs to continue on with its original plans.

It was suggested that RUG needs to be smart and efficient moving forward, and listen to the advice and needs of BTA, the town of Superior and other key entities.

It’s believed that the RUG can set and accomplish some long-term goals and help get important recreation spots opened and restored. It’s suggested that we talk to the FS about prioritizing certain areas to help open specific areas faster and still focus on and consider how to clean up debris and prevent flooding. There will be no trails if areas get flooded.

RUG does not have resources for restoration of fire-affected areas, but we can have influence on where other's resources are distributed for the greatest needed.

It was suggested to add another element to the mission of the group: fire clean up and prevention. RUG may be able to get funding we would not get otherwise for fire prevention which can help accomplish goals such as grants available for replanting native species. This could be an opportunity to restore trail systems to a more natural design. It was suggested that most grants are not written to support towns like Superior because it's considered a moderate-risk community for fire despite being affected by two of the largest fires in AZ in recent years. The group needs to consider how to attract funding. Pelletizing brush/debris from the fires to was suggested as a way to gain funding.

It was stated that how the group attacks this plan is critical. We cannot simply wait for purse strings to open. RUG might submit a request to the FS soon to get access to the Baer Report and see how the FS has interpreted the fire damage.

Would it make sense for a subset of this group to list its priorities to present to the FS. There was general agreement and potential members for a small-group meeting were offered including Lynne Nemeth, Todd Pryor, Mayor Besich, Greg Waterman, Elizabeth Butler, and Pete Casillas.

Next Steps

The RUG should not just view trails as trails, but also as a fire-break asset figuring out how to establish safety enhancements into trails. Perhaps we could get some additional funding for developing "smarter" trails. Smart infrastructure, including forest roads and trails acting as fire-breaks, could help protect Superior in the future. Restoring the area to a more native state could also help increase safety. Funding might largely depend on where the trails are located, and the primary concern right now is flash floods washing out trails. It might be difficult to get people to agree to establishing fire-breaks along trails because people like the natural feeling of trails. Trail treads aren't really been damaged by fires. Invasive species can increase the intensity of fire, so restoring natives could be a step in the right direction. However, invasives are often fire-resistant so it can be an uphill battle.

Picket Post was suggested as a priority, as this is an area with some of the highest traffic. It was agreed that RUG needs to go forward with projects planned for Picket Post with fire damage in consideration.

RUG needs to act like stewards for the area and encourage people to respond in positive ways in order to avoid more damage and get public involved in restoration efforts. It was recommended channeling other user-groups to hear their ideas and gain support. A master list of users that are either currently members of RUG or who previously worked with RUG has been sent to the group for review and additions. The group was asked to review the list and send GRA modifications as needed.

It was suggested focusing on tasks that can be accomplished with the FS and established a list of questions the group has for the FS. So much will come out of the FS assessment of the area, and this will have a substantial impact on how the group can move forward.

The group agreed to be proactive to getting things done, establish priorities, move forward, know what we can and can't do and identify sources for funding.

It was mentioned that Wild Arizona has been leading the invasive plant management in Telegraph Canyon and Arnett Creek for several years, and plans to survey the areas. They will share their findings with the group.

Next Meeting

SMALLER Subcommittee Meeting

Friday, July 9, 2021

10:00am - Noon

In-person at Superior Town Hall and online via Zoom

Regular RUG Meeting

Wednesday, July 14, 2021

10:00am - Noon

In-person at Superior Town Hall and online via Zoom