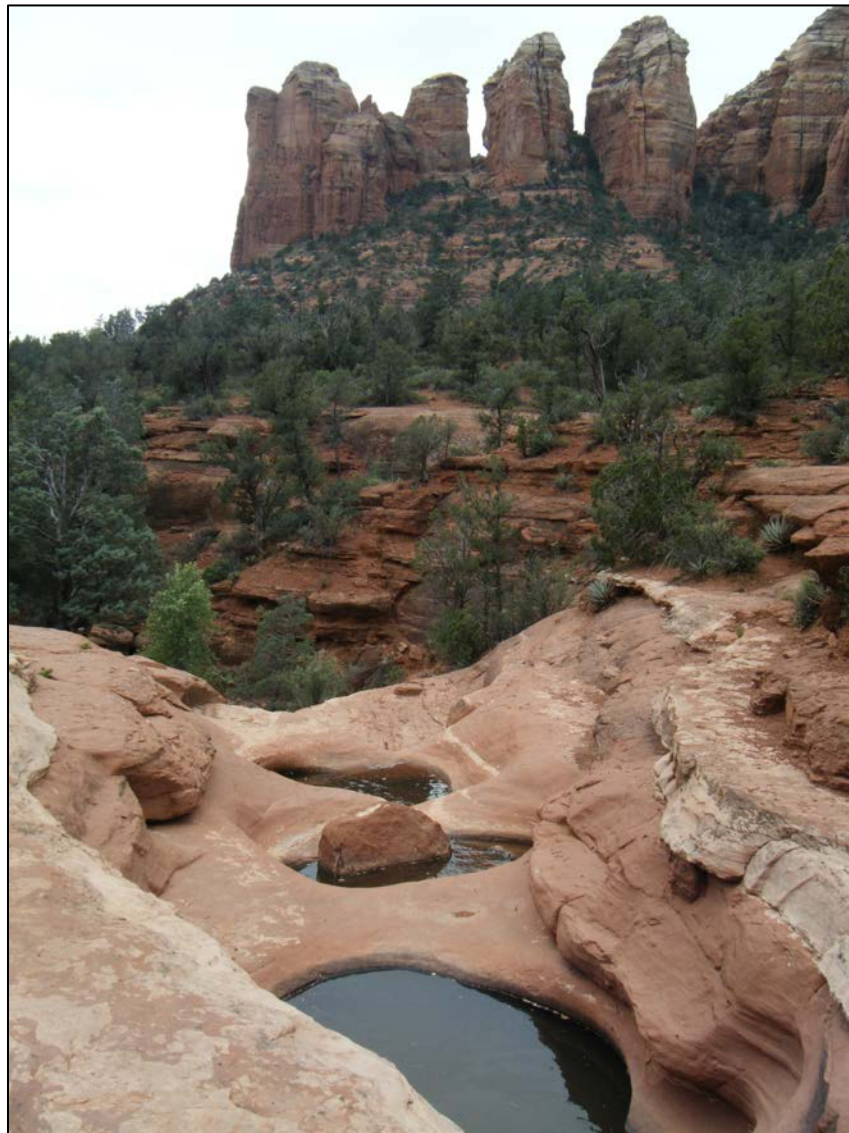




United States Department of Agriculture

Soldiers Pass Motorized Use Project Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact



Forest Service

Coconino National
Forest

Red Rock
Ranger District

March 2017

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Introduction

We, the USDA Forest Service, are proposing to revise the current management of motorized use on the Soldiers Pass road in Sedona, Arizona. The purpose of this proposal is to bring motorized use of Soldiers Pass road into compliance with forest plan direction and to reduce conflicts that are occurring on the nearby City of Sedona and private properties as a result of the high volume of motorized traffic accessing the Coconino National Forest. The environmental assessment documents the analysis of the proposed action and three alternatives. In addition, the Additional Analysis Report provide analysis for two modified alternatives which were developed in response to public comments. These documents are incorporated by reference.

Decision

I have read the Soldiers Pass Motorized Use Project Environmental Assessment and the Additional Analysis Report, reviewed the analysis in the project record, including documents incorporated by reference, and fully understand the environmental effects disclosed. Based upon my review of all the alternatives and the comments and objections received from the public for this project, I have decided to implement Alternative C with clarification regarding interim management.

The selected alternative will continue to authorize an outfitter/guide permittee to operate guided jeep tours on Soldiers Pass road. The existing outfitter/guide permit would be extended to a 10-year term and amended to reflect the following changes: the authorized use allocation would be adjusted from 10 vehicles at one time and 2,100 vehicles per year, to 2 vehicles at one time and 12 vehicles per day with 4,380 vehicles per year. This would make their “at one time” and daily use consistent with most other motorized outfitter/guide use on the Red Rock Ranger District.

Other motorized use on the route will be managed by a permit system. Twelve permits per day will be issued, making public access available in the same amount as that for the permitted outfitter/guide. This decision requires the development of a permit reservation system. A collaborative group will be convened to facilitate efforts to develop, implement, and monitor the permit system.

This decision requires the installation of a gate to control motorized access to the route so that only the outfitter/guide and permitted individuals would have access to Soldiers Pass road. Gate placement will not increase parking capacity.

The route will be closed to public motor vehicle use during interim management until a functional permit system is operating to manage public motorized use. This interim closure will not apply to existing permitted outfitter/guide use. Once a permit system for public motorized use is operational, the route will be open to 12 permits a day for public motor vehicle use in accordance with this decision.

The travel management designation for the Soldiers Pass road and associated spurs (FR 9904, 9904B, and 9904C) will change from open to motorized vehicle use to non-designated (meaning closed to all motor vehicle use except permitted use or administrative use). This change will be reflected on the next update of the Coconino National Forest Motor Vehicle Use Map.

