



File Code: 1950-1

Date: September 10, 2009

Dear Interested Party,

The Angeles National Forest (ANF) is conducting an environmental analysis under the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to resolve the existing temporary closure in the Williamson Rock vicinity. The proposed action would reopen the area to dispersed recreation while providing required protection for Federally-listed biological species. We are soliciting public input for the issues to be addressed in the environmental analysis.

Williamson Rock is located on National Forest System lands within the Santa Clara-Mojave Rivers Ranger District, in upper Little Rock Canyon (see attached map). The proposed action involves portions of T. 3N, R. 9W, Section 7, and T. 3N, R. 10W, Sections 11, 12, 13, and 14, SBM, in Los Angeles County, California. The project vicinity is classified in the ANF Land Management Plan as Backcountry Non-motorized and Developed Area Interface, with portions of Existing Wilderness and Critical Biological Habitat.

Background

Williamson Rock is a well-known High Country recreation area used predominately for rock climbing. It has been utilized by climbers since the 1960's and is regarded as one of the unique rock climbing resources in Southern California, due to its mild summer temperatures and close proximity to urban centers. In the absence of any developed access hiking routes to the rock from Angeles Crest Highway (CA-2), the public had historically utilized a series of intertwining user-created trails, which have led to unregulated recreation in upper Little Rock Creek.

On December 29, 2005, the Forest issued a temporary closure order of approximately 1000 acres within the upper reaches of Little Rock Creek, an area including Williamson Rock, in response to the designation of critical habitat for the mountain yellow-legged frog (*Rana muscosa*) (MYLF). The Southern California population of the MYLF was listed in 2002 under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. In Southern California, MYLF have historically occurred in drainages throughout the San Gabriel, San Bernardino, and San Jacinto Mountains, but numbers have markedly declined in the modern era. The species has been extirpated from 99% of its historic range in the region, with five of the seven remaining known MYLF populations located on the Angeles National Forest.

Interface between recreational forest users and the MYLF is a subject of concern at Williamson Rock. Particular concern revolves around recreation activities within the creek habitat, which can lead to disturbance of egg masses, trampling of individual frogs, capture and handling of tadpoles and adult frogs, and generalized disruption of mating and migration if humans tread within the critical habitat. Recreation may also render habitat unsuitable by altering streambeds and denuding banks, and lead to the introduction of pollutants and garbage into the creek. Due to remoteness and current lack of facilities,



human waste also has the potential to contaminate critical habitat because it is not being properly disposed of. Moreover, the Williamson Rock vicinity is also home to raptors, as well as Forest Service-listed sensitive plant species. The combination of all of these resource concerns as well as recreation user interface contributed to the agency closure of the area.

The ANF has annually renewed the existing Williamson Rock closure order. The original closure was intended to be temporary, and has been renewed for four years as the ANF had gone through the NEPA process to analyze measures for area management. During that interval, the ANF has cooperated with other agencies to construct fish barriers on both Big Rock Creek and Little Rock Creek. The structures are designed to prohibit upstream dispersal of non-native fish species within MYLF habitat, thereby preventing a major source of predation. Continuance of the program should allow frog populations in those areas to grow and expand their range.

A portion of the Pacific Crest Trail also lies within the MYLF critical habitat. The ANF has been concurrently working with cooperators to analyze this issue separately, and has developed a possible alternate route which would redirect hikers and equestrians away from the critical habitat area. The Forest is planning on completing the proposed re-route utilizing a Categorical Exclusion (CE) to expedite resolving one access issue sooner rather than waiting for completion of the larger environmental analysis. Even though these are connected actions, the Deciding Official has the discretion to separate these two decisions to expedite resolution of issues. The analysis for the Williamson rock project is expected to take longer to complete than just the PCT trail re-route CE. An effects analysis will be completed for both the CE and environmental analysis.

