



**DECISION MEMO
WHITEWATER PICNIC AREA AND CATWALK NATIONAL RECREATION
TRAIL**

USDA – Forest Service
Southwestern Region
Gila National Forest
Glenwood Ranger District
Catron County, New Mexico
April 29, 2002

I. DECISION

A. Description of Decision

After reviewing the Gila National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) and considering the environmental analysis conducted, it is my decision to construct 1,077 feet of accessible trail that will become part of the existing Catwalk National Recreation Trail. The new trail, which will be located on the east side of Whitewater Creek, will intersect the Catwalk National Recreation Trail at mile .15 and mile .40. The project area is accessed via NM Route 174 (also known as the Catwalk Road), which terminates at the Whitewater Picnic Area. The legal description of the project is N1/2 of SW 1/4 NW 1/4 Of SE1/4 Section 5, T. 11 S., R. 19 W., NMPM. Specific actions, which will take place, include:

- Construction of a 1,077 foot trail which: (1) Is fully benched requiring sections of cut and fill; (2) Has a hardened (paved) surface; (3) Is approximately 48 inches wide; (4) Is designed to meet universal design (accessible) standards; (5) Trail alignment is constructed above the vegetation line when possible to retain vegetation and habitat; and, (6) Has rest areas and passing zones, which are a maximum width of 60 inches, provided throughout the trail's length.
- Blasting and use of a bob-cat type of mechanized equipment is expected during construction.
- Hanging catwalk will be incorporated as part of the trail on approximately one-tenth of the trail. Metal hardware such as bolts and cable are used to attach the structure to the cliff wall.

- The Whitewater Picnic Area, the existing Catwalk National Recreation Trail (which includes the remains of the historic catwalk pipeline and CCC trail) and the town and mill of Graham will be nominated for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. The area will also be established as an archeological District.
- A self-guided interpretive audiotape and brochure will be developed.
- Interpretive brochures and signs will be developed and include information concerning laws protecting historic resources and appropriate behavior at historic sites.
- If possible, all project activities will be scheduled to allow continual recreation use of the area to reduce impacts to individuals and local business.

The proposed action along with Best Management Practices will be applied to the project and are listed in detail in the project record. In addition to these practices, the following mitigation measures will be incorporated into project implementation to protect resources:

- Project activity within the Whitewater Creek channel will comply with all conditions identified in the State of New Mexico 401 Water Quality Certification and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Section 404 Permit.
- All construction activities within Whitewater Creek will occur when Whitewater Creek is at its lowest flow which is tentatively estimated to be mid to late June. In addition, construction activities within Whitewater Creek will be avoided during the loach minnow spawning season which is from March to early June.
- All excavated materials, which are estimated to be 588 cubic yards, will be transported off site and away from Whitewater Creek.

B. Purpose of Decision

The purpose of the project is to provide a recreational experience to visitors who are currently unable to utilize the existing Catwalk National Recreation Trail due to trail grade, length, width, and surface by incorporating universal design standards. The project will provide opportunities to increase and expand interpretive services and conservation education programs on the Catwalk National Recreation Trail.

II. REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they fall within one of the categories identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 7

CFR part 1b.3 or when they fall within one of the categories identified in the Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 sections 31.1b or 31.2. These categories may be used providing that no extraordinary circumstances exist in relation to the proposed action.

A. Category of Exclusion

This decision fits Category #1(a) of FSH 1909.15, Section 31.2. This category includes the construction or reconstruction of trails that lead to scenic overlooks. The presence of conditions that would lead to a finding of an extraordinary circumstance (which has a potential for significant effects) does not apply to this project. Therefore, this action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement (FSH 1909.15, Chapter 30.3).

B. Relationship To Extraordinary Circumstances

- **Steep Slopes or Highly Erosive Soils:** Steep slopes are present in the project area. However, past and similar actions indicate conditions are not present which would cause this to be an extraordinary circumstance.
- **Threatened and Endangered Species or Their Critical Habitat:** A biological evaluation was completed in February, 2002. No threatened, endangered, or sensitive species or their critical habitat will be affected.
- **Floodplains, Wetlands, Or Municipal Watersheds**
 - ✓ Floodplains – Floodplains are present in the vicinity of the project area. Experience with past and similar actions does not result in conditions being present which would cause this to be an extraordinary circumstance.
 - ✓ Wetlands –Wetlands are within the vicinity of the project area. Compliance with the requirements of the 401 and 404 permit, past and experience with past and similar actions do not result in conditions being present which would cause this to be an extraordinary circumstance.
 - ✓ Municipal Watersheds - The project area is within the Whitewater Creek fifth code watershed which passes through the project area to the town of Glenwood. Municipal watersheds will not be affected and conditions are not present which would cause this to be an extraordinary circumstance.

- **Native American Religious or Cultural Sites, Archaeological Sites, or Historic Properties or Areas –**

No Native American concerns were identified for this project. Historic properties and structures are located within and adjacent to the project area. Consultation with SHPO is complete. Recommendations from SHPO were received on March 20, 2002. Per those recommendations, the requests set forth in the No Adverse Effect determination will be met within two years and result in no conditions being present which would cause this to be an extraordinary circumstance.

- **Congressionally Designated Areas –**

No congressionally designed areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, National Recreation Areas, inventoried roadless areas, or Research Natural Areas will be affected.

- ✓ Wild and Scenic Rivers: The project is located in the vicinity of Whitewater Creek, which is currently being evaluated for eligibility as a Wild and Scenic River. The attributes of Whitewater Creek which may make it eligible for wild and scenic designation are described as: "The Catwalk is a large day use recreation area with high visitation. The walkway is unique overhanging Whitewater Creek winding up a scenic narrow incised canyon. There are many cliffs and historic sites along the creek. From Hummingbird Saddle to the Catwalk the creek is classified as scