

EDITORIAL

Balance needed to protect forest and the right to recreate

Written by Christopher Fox Graham

Friday, 23 July 2010 16:07

On Sept. 3, 1964, the United States Congress adopted the Wilderness Act to protect undeveloped land and wildlife in our country.

Today, the U.S. Forest Service continues to protect parcels of land designated wilderness and in some areas, including the Verde Valley, it's pushing for more acreage.

The Coconino National Forest is asking the public for feedback on 10 potential wilderness areas. Six of the 10 areas are located near the Verde Valley — Walker Mountain, Black Mountain, Cedar Bench, Davey's, Cimarron-Boulder and Hackberry.

When Congress adopted the Wilderness Act, it was faced with expansion as cities and towns grew and logging companies tried to keep up with the rate of development.

Today, the proposed wilderness areas are already protected from development — they are located within the forest boundaries. In the case of these spots, however, USFS doesn't feel that's enough.

USFS is forced to also protect the land from a few bad recreationists on foot, bike or motorized vehicle.

As a nature lover and outdoor explorer — either by foot or mountain bike — I'm torn between advocating heavy protection for wildlands and ensuring outdoor enthusiasts can still enjoy their public lands.

The key in the Coconino National Forest will be striking a balance. Forest managers need to look at the ratio of wilderness area to non-designated land and what imposing a stricter designation upon an area will mean for residents, law enforcement and wildlife.

At least two of the five areas proposed for wilderness designation currently see use by off-highway vehicles, and all of them receive foot traffic, which means mountain bikes may not be too far behind.

Designating any of these areas as wilderness at this point means telling quad, dirt bike and mountain bike riders to stay out, which could be difficult. In other states where forest plans change to enforce more stringent rules, forest law enforcement often rumbles with those not ready or willing to make the change.

Wilderness areas serve an important purpose in the United States and force us to remember that conservation and protection of nature is important. On the flip side, every American's right to recreate in whatever responsible manner they choose also needs to be protected.

There will be a public meeting at the Red Rock Ranger District Office, 8375 SR 179, Sedona, on Tuesday, July 27, at 5:30 p.m. Comments must be submitted to USFS by Monday, Aug. 2