Purpose and Need for Action

It is consistent with the objectives and management direction of the Angeles National Forest Land Management Plan vision to provide a balanced and sustainable flow of goods and services for a growing diverse population while ensuring long-term ecosystem health, biological diversity, and species recovery (Forest Plan 2005, Part 1, p. 6). The desired condition is to retain the natural character and habitat characteristics in the Williamson Rock vicinity and limit the level of human development to manage for protection of species-at-risk (Forest Plan 2005, Part 2, p. 10). The purpose of the proposed action is to allow controlled access to Williamson Rock in order to provide a unique recreation experience, while managing uses in order to protect and restore the habitat within upper Little Rock Creek. Populations of MYLF in Southern California are imperiled; conservation and protection of habitat and known populations are essential to the survival of this species. The ANF is mandated to manage recreational activities in such a manner as to maintain and enhance the long-term goals of protection and recovery of the species.

Proposed Action

In meeting the needs for action, the following measures are being proposed:

Development of facilities along Angeles Crest Highway to create a focal point for recreation management, and provide basic public needs for parking and sanitation.

- A trailhead and parking area will be developed at the existing large turnout in the saddle on Kratka Ridge, on the north side of CA-2 (T. 3N, R.10W, SW ¼ NW ¼ Section 11). The designated parking area will be striped to facilitate management.
- As part of the trailhead, a 'sweet smelling' toilet (SST) shall be installed at the parking area to limit human waste disposal in the vicinity of Little Rock Creek. In addition, bear-proof trash bins will be installed at the trailhead to reduce the potential for garbage deposition in the area.

- An information kiosk shall be provided to explain the sensitivities of the Williamson Rock vicinity and promote eco-friendly activities and ‘Leave No Trace’ principles. A map board will also show the areas that are off-limits to recreational use.
- All other pullouts and potential access points from along CA-2, between Eagles Roost Picnic Area and the proposed Kratka Ridge trailhead, will be physically closed and (where warranted) rehabilitated to prevent unrestricted access to the upper Little Rock Creek vicinity.

Designation and development of a single access trail to Williamson Rock to protect the quality of the visitor experience, promote human safety, and promote the recovery of species.

- The ‘Long Trail’, which runs approximately 0.9 miles from the Kratka Ridge saddle to Williamson Rock (T. 3N, R. 10W, SW ¼ NW ¼ Section 11, & N ½ NE ¼ Section 12), shall be constructed. This trail, which provides both scenic and reasonably safe access to Williamson Rock from CA-2, shall be designated ‘Hiker only’ to enhance the primitive setting of the area. This is consistent with the Angeles NF Strategy of the Southern California National Forest Plan, which permits low impact recreational activities in Critical Biological Areas, such as Little Rock Creek. Trail alignment and design will be consistent with Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction. No dispersed camping will be allowed within the Williamson Rock vicinity.
- Signage and barriers will be strategically emplaced to keep traffic on the trail. An area closure will be enacted to limit through traffic along the trail to the Williamson Rock vicinity only. Two drainage crossings exist on the designated route through areas that do not carry appreciable water during the climbing season and are not within MYLF-occupied habitat. These will be direct, perpendicular crossings with identified (and signed) closures outside the designated crossing areas.
- All other Williamson Rock ‘user-created’ braided trails and paths along scree slopes, which have historically provided direct access into MYLF habitat, will be subject to closure and (where warranted) limited rehabilitation at their outlets. The routes’ closure, combined with implementation of visible signage and physical obstructions, shall remove direct public access to the creek at the base of Williamson Rock.

Designation and development of a primary staging area in order to manage recreational use at Williamson Rock.

- The Long Trail terminus at the east side of Williamson Rock will receive limited improvement as a staging area for climbing activities: an information kiosk that will display a map of the existing climbing routes available for use and clearly-identified closed areas. Eco-friendly climbing principles (plant and animal avoidance, packing out all garbage, etc.) will also be stressed to aid in public understanding of conservation and recovery needs for the area.
- An area-appropriate physical barrier will be constructed along the interface of the Williamson Rock staging area and the creek. Appropriate signage will be emplaced at primary access points.