This decision also includes implementation of the design features described in appendix 2, “Project Design Features” and the following monitoring:

- Outfitter/guide compliance officers will check monthly to ensure that authorized vehicles parking on the bedrock slab above the “Seven Sacred Pools” site are not dripping vehicle fluids that may wash into the pools during rain events, degrading water quality.

- Outfitter/guide compliance officers will monitor use of Broken Arrow road to observe the effects of displacement, if any.

A collaborative group of trail users and other interested parties will be convened to develop a process to ensure that permits are issued in a fair manner and to monitor the system to verify it is working as intended. Results from this monitoring may be used to make adjustments in the permitting system to continually improve the management of motorized use in the project area, if needed.

The Coconino National Forest is currently operating under the 1987 Coconino Land Management Plan, as amended. The Coconino is in the process of revising the forest plan, with the record of decision for the revised plan anticipated for release in 2017. A project-specific forest plan amendment is required because this decision is being signed prior to implementing the revised forest plan. This decision amends the forest plan under the 2012 Planning Rule for this project (36 CFR 219.13). The amendment removes the recreation opportunity spectrum guideline of 15 encounters per day for social encounters. It will be replaced with the following language: "Visitors may expect moderate to high contact with other visitors. Moderate evidence of use is present. Social encounters are higher within ½ mile of trailheads, paved roads, and residential areas."

Current use in the Soldiers Pass area presents us with a difficult management situation due to the proximity of the motorized recreation opportunity to a residential area and limited access to the National Forest System land through Sedona neighborhoods. As the popularity of motorized recreation increases, so do concerns over impacts to other recreational uses and to the quality of life in adjacent residential areas. In making my decision to select alternative C, I recognize that limiting unguided motor vehicle use on the Soldiers Pass road to 12 vehicles per day will not be favored by everyone. I recognize that some would prefer to see no motor vehicle use in this area, while others believe that no restrictions should be in place. I believe my decision represents a balanced approach to meeting the desired condition of managing recreational use to reduce the impacts to residential quality of life while responding to public interest in maintaining some unguided recreational opportunities for motorized travel on a four-wheel-drive road.

Meets the Purpose and Need

Current levels of motorized use on Soldiers Pass road are out of compliance with the forest plan, which directs that social encounters in the Soldiers Pass area occur at the rate of 15 per day. Data collected from 2010 to 2011 show an average encounter rate of 12 per hour and compliance with forest plan direction only two percent of the time. This vast difference between our management direction and the existing condition is of major concern to me.

This decision reduces motorized use to a maximum of 24 vehicles per day, bringing management of the project area much closer to the desired recreational setting. Still, the selected alternative requires a project-specific forest plan amendment. This amendment has been prepared to be consistent with the draft management direction for the revised forest plan. By reducing social encounters and amending the forest plan to a more descriptive encounter rate, this decision meets the need to bring motorized use of Soldiers Pass road into compliance with forest plan direction.

Unguided motorized use of Soldiers Pass road has substantially increased in recent years and is expected to continue rising. The high levels of motorized use are creating social conflicts on both the national forest and the adjacent private lands. Several non-motorized trails intersect the road, bringing hikers and mountain bikers into close contact with vehicles at multiple points, increasing the risk of safety hazards. In addition, the noise of increasing motorized use over time is disturbing private landowners and decreasing the quality of recreation experience for non-motorized visitors to the Coconino National Forest.

As stated in the forest plan, our objective in the Neighborwoods Management Area is to “address local neighborhood concerns about the impacts of visitor use on residential quality of life.” Based on the volume of public input I’ve received citing concerns over safety and disturbance in the neighborhood, it is clear to me that we are not currently meeting this objective. Public comments have indicated that unguided use is the primary source of the noise or conflicts. Alternative C (represented by this decision) addresses the issue of noise and social conflict, though to a lesser degree than alternative B because it allows double the daily and annual number of vehicles. Still, alternative C represents a 49 percent reduction in use on weekdays and a 73 percent reduction in use on peak weekends compared to the existing condition. In addition, it is unlikely that all 12 daily permits would be used at the same time.

Lastly, the implementation of a permit system for public use allows greater opportunity for educating the public on the location of the trailhead and etiquette while driving through residential neighborhoods. This would further reduce conflicts with adjacent property owners. Overall, this decision (alternative C) provides greater public access to the motorized recreational opportunities than alternative B and provides a balance between commercially-guided and non-guided motorized use.

I heard from a large number of people interested in maintaining unguided access for motorized recreation. There was great concern expressed, as reflected by the volume of comments and objections and by the discussions during the objection resolution meetings, that closing Soldiers Pass to public unguided motorized use would result in substantial impacts. To those I heard from, it would mean closing the potential for motorized recreation on a unique, easily accessible, and highly regarded trail. Though the trail may appear minor (just 1.2 miles), I heard from some people that the trail is especially important to the public because it is easily accessible and is only one of two trails that provides an actual opportunity to drive up and onto the red rock formations. I heard from the public that what sets Soldiers Pass apart is that while both it and Broken Arrow provide an opportunity to get up close and personal with the area’s highly-prized red rocks, Soldiers Pass requires little technical ability and is more gentle terrain. Broken Arrow requires more technical driving skills and can include abrupt and rugged terrain that results in a jarring ride that is not feasible for many users with disabilities. For these individuals, the only option for getting this recreation experience would be to pay the outfitter/guide \$90 per person to join a guided tour of the area.

