USDA Forest Service - Southwestern Region

Recreation Program– Briefing Paper

September 29, 2021

**Topic: Arizona National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan and Environmental Analysis**

**Issue:** There will be a 6-month “gap” between the time a temporary R3 Trails and Dispersed Recreation Program Manager detail ended (mid-May 2021) and when the position is filled permanently (late November 2021). Consequently, this will: (a) delay the schedule of the Arizona National Scenic Trail (ANST) Comprehensive Plan (CP)/EA, and (b) require an agreement modification with the Enterprise Team to execute project deliverables.

**Recommendation:** Schedule a meeting with the Enterprise Team (Joseph David and Nate Rezeau) to discuss the need to revise the CP/EA schedule (see table on page 2) and term of the agreement. This will allow the new R3 Trails and Dispersed Recreation Program Manager suitable time to onboard in late November and review ANST CP/EA documents and develop partner relationships through the balance of the calendar year (2021).

**Current Status:**

*Staffing:*

The draft Comprehensive Plan (CP) for the Arizona National Scenic Trail (AZT) has been in development for several years under the direction of the R3 Arizona Trail Administrator, but that person retired in December 2020. In mid-January 2021, those duties were assigned to an acting R3 Trails and Dispersed Recreation Program Manager (the term of that detail ended in mid-May 2021). The permanent Trails and Dispersed Recreation Program Manager has been selected, but the start date for this position is now slated for late November 2021.

*Comprehensive Plan/EA:*

In July 2020, the draft Arizona National Scenic Trail CP and some of the completed appendices were shared with managing federal, state and local government agencies (Cooperators), and with the four forests that manage sections of the trail. The trail administrator and an Enterprise environmental coordinator have compiled and incorporated input from the managing agencies into the current draft of the CP and appendices. The CP has also been reviewed by the R3 environmental coordinator and acting regional planner. The draft CP with completed appendices were provided to tribes associated with the trail in April 2021. In May, this complete draft CP was also provided to the Cooperators and those forests through which the trail traverses for an additional review and comment. NEPA analysis is currently being completed. In October 2021, the revised draft CP and EA will be ready for RO and federal partner reviews in preparation for public comment. It is expected to be ready for public review in January of 2021. A signed decision is planned for April 2022. Thus, prolonging the draft CP review/input would extend the project schedule by approximately 4 months.

**Background:**

The 800-mile AZT was designated a national scenic trail by Congress in 2009. It stretches from the U.S – Mexico border to the Utah border, showcasing Arizona’s diverse geology, vegetation, wildlife, wilderness and scenery, and providing unparalleled opportunities for hikers, mountain bikers, equestrians and other non-motorized trail users. The majority of the trail lies on the Coronado, Tonto, Coconino, and Kaibab National Forests. It also crosses Grand Canyon National Park and three other national park units, two Bureau of Land Management field offices, one state park, and Arizona State Trust lands. Small portions cross county, municipal and private lands. The Arizona Trail Association, the non-profit partner for the trail, works across jurisdictional boundaries to protect, maintain, enhance, promote and sustain the Arizona Trail as a unique encounter with the land.

The Regional Forester of the Southwestern Region has been delegated the lead federal official for coordinating matters concerning the planning, development, administration and management of the AZT. The National Trails System Act (NTSA) requires a CP to be completed and submitted to Congress (16 USC 1244(e)) within 2 years of designation. The Chief of the Forest Service will approve the CP. The Regional Forester is responsible for the associated NEPA analysis and decision. The purpose of the CP is to provide a shared vision for long-term, trail-wide administration and coordinated management that meets the legislative requirements and intent for a national scenic trail. The CP would provide fundamental guidance to agencies who manage portions of the Arizona Trail and it will be analyzed in a programmatic Environmental Assessment. It will inform federal agency land use plans, but the NEPA decision will not include any land use plan components or allocations that would amend plans. The only decision resulting from NEPA analysis will be the decision to adopt the plan, which would include trail carrying capacity (visitor capacity), as required by the (NTSA).

**Arizona National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan/EA Schedule:**

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| **Milestone** | **New AZT Target Date** | **Previous AZT Target Date** |
| Introductory Tribal consultation meetings | Completed | August 2017 |
| Initiate scoping for NEPA analysis | Completed | August 2017 |
| Complete draft CP | Completed | August 2020 |
| Cooperator/Forests review and comment on initial draft of CP | Completed | August 2020 |
| Completion of draft CP with appendices | Completed | April 2021 |
| Tribal consultation meetings on draft CP | Completed | May 2021 |
| Cooperator review and comment on Complete CP Package | Completed | June 2021 |
| Federal partner/Forests/RO review and comment on Draft EA/CP Package | \*October 2021 | August 2021 |
| Public review of EA/CP | Begin Jan. 2022 | Begin Aug./Sept. 2021 |
| Final EA/Draft DN/Objection period for EA | March 2022 | January 2022 |
| Objection Resolution | April-June 2022 | February 2022 |
| Final DN/FONSI | June 2022 | March 2022 |
| Submit CP to Congress following DN/FONSI | By Sept. 2022 | April 2022 |

\*Or extend another 3 months to allow new R3 Trails and Dispersed Program Manager to onboard and review ANST CP/EA documents and develop partner relationships through holidays.

