



Upper Gila Watershed Alliance

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NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY OF NEW MEXICO 2009 GRANT REPORT TRAVEL PLANNING ON THE GILA NATIONAL FOREST

Background: The Upper Gila Watershed Alliance (UGWA) is a local watershed protection nonprofit organization. One of our campaigns is to limit the impacts of off-road vehicles in the Gila National Forest. Since 2001, UGWA has worked to establish a collaborative relationship with off-road vehicle (ORV) groups and Forest Service officials through meetings, various joint field trips, closing roads along important riparian corridors, and more. UGWA is the only local conservation group working on this critical issue.

Since 2006, we have scrutinized the Gila National Forest district maps for problematic routes, mobilized a network of volunteers to photograph and document issues with specific routes on hundreds of input forms, met numerous times with the district rangers to present our input, and provided formal comments to the Forest Service during both of the public comment periods (fall 2008 and October 2009).

At the 2009 NPSNM board meeting, UGWA was awarded a second grant to pay for GIS (geographic information systems) analysis of the Gila National Forest's Proposed Action, and we again contracted with Kurt Menke of Bird's Eye View for these services.

Update: On September 11, 2009, the Gila National Forest released maps of their proposed recreational route system. Using data obtained from the Gila National Forest, Menke created professional maps, for each of the six ranger districts, of the proposed recreational route system, on which he highlighted roads that negatively impact threatened and endangered species habitat, perennial and intermittent streams, old growth forests, steep slopes, and more. Menke created maps showing Distance to Roads, Road Density per Watershed, and, for each district, maps that compare the 2009 proposed routes to those of the 2008 draft proposal. Another critical map prepared by Menke demonstrated one of the Forest Service's particularly misguided proposals: allowing hunters to drive up to one mile off designated open roads in the *entire Forest* to retrieve their downed deer or elk. Menke's map dramatically displayed the folly of this proposal, which would open up more than 90% of the Forest to off-road driving.

Because riparian areas are such important habitats for our native flora and the wildlife which depend on this vegetation, UGWA is particularly concerned about protection for perennial and intermittent streams.

Kurt Menke provided UGWA with spreadsheets listing routes that intersect perennial streams; critical habitat for Loach Minnow, Spikedace, and Southwest Willow Flycatcher; Mexican Spotted Owl Protected Activity Centers; Northern Goshawk nest sites; Gila Trout occupied streams; Old Growth forests, and more. All of Menke's spreadsheets and maps were submitted to the Forest Service with UGWA's formal comments in October 2009, and are part of the official record.

Future tasks: Alas, this process is still far from finished. Using the spreadsheets and maps created by Menke, UGWA will recruit volunteers to document, with notes and photos, the routes that have been identified as resource "hot spots." These are defined as routes where two or more resource issues converge, such as negative impacts to riparian areas, native vegetation, and threatened and endangered species of wildlife. When the Gila National Forest releases its draft Environmental Impact Statement, expected in summer or fall of 2010, UGWA will again analyze their proposal, and will again need to contract for GIS services.

Thank you! The Upper Gila Watershed Alliance would like to thank the Native Plant Society of New Mexico for your generosity in awarding us a second grant. Without your help, we would not have been able to obtain the services of a GIS professional, and analysis of the Gila National Forest's recreational route system would have been impossible.