The objections we received and the objection resolution meetings made it clear that people believe it is necessary that we provide for fairness between unguided and guided motorized use. This decision addresses the issue of fairness by allowing permitted public motorized use of up to 12 vehicles per day and ensuring the permits available for unguided motorized use is equal to that of the permitted outfitter/guide.

Overall, this decision will substantially reduce the number of vehicles in the project area which will reduce the level of noise, social conflict, and impacts to residential quality of life while still allowing for continued motorized public access to the area. Therefore, this decision meets the need to reduce social conflicts on the Coconino National Forest and adjacent private land, while still providing for motorized recreational opportunities.

When compared to alternatives B and D, the selected alternative will not result in as much displacement of public motorized use to nearby motorized trails such as Broken Arrow. This is important considering we are already hearing of similar concerns regarding overcrowding, increasing encounters, and noise impacting nearby neighborhoods on Broken Arrow and other routes such as Schnebly Hill.

My decision authorizes interim management to close the Soldiers Pass route to unguided motorized use until a functional permit system is operating. The reason for this closure is to provide an incentive for interested parties to convene around the development, management, and monitoring of a permit system

for public motorized access. I am concerned that without this interim closure, there will be no incentives for many key members of the public to participate which will hamper efforts to develop a permit system.

This decision requires an interim closure of the Soldiers Pass trail to public motorized access until a functional permit system is put in place through a collaborative process. The Red Rock District Ranger is directed to make every effort to convene a collaborative group and develop a functional and acceptable permit system in a reasonable timeframe so that the interim closure does not unnecessarily prevent motorized recreation opportunities on the Soldiers Pass route.

This decision also converts the existing outfitter/guide permit to a 10-year term, which includes more defined timing of trips. When compared to the modified alternatives B or C, the selected alternative allows half of the number of outfitter/guide trips per day (12 instead of 24), which allows for the 12 unguided motorized trips while still limiting encounter levels to acceptable levels. The number of trips per year allowed under the outfitter/guide permit are increased to 4,380 trips, to encourage more guided tours during periods of lower recreational use, traffic, and crowding. These elements of the final decision are intended to specifically address the direction in the forest plan to manage encounter levels for a desired recreational setting.

Addresses Key Issues

This decision reduces environmental effects over the no-action alternative (alternative A) and addresses the key issues analyzed in the environmental assessment. The decision reduces social encounters from a recorded maximum of 96 per day to 24 per day. This would reduce noise on the trail as well as in adjacent neighborhoods and reduce the potential for conflict between motorized and non-motorized users. As disclosed in the environmental assessment and the additional analysis report, the decision also reduces effects to wildlife, soil, water, and air. While it does not reduce these effects as much as alternative D, it does balance reducing effects with the need to provide opportunities for motorized access.

Addresses Public Concerns

I heard from many commenters who do not want the Soldiers Pass area closed to unguided motorized use and do not want to see such use limited. While my decision may limit a certain type of use in this area to 12 unguided permits per day, this decision is not intended to exclude individuals from National Forest System lands. Opportunities for motorized recreation are plentiful on the Red Rock Ranger District, with over 1,000 miles of road open to motorized use. Limited use on only 1.2 miles of road to motorized use would not significantly affect the public's access to motorized recreation opportunities. The vast majority of these roads are not located in or adjacent to residential areas. While many of these roads do not offer exactly the same recreational experience as Soldiers Pass, the selected alternative balances the need for motorized recreational opportunities with the need to protect resources and social values in the project area.

I also heard from commenters concerned that the selected alternative would favor the neighborhood landowners or a private company over the general public. The Soldiers Pass area lies within the Neighborwoods Management Area. This management area was developed to address the very complex management environment in and around the City of Sedona, where the past several decades of development have resulted in national forest recreational opportunities and trailheads that are intimately woven into residential communities. As stated in the environmental assessment and above, the emphasis of this management area is to "support resident health, safety, and quality of life." This forest plan direction also includes an objective to "address local neighborhood concerns about the impacts of visitor use on residential quality of life." Therefore, it is clear that in this management area, residents' concerns are an important factor to be considered in management decisions.

Public comment and several years of data demonstrate that the majority of impacts are occurring as a result of unguided motorized use. Therefore, limiting this type of use is a legitimate option to meet the purpose and need of the project. Retaining a permitted outfitter/guide company and implementing a permit system to limit unguided public use is acceptable because it would maintain some level of public access to motorized opportunities in a manner that can be more easily managed and controlled. Allowing 12 permits to unguided motorized use and 12 permits per day to outfitter/guide motorized use addresses public concern about fairness of only limiting unguided motorized public use on the Soldiers Pass route.

One of the most repeated concerns I heard from public comments and objections was that a decision to prohibit unguided motorized use would set a precedent for similar actions in the future on other routes. One such route is Broken Arrow where the concern is that the Red Rock Ranger District would change the management of this road to allow only outfitter/guide motorized use. This decision is not intended to set any precedent. That said, management of motorized vehicle use across the Red Rock Ranger District is something that needs to be more broadly addressed. The Red Rock Ranger District has recently hired an Off-highway Vehicle Coordinator, whose primary role is to address the needs of off-highway vehicle users and the concerns or issues stemming from this use on the ranger district. Part of this process may identify potential locations for future off-highway vehicle use development.

