

Input sought on Gila roads plan

By Christine Steele

SILVER CITY - The Gila National Forest has released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement on its proposed Travel Management Plan for motorized travel in the Gila National Forest, and will hold a series of open houses for the public to ask Forest Service personnel questions about the plan.

The Silver City open house will be from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday at the Grant County Convention Center on Highway 180 E, next to Ace Hardware.

More than 900 copies of the plan were mailed to individuals and organizations last month, said Lisa Mizuno, the travel management coordinator.

The draft plan discloses the environmental impact associated with six alternatives, including the No Action alternative, the

Modified Proposed Action and four alternatives to the Modified Proposed Action.

In the draft plan, roads open to public use range from 4,604 miles in the “no action” alternative to 2,332 in Alternative E. The Forest Service’s “preferred alternative” - Alternative G, which the Forest Service said falls near the middle - would reduce redundant routes, it said, and include about 3,300 miles, but would allow the network of ATV-width trails to expand.

One area that has been of concern to conservationists in the region is the San Francisco River area, which is home to threatened and endangered species.

Three of the plans would protect the San Francisco River from motorized vehicles, and three would allow all types of vehicles to drive through the river, conservationists said.

The Forest Service’s preferred proposal will keep off-road vehicles out of the San Francisco River, which pleases environmentalists, but they still feel the plans open up too much of the forest to off-roading.

“The San Francisco River is a natural treasure that provides habitat for the Mexican spotted owl, spikedace, loach minnow and Chiricahua leopard frog,” said Cyndi Tuell, Southwest conservation advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity. “While we’re pleased to see the Forest Service’s support for keeping off-road vehicles out of the San Francisco River, the preferred alternative still opens up too much of the rest of the Gila to motorized vehicles.”

Conservationists claim the Forest Service cannot afford to maintain as much as 3,300 miles of road

annually, and that lack of road maintenance can cause erosion, which harms wildlife habitat and makes it difficult for the public to get to favorite places in the forest.

Donna Stevens, executive director of the Upper Gila Watershed Alliance, said she is hopeful about the Forest Service's attempt to safeguard the Gila National Forest's soils, plants and wildlife for future generations through the travel-management process. She suggested an alternative to the Forest Service's preferred plan.

"Alternative E is the best option to both safeguard the environment and responsibly manage Forest Service funds," Stevens said. "The plan with the fewest miles of roads on the ground still gives the public more than 2,300 miles of roads to drive on. That's like driving from Silver City, N.M., to New York City."

Environmentalists said the Gila National Forest's plan is in stark contrast to a similar plan released by the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in Arizona in late 2010. Each

alternative in the Arizona plan, they said, would permit all types of vehicles, from ATVs to monster trucks, to drive directly in a section of the San Francisco River that runs from the confluence of the Blue River to Clifton, Ariz. Several segments of both of these rivers are currently closed to off-road vehicles to protect wildlife habitat and water quality in both Arizona and New Mexico.

The plan is available at: <http://fs.usda.gov/goto/gila/>

For more information call Lisa Mizuno at: (575) 388-8267, or your local Ranger District office.

If you go

What: Gila National Forest Travel Management Plan Open Houses.

Truth or Consequences - 3-7 p.m. Thursday at the Sierra County Fair Building.

Silver City - 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday at Grant County Convention Center, Silver City.

Reserve - 3 to 7 p.m. Jan. 20 at Catron County Fairgrounds.

Las Cruces - 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Jan. 29 at Hotel Encanto.