Closure of areas on permanent and seasonal bases, as necessary, to protect the habitat and reproductive success of species.

- A permanent closure will be implemented for a distance of 50 feet from centerline of Little Rock Creek. In order to preserve the species and its critical habitat, all stream-based rock climbing routes (e.g. the “Stream Wall” and “London Wall”) will be permanently closed to reduce the potential for human/frog interaction.
- To minimize impact to raptors that nest within a portion of the climbing area, portions of the rock may be subject to seasonal closure. Subject closure will consist of a biologist-determined buffer zone for the nesting site, applying to all climbing routes that intersect this zone. Closure shall be

carried out in an effort to avoid impacting the birds during nesting season, and enacted on a basis determined by Forest Service monitoring.

Management of recreational use to protect the primitive solitude of climbing and the quality of the visitor experience, as well as perpetuate resource protection in the Williamson Rock vicinity.

- A Williamson Rock Area Management Plan is under development, with specific procedures for management activities, and enforcement. Climbing-specific measures will include a map of all existing mapped climbing routes, restricted and permitted activities at Williamson Rock, etc.
- In order to ensure the effectiveness of management, controls will be subject to compliance monitoring. As management feedback dictates, use may be subject to limitation, both in time, season and numbers. Specific use period monitoring will include on-site checks of the trailhead area, stream crossings, and staging area for compliance.

Strategic management to restore habitat and implement recovery actions for TES populations.

- Management of the human factors within the Williamson Rock vicinity will be coupled with the ongoing regime of biological enhancement activities by the agency to provide species recovery. In 2002, the ANF participated in creation of the Conservation Assessment and Strategy for management and recovery of the MYLF. Key components of the document include habitat protection and enhancement, inventory, monitoring, database development and data storage, research, information and education, coordination, cooperation and collaboration among management agencies, funding to accomplish goals and objectives, and reporting. The Forest is committed to utilizing that document in management of the Williamson Rock area.
- Ongoing tri-annual surveys by the USGS of the MYLF populations in the Angeles National Forest and annual supplemental condition surveys will be conducted for all sensitive botanical and biological species within the area by Forest personnel.
- The Forest will also continue planned projects for fish barriers and removal in the discrete MYLF habitats within the ANF in order to aid in species recovery.

Proposed actions will be designed to retain the natural character of the Williamson Rock area, allow limited recreational rock climbing, while maintaining the habitat characteristics to provide protection for species-at-risk (Forest Plan 2005, Part 2, pp. 10-11). In order to reduce conflicts with recreation activities, infrastructure will be designed to direct use away from sensitive areas (Forest Plan 2005, Part 1, pp. 33-35). Successful management will provide the ecological conditions to sustain viable populations of native species and neutralize or reverse the declining trends in threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate, and sensitive species populations (Forest Plan 2005, Part 2, p. 26).

It is anticipated that an Environmental Assessment and Decision Notice will be prepared in conjunction with this proposed action. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with an opportunity to participate in the environmental analysis for this project. The comment period provides those interested in or affected by the project an opportunity to make their concerns known. NEPA requires that the potential effects of federal actions and possible alternatives to those actions be disclosed to the public. Issues identified during scoping will help determine the range of issues to be considered in the environmental analysis and will help determine whether alternatives to the proposed action should be developed and analyzed.

Your comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days of the date of this letter. Comments may be mailed to the following address:

Darrell Vance, Williamson Rock ID Team
Angeles National Forest

701 N. Santa Anita Ave
Arcadia, CA. 91006-2725

Your comments must be as specific as possible, pertinent to the proposal, and contain the following:

Name, address, and telephone number (if available);
Title of the project on which you are commenting on; and
Comments, along with supporting reasons, that you believe the Forest should consider in evaluating the proposal.

All comments received become a part of the project record and are available for public review. Upon completion of the environmental analysis, an opportunity to comment will be provided to those who have previously expressed an interest in these types of projects and those who responded to this scoping letter.

Sincerely,

JODY NOIRON
Forest Supervisor

Enclosure