Changes Between the Draft and Final Decision

The draft decision previously indicated that the Forest Service was leaning toward selecting modified alternative B. However, during the administrative review period we had the opportunity to meet and discuss this issue with the Mayor and City Manager of the City of Sedona, homeowners surrounding the Soldiers Pass road, and 9 of 16 project objectors.¹ Based on these informative discussions, the objection reviewing officer instructed me to change the decision from modified alternative B to alternative C. These instructions respond to objectors' concerns that the draft decision would provide exclusive motorized access to a single commercial entity, and the effect this could have on nearby motorized routes such as Broken Arrow. As described in detail earlier, Alternative C will continue to allow some public motorized use while managing this use to achieve a desired recreational setting and address issues presented in the environmental assessment. This alternative also responds to the issue of fairness between permitted outfitter/guide use and public motorized access, which was a key issue in the public comments and objections received as part of the planning process.

The final decision notice includes some minor clarifications to the draft decision. First, we removed references to the Red Rock Western Jeep Tour company, which is the current holder of the outfitter/guide permit for Soldiers Pass. Instead, this final decision notice refers generically to the "permitted outfitter/guide." While Red Rock Western Jeep Tour is the current permit holder, the decision outlined in this document applies to the use authorized by the permit and specific terms of that use, regardless of who the permit holder may be.

The draft decision, environmental assessment, and response to comments referred to a "free" public permit system. However, it was recognized in our deliberations, that there may have to be some fees associated with the permit, and that while the permits themselves might be technically free, the administration of the permit system may result in fees. This would not be perceived by the public as a "free" permit system. It is possible a fee associated with the permit could result in a more efficient and more equitable permit system. The details of the permit system will be developed through a collaborative process (see "Decision," above).

¹ Only 9 of the 16 objectors chose to participate in objection resolution meetings.

Lastly, this decision includes a clarification that wasn't included in the analysis of alternative C in the draft environmental assessment. Specifically, this decision identifies that the Soldiers Pass route will be closed to unguided motor vehicle use during interim management until a functional permit system is ready for implementation. The purpose of this interim management is to provide incentives for interested parties to work together toward the development of a permit system. Considering other alternatives were fully analyzed that closed the route to all unguided motorized use (alternative B and modified alternative B), and alternatives were analyzed completely closing the route to all motorized use (alternative D), my decision is within the range and scope of effects analyzed and disclosed in the range of alternatives considered in the environmental assessment and supplemental analysis.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered the no-action alternative and three other action alternatives. These alternatives are described in detail in the environmental assessment and additional analysis document and are summarized in table 1. This section includes a rationale for why each of these was not selected.

Table 1. Comparison of alternatives analyzed in detail

	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D	Modified Alternative B	Modified Alternative C
Management of Motorized Use	No Action (Current Management)	Outfitter/Guide Use Only	Outfitter/Guide Use and Public Use by Permit	No Motorized Use	Outfitter/Guide Use Only	Outfitter/Guide Use and Public Use by Permit
Unguided Vehicles (AOT ¹)	Unlimited	0	Not regulated	0	0	Not regulated
Unguided Vehicles (Per day)	Unlimited	0	12	0	0	12
Unguided Vehicles (Per year)	Unlimited	0	4,380	0	0	4,380
Outfitter/Guide Vehicles (AOT)	10	2	2	0	4	4
Outfitter/Guide Vehicles (Per day)	Unlimited	12	12	0	24	24
Outfitter/Guide Vehicles (Per year)	2,100	4,380	4,380	0	3,500	3,500
Miles of Road Open to Public Motorized Use	1.2	0	0	0	0	0
Miles of Road Open by Permit Only	0	1.2	1.2	0	1.2	1.2
Acres Affected	2.5	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.2
Installation of Gate	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Forest Plan Amendment	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

¹ AOT = at one time.

Alternative A – No Action (Current Management)

In alternative A (no action) there would be no changes in current management. The permitted outfitter/guide use allocation would remain at 10 vehicles at one time with a maximum of 2,100 vehicles per year. Other motorized use would remain unregulated. The social encounter guideline for Soldiers Pass would not be modified and use would continue to exceed (be noncompliant with) forest plan direction.

This alternative was not selected because it does not meet the purpose and need for the project, social conflicts would not be addressed or reduced, and it would result in the greatest negative effects to soil, water, air, wildlife, and recreation resources.

Alternative B – Outfitter/Guide Use Only

This alternative was developed to respond to comments that noise disturbance and social conflicts were resulting from the high volume of unguided motorized vehicles. Alternative B would restrict motorized use to the permitted outfitter/guide only and prohibit all other motorized use (with the exception of emergency responders, see below). The permitted outfitter/guide's authorized use allocation would be adjusted from 10 vehicles at one time and an annual maximum of 2,100 vehicles to 2 vehicles at one time, up to 12 vehicles per day and 4,380 vehicles per year. This alternative would require installing a gate to control access.

This alternative was not selected because it does not allow for a fair distribution of public use between unguided and guided trips. While this alternative may address the issues of noise and conflicts with unguided users most directly, the objections and objection resolution meetings made it clear that many expressed that requiring the public to use the outfitter/guide service was not fair or warranted. In addition, they believed that limiting unguided use of Soldiers Pass would eliminate a "unique" opportunity for beginners and others looking for a relatively easy drive that provides access to the red rocks (see also "Decision" above). There was a widely held perception that closure of the Soldiers Pass route to unguided use would cause an increase in traffic to surrounding motor vehicle routes, which could cause similar management actions in these areas, thus establishing a precedent for closing the motorized public out of highly desirable motorized recreation opportunities. Instead, with the selected alternative, we can provide for unguided use and still meet our purpose and need to reduce noise and social conflicts, while still providing an unguided motorized experience.

Modified Alternative B – Outfitter/Guide Only

This alternative would be the same as alternative B, except that the permitted outfitter/guide's authorized use allocation would be adjusted from 10 vehicles at one time and an annual maximum of 2,100 vehicles, to 4 vehicles at one time, 24 vehicles per day, and 3,500 vehicles per year.

