



Upper Gila Watershed Alliance

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NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY OF NEW MEXICO 2011 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 objectives is to reduce the negative impacts of off-road vehicles in the Gila National Forest, while still allowing for ample recreational access. For a decade, UGWA has worked with the Forest Service to establish a responsible road system. 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 volunteers to photograph and document issues with specific routes, met numerous times with the district rangers to present our input, attended Travel Management meetings and open houses, and submitted formal comments to the Forest Service during three public comment periods (2008, 2009, and 2011).

For the last four years, NPSNM has awarded grants to UGWA to pay for GIS (geographic information systems) analysis of the Gila National Forest's Travel Management proposals, and we have contracted with Kurt Menke of Bird's Eye View for these services.

2009: In 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. He created maps showing Distance to Roads and Road Density per Watershed. 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. This map, which was posted on the NPSNM website, dramatically displayed the folly of this proposal, which would open up more than 90% of the Forest to off-road driving.

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.

Because riparian areas are such important habitats for our native flora and the wildlife that depend on this vegetation, UGWA is particularly concerned about protection for perennial and intermittent streams. The Forest Service had proposed a road that crosses the San Francisco River many times, and we were adamant in our opposition to this.

2010: The maps we commissioned in 2010 depicted the “hot spot” routes: roads where two or more resource issues combined to cause unacceptable damage. These issues include: 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.

2011 Update: In late 2010, the Gila National Forest released its draft Environmental Impact Statement, including six different alternatives, from “no change” to the best alternative, featuring a 33% reduction in road miles. The public comment period lasted until March 7, 2011.

Using NPSNM funding, UGWA contracted with Kurt Menke to perform the following analyses for a graphic comparison of four Forest Service alternatives. His maps and spreadsheets were attached as appendices to UGWA’s formal comments and were submitted to the Forest Service in March 2011.

- “Hot spot” analysis: maps of open roads where resource issues occur. These issues are listed above.
- Corridor maps: maps that depict the motorized big game retrieval and motorized camping areas. For example, Alternative G, the Forest Service’s preference, designates 600’ corridors along 1,327 miles of roads, which equals over 96,000 acres of off-road driving areas.
- “Quiet use” maps: these maps graphically display the distance from open roads in increments of about 300 meters, with distances in different colors. Distance from roads is equivalent to the absence of human-caused noise in an area, which in turn determines whether the area is healthy for animals (including humans). Many studies describe the adverse impacts of noise on wildlife, including: stress that decreases overall health, increased juvenile mortality, decreased breeding and birth rates, inability to escape predators, etc.

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 fourth 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. We appreciate NPSNM’s vote of confidence, and the fact that you’ve stuck with us over the long haul.

I am pleased to say that in the Forest Service’s draft Environmental Impact Statement preferred alternative G, which is almost guaranteed to be the one they choose, there is no road in the San Francisco River. Also in this preferred alternative is a much reduced corridor for motorized big game retrieval. Because of the GIS analysis you’ve funded for four years, NPSNM deserves credit for these victories.

2012: In spring of 2012, we expect the Gila National Forest to release their final Environmental Impact Statement. We hope that they remain firm in their resolve to protect the forest and do not cave in to pressure from the vocal minority of off-road vehicle users, many of whom appear to disregard the intrinsic value of our public lands. UGWA will remain engaged in the Travel Management process until the implementation phase. Even then, we will continue to monitor the effects of roads on the native flora, riparian areas, wildlife, and quiet areas of the Gila National Forest.

Again, we extend our sincere gratitude to NPSNM for your support.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donna Stevens". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Respectfully submitted by Donna Stevens, Executive Director
December 7, 2011