This alternative was presented as the selected alternative in the draft decision notice. This alternative was not selected for the same reasons as alternative B, above.

Modified Alternative C – Outfitter/Guide and Public Use by Permit

This alternative would be the same as the selected alternative (alternative C), but the permitted outfitter/guide's allocation would be 4 vehicles at one time, 24 per day, and 3,500 per year. This is an increase in their daily and at-one-time use, when compared to alternative C, but a lower annual use limit. The annual limit of 3,500 jeeps means they would not operate their maximum of 24 vehicles every day.

This alternative was not selected because there was a concern about the outfitter/guide being authorized for more use than the general public. In addition, there was a concern that, with increasing hikers (for which there are no managerial restrictions), encounter levels will eventually become greater than the

counter levels described in the amended forest plan language. Thus, to address these issues the decision only increases the permitted use from 10 to 12 per day and increases the annual use to 4,380 to encourage guided trips during periods with less visitation.

Alternative D – No Motorized Use

This alternative was developed in response to comments received at a 2014 public meeting. In alternative D, Soldiers Pass road would be closed to all recreational motorized use. The outfitter/guide authorization for this location would be allowed to expire at the end of the current permit term and would not be reissued.

This alternative was not selected because it does not meet the purpose and need as fully as the selected alternative. This alternative would not provide an opportunity for motorized travel on a four-wheel drive road. This alternative would remove motorized use completely from an area where it was historically established, primarily through guided jeep tours. Commenters who supported this alternative cited concerns about noise, social conflicts, and resource effects. I believe their concerns about these issues can be addressed by the selected alternative, while still allowing a guided jeep tour experience.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

In addition to the alternatives considered in detail in the environmental assessment, there were three alternatives that were either initially considered or eliminated from detailed study, or were previous versions of one of the alternatives that did not adequately address one or more issues identified during the planning process, and thus did not merit detailed study.

Three alternatives were developed but eliminated from detailed analysis: (1) amending the forest plan to make direction for social encounters reflect the existing condition; (2) applying a recreation opportunity spectrum exception to the road corridor, allowing higher social encounters than would otherwise be prescribed; and (3) actively managing use to meet current plan direction.

Adjust the Forest Plan Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Guidelines

Under this alternative, the only action would be to change the forest plan recreation opportunity spectrum guidelines for social encounters in the entire project area (for both the motorized road and non-motorized trails) from 15 encounters per day to 15 per hour. This would require a project-specific (nonsignificant) forest plan amendment. Red Rock Western Jeep Tours' authorized allocation would be adjusted from 10 vehicles at one time and 2,100 trips per year to 2 vehicles at one time, 12 vehicles per day, and 4,380 trips per year. Other management actions would not change.

This alternative would address the issue of forest plan consistency. It would also make management of Soldiers Pass road consistent with management of the Broken Arrow road, which has similar recreational use. It would reduce the outfitter/guide's contribution to hourly encounter levels by reducing their at-one-time limit, thereby potentially reducing the overall motorized encounter levels. However, it would not be likely to reduce noise levels, and it would not address the social conflicts occurring on the road or on the adjacent city and private property. Additionally, as the off-highway vehicle rental industry in the City of Sedona continues to grow, it is likely that use levels would exceed 15 encounters per hour within a few years. This alternative would not meet the purpose and need for action. For these reasons it was considered but eliminated from detailed study.

Apply a Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Exception for the Road Corridor

This alternative would apply an exception to the recreation opportunity spectrum encounter guidelines for the Soldiers Pass road corridor only, allowing motorized encounters to be 15 per hour. This would require

a nonsignificant forest plan amendment. The rest of the project area, including all nonmotorized trails, would remain at 15 encounters per day. The outfitter/guide's authorized allocation would be adjusted from 10 vehicles at one time and 2,100 trips per year to 2 vehicles at one time, 12 vehicles per day, and 4,380 trips per year. Other management actions would not change.

This alternative would address the issue of forest plan consistency. It would also make management of this road consistent with management of the Broken Arrow road, which has similar recreational use. It would reduce the outfitter/guide's contribution to hourly encounter levels by reducing their at-one-time limit, thereby potentially reducing the overall motorized encounter levels. However, it would probably not reduce noise levels, and it would not address the social conflicts occurring on the road or on the adjacent city and private property. Additionally, as the off-highway vehicle rental industry in the City of Sedona continues to grow, it is likely that use levels would exceed 15 encounters per hour within a few years. This alternative would not meet the purpose and need for action. For these reasons it was considered but eliminated from detailed study.

Reduce Use to Levels Compliant with the Forest Plan

Under this alternative, the Red Rock Ranger District would actively manage motorized use to reduce it to the level of 15 social encounters per day. The outfitter/guide permit would be adjusted, to 2 vehicles at one time, 12 vehicles per day, and 4,380 trips per year, making it consistent with other motorized outfitter/guide use on the Red Rock Ranger District. The remainder of available use would be allocated to the general public, via some form of permit system.

This alternative addresses the issue of forest plan consistency. It also addresses the issues of noise and social conflicts by significantly reducing the use. However, the allocation between outfitter/guide and the general public would be problematic. Only three vehicles per day would be available to the general public. Therefore, at the time this alternative was developed (2012), enforcing only 15 trips per day did not seem like a reasonable management option. In 2014, specialists identified the need to redesign the recreation opportunity spectrum framework as a whole. This alternative was considered but eliminated from detailed study because it was modified and resulted in the development of alternative C (proposed action).

Public Involvement

The NEPA process provides for open public involvement. The NEPA phase of a proposal begins with public and internal agency scoping. Scoping is the process used to identify major issues and to determine the extent of environmental analysis necessary for an informed decision to be made concerning a proposed action. Issues are identified, alternatives are developed, and the environmental analysis is conducted and documented.

On February 28, 2012, the Red Rock Ranger District asked the public to comment on the purpose and need for action and to provide potential management solutions that would be used in the development of the proposed action. Interested parties included the Shadow Estates Home Owners Association, the City of Sedona (hereafter referred to as the "City"), other local agencies, and parties generally interested in outfitter and guide topics. We received 44 comments. The majority of comments can be categorized into two issues of concern: noise disturbance from motorized use and conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users. In October of 2013 we posted the project on the Coconino National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions. It has appeared on all subsequent schedule of proposed actions since that time. On January 25, 2013, the Red Rock Ranger District repeated its request for public comment on the purpose and need with an article that was published in the *Red Rock Daily News* (local newspaper). We received 18 comments. Comments were similar to those submitted in 2012.

In December 2014, we presented draft alternatives to the Sedona City Council at a public meeting. This generated additional comments, primarily from the residents of the Shadow Estates subdivision. As a result of comments a potential alternative that we had dismissed (no motorized use) was categorized as an action alternative to be fully analyzed.

Since December 2014 the Red Rock Ranger District has provided updates to the City and interested individuals regarding the status of this project. We encouraged Soldiers Pass residents to submit observations of any perceived conflicts or concerns resulting from motorized use in the area—such as overcrowding by vehicles and damage to vegetation. See the project record for all public involvement information.

We released the environmental assessment for public comment on April 1, 2016, via a published legal notice. We received input from 290 individuals or organizations during the 30-day comment period. Our detailed responses to the public comments we received in response to publication of the environmental assessment can be found in the project file. On September 16, 2016, we published a supplemental analysis to the draft environmental assessment, draft decision notice, and a legal notice to start the objection process. Approximately 64 letters or e-mails were received during the objection filing period, 16 of which were determined to be valid objections. We participated in three objection resolution meetings on December 14, 2016, which were open to the public and included participation by 9 of the 16 objectors.

Tribal Consultation

We notified the following Native American Indian tribes of the project in the Coconino National Forest's quarterly schedule of proposed actions consultation letter dated October 16, 2012 (and each subsequent quarter thereafter): Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, Havasupai Tribe, Hopi Tribe, Hualapai Tribe, Navajo Nation, Pueblo of Acoma, Pueblo of Zuni, San Carlos Apache Tribe, San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe, Tonto Apache Tribe, Yavapai-Apache Nation, Yavapai-Prescott Tribe, and White Mountain Apache Tribe. No replies indicated tribal concerns. Comments on this project, previous consultations, and research into tribal uses of the Forest indicate there are no areas of traditional cultural importance or areas with specific tribal concerns (Bone 2015, unpublished report).

Issues

Using the comments we received, the interdisciplinary team identified several issues regarding the effects of the proposed action. The majority of public comments can be categorized into two issues of concern: noise disturbance from motorized use, and conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users. While most respondents cite conflicts and noise occurring on City streets or private property, these issues also occur on the National Forest System lands within the project area. Additionally, our management of motorized uses in the project area has a direct effect on how these issues manifest on the adjacent non-National Forest System lands. In addition to issues raised by the public, Forest Service specialists raised resource concerns including noise impacts to peregrine falcons nesting in the area, potential impacts to frog habitat in the location commonly called the "Seven Sacred Pools," and consistency with forest plan direction for social encounters. These concerns are evaluated in the "Environmental Consequences" section of the environmental assessment.

Noise

Several commenters express concern over the noise generated by motorized use of the Soldiers Pass road. In 2014 this issue had become the primary concern to residents affected by motorized users passing through the neighborhood enroute to the trailhead. Most comments cite off-highway vehicle (as opposed to jeeps) as the cause of excessive noise, specifically tomcars. Commenters state the noise created by motorized users reduces the quality of life for residents, especially for those living closest to the trailhead.

Off-highway vehicle noise also has the potential to reduce the quality of recreation experience for non-motorized trail users within the project area.

The selected alternative would result in a large reduction in noise because there would be fewer vehicles present at any one time. While the selected alternative will continue to allow unguided motor vehicles, including off-highway vehicles and utility vehicles, which are considered to be a greater source of noise than jeeps, there are a number of ways we can decrease noise levels from current conditions. Specifically, the limited number of permits available for unguided motorized use, additional managerial control afforded by a permit system, and planned monitoring efforts are expected to result in a greater ability to manage noise impacts.

Conflicts Between Uses

Many comments reflect concern over the proximity of hiking and motorized use in the project area. The Soldiers Pass, Jordan, and Tea Cup trails all intersect the road. This is especially prominent at the sinkhole, known as Devil's Kitchen. This geologic feature is a key destination within the Soldiers Pass area, and hikers, mountain bikers, and motorized users are frequently present at the same time. Many comments cite the safety concerns of having high levels of both motorized and non-motorized use in the same area, especially as many off-highway vehicle drivers are perceived as driving too fast for this road. In addition to safety, the high levels of motorized use degrade the recreation experience of non-motorized users on these trails.

This decision is expected to result in a large reduction in social conflicts within the project area. Fewer vehicles present would reduce the opportunity for conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users. Furthermore, the limited number of permits available for unguided motorized use and additional managerial control afforded by a permit system are expected to result in greater ability to manage conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users on the Soldiers Pass route.

Finding of No Significant Impact

The following is a summary of the project analysis to determine significance, as defined by Forest Service Handbook 1909.15_05. "Significant" as used in NEPA requires consideration of both context and intensity of the expected project effects.

Context means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts (i.e., local regional, worldwide), and over short and long timeframes. For site-specific actions, significance usually depends upon the effects in the local environment rather than in the world as a whole.

Intensity refers to the severity of the expected project impacts and is defined by the 10 points below.

Context

This decision will change the public motorized use on approximately 1.2 miles of National Forest System road. From a landscape perspective, the decision would affect a very small portion of the Red Rock Ranger District road and trail system. Direct effects are limited to the project area surrounding Soldiers Pass Road. Indirect effects are limited to areas where some displacement may occur on the Red Rock Ranger District, especially the Broken Arrow road. Though the effects of displacement would be imperceptible at the Red Rock Ranger District-scale, it would be perceptible within the project area and possibly within the area of Broken Arrow road. The effects of the decision for the Soldiers Pass road project area would be beneficial by reducing the effects to soil, water, air, wildlife, and recreational resources.

Intensity

The following factors were considered to evaluate intensity.

1) Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on the balance the effects will be beneficial.

This decision would result in both beneficial and adverse effects. Beneficial effects include reduced effects to natural resources and recreational settings as result of reduced motor vehicle use in the Soldiers Pass area. Adverse effects would include a reduction of motorized public recreational access in the project area and impacts to natural resources and recreational settings from displacement of motorized use to other areas, such as Broken Arrow road. Broken Arrow road would be monitored for impacts of displacement.

While these effects may be noticeable, they would not significantly impact any Coconino National Forest resources or visitors.

2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

This decision is not likely to adversely affect public health or safety, and it may result in improved public safety. The decision would limit motorized use of the Soldiers Pass road to guided visitors and permitted individuals only. In doing so it would reduce the number of encounters between motorized and non-motorized trail users each day. The implementation of a permit system for public motorized use may also provide for additional opportunities to share information with motorized users in the area that can decrease potential impacts to public health and safety over time.

3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The project area does not include any park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas. Historic or cultural resources would not be affected by the selected alternative.

4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The term “controversial” in this context refers to cases where substantial scientific dispute exists as to the size, nature, or effects of a major Federal action on some human environmental factor, rather than to public opposition of a proposed action or alternative. The effects of reducing public motorized use in Soldiers Pass are not likely to be highly controversial. While there may be public disagreement about the decision (addressed previously in the decision rationale), this does not represent a scientific dispute.

5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The effects of reducing public motorized use are very well known and not uncertain nor involve unique risks. There is some uncertainty regarding the displacement of motorized use to other areas of the Red Rock Ranger District, especially the Broken Arrow road. The expected effects of such displacement are disclosed in the environmental assessment. In addition, the project includes monitoring to observe the effects of any displacement. Management actions would occur if displacement resulted in unacceptable effects.

6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The changes to public motorized use at the Soldiers Pass road are not likely to establish a precedent for future actions. This decision authorizes changes only within the project area on 1.2 miles of National Forest System road based on the unique conditions and management challenges in that location. It does not result in a precedent that would affect considerations of future actions.

Some commenters are concerned that the decision for Soldiers Pass may establish a precedent for future actions on other National Forest System roads or trails, such as Broken Arrow road. However, this is not the intent; allowing only outfitter/guides to access an area is an exception, not the rule. This decision affects only motorized use in the Soldiers Pass road and within the project area.

7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

Reducing public motorized use will reduce environmental effects when compared to the no-action alternative. Cumulative effects from implementing alternative C are disclosed in the environmental assessment. Overall, alternative C would result in minor direct and indirect effects for all resources. In many cases the selected alternative would reduce environmental effects when compared to the existing condition. There are no past, present, or reasonably foreseeable actions which, when added to the minor effects of the selected alternative, would result in significant environmental effects.

8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant cultural or historical resources.

The Soldiers Pass road has been previously surveyed, and there are no cultural sites located near the road. Continuing motorized use and typical maintenance on the existing roads would have no effect, either direct or indirect, on cultural resources. Nor would reducing public motorized use have any direct or indirect effect on cultural or historic resources. The decision is in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act.

9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act.

A wildlife, fish, and rare plant specialist report was prepared for the project. None of the federally-listed species evaluated occur in the project area or have potential suitable habitat within the project area. Therefore, the decision would not result in adverse effects to an endangered, threatened, or candidate species or their critical habitat.

10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The action and resource protection measures are in full compliance with Federal, State, and local law requirements for the protection of the environment.

Findings Required by Other Laws, Regulations, and Policies

National Forest Management Act (NFMA)

This decision is consistent with the intent of the forest plan's management direction listed on pages 21 to 26. The project was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines.

The project area lies entirely within the Neighborwoods Management Area (Coconino National Forest Plan, management area 24, pages 206-40 to 206-42). This management area is "Sedona's Backyard," and borders many residential areas and urbanized sections of Sedona and the Village of Oak Creek. This area is heavily used by visitors and residents, who frequent the network of trails. The management emphasis for this area is to support resident health, safety, and quality of life. Relatively quiet, easily accessed national forest supports wildlife, scenic viewing, and experiencing nature.

There is a need to amend the forest plan to allow implementation of this decision. I have determined that the amendment is appropriate and project-specific. The amendment is summarized in the "Decision" section and detailed in appendix 1, "Project-specific Forest Plan Amendment." I have determined that the amendment does not constitute a significant change to the forest plan per (36 CFR 219.13(b)(3)). This amendment has been prepared consistent with the draft management direction for the revised forest plan. We notified the public at scoping that amendments would be part of this analysis and the decision. We advised the public of the need for the amendments, and their components were described in the environmental assessment that we issued for public comment.

Regional Forester Sensitive Species

A wildlife, fish, and rare plant specialist report was prepared for the project. Ten Regional Forester Sensitive Species known to occur or have habitat within the project area were evaluated. The biologist determined that the authorized activities resulted in a determination of may impact individual spotted bats, Allen's lappet-browed bats, Pale Townsend's big-eared bats, peregrine falcon, bald eagle, Tonto Basin agave, Phillips' agave, Sacred Mountain agave, Mt. Dellenbaugh sandwort, and Eastwood alum root, but is not likely to result in a trend toward Federal listing or loss of viability of these species.

Bald Eagle Protection Act

Alternative C will not result in "take" as defined by the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. Effects to bald and golden eagles are insignificant and discountable and will not cause (1) injury to an eagle; (2) a decrease in productivity, by substantially interfering with normal breeding, feeding, or sheltering behavior; or (3) nest abandonment by substantially interfering with normal breeding, feeding, or sheltering behavior.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

A wildlife, fish, and rare plant specialist report was prepared for the project. Six migratory bird species known to occur or have habitat within the project area were evaluated. The biologist determined that none of the alternatives would lead to an unintentional take of individuals or a decline in the population for pinyon jay, gray vireo, gray flycatcher, black-throated gray warbler, band-tailed pigeon, and loggerhead shrike.

Conclusion

After considering the environmental effects described in the environmental assessment, additional analysis report, and specialist reports, I have determined that this decision to will not have significant

effects on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

Administrative Review

This project is subject to the Pre-decisional Administrative Review Process (Objection Process) pursuant to 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B. The project-specific plan amendment is not subject to an additional administrative review process of 36 CFR 219 subpart B because it applies only to this decision and not future projects (see 36 CFR 219.59(b)).

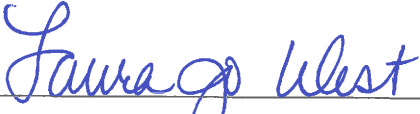
A total of 64 letters or e-mails were submitted during the objection-filing period and 16 met the objection eligibility requirements of 36 CFR 218. These 16 objections were reviewed by the reviewing officer, Deputy Regional Forester, Jim Upchurch, who met with 9 of the objectors on December 14, 2016.

On January 17, 2017, the reviewing officer replied to all objectors in writing. The objection response included a number of instructions that needed to be met to finalize the decision. The instructions are discussed in more detail elsewhere in this document and can be accessed at the project website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=38555>. This decision is in conformance with the instructions issued in the objection response.


Implementation

This decision has addressed all of the instructions included in the objection responses. Therefore, this decision can be implemented immediately.

For further information concerning the Soldiers Pass Motorized Use Project, please contact: Julie Rowe at jrowe@fs.fed.us or 928-203-7516.



LAURA JO WEST
Forest Supervisor
Coconino National Forest



Date

Appendix 1: Project-specific Forest Plan Amendment

A project-specific forest plan amendment is proposed in alternative C (table 2). This amendment would modify the encounter guideline for the recreation opportunity spectrum class semi-primitive motorized. A site- or project-specific plan amendment is a one-time variance in forest plan direction for the project; the language proposed does not apply to other future forest projects. The proposed plan language is displayed in **bold** type.

Table 2. Existing and proposed Coconino National Forest Forest Plan encounter guidelines

Coconino NF Forest Plan (USDA Forest Service 1987)		Project-Specific Forest Plan Amendment
Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Class	Encounter Guideline	Proposed Encounter Guideline Language
Rural	No more than 15 per hour for Forest Service permitted commercial tour operations only. All other users are moderate to high contact frequency.	No change.
Roaded Natural	No more than 15 per hour for Forest Service permitted commercial tour operations only. All other users are moderate to high contact frequency.	No change.
Semi-Primitive Motorized	No more than 15 per day for all users (commercial tours and self-guided).	Visitors may expect moderate to high contact with other visitors. Moderate evidence of use is present. Social encounters are higher within ½ mile of trailheads, paved roads, and residential areas.
Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized	No more than 15 per day for all users (commercial tours and self-guided).	No change.
Semi-Primitive–Wilderness or Primitive–Wilderness	No more than 15 per day for all users (commercial tours and self-guided).	No change.
Pristine	N/A	No change.

Appendix 2: Project Design Features

Table 3. Resource protection measures required for action alternatives

Number	Design Feature, Best Management Practice or Mitigation	Objective
Recreation and Special Uses		
RSU 1	Schedule regular patrols of the project area.	To monitor motorized use of the road to ensure compliance with the decision and forest plan direction for social encounter levels.
RSU 2	See SW 3	
Soil and Water		
SW 1	Implement best management practices prior to project implementation.	To minimize impacts to soil and water resources from project implementation, to minimize non-point source pollution, to adhere to the Clean Water Act, and to adhere to the intergovernmental agreement between Region 3 of the Forest Service and the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality.
SW 2	Assure that excavated soil material (resulting from gate installation) is placed outside of streamcourse high-water marks or floodplains and drainage bottoms.	To minimize impacts to water resources from project implementation, to minimize non-point source pollution into Soldier Wash and Oak Creek.
SW 3	Require no vehicles with known fluid leaks to be used in Soldiers Pass area unless HAZMAT absorbent pads placed under vehicles while parked on bedrock slab above Seven Sacred Pools. Forest Service to check bedrock slab for vehicle fluids on a monthly basis. If fluids are found, follow up with permittees.	To minimize impacts to water resources to minimize non-point source pollution into Soldier Wash and Oak Creek.
Wildlife		
W 1	See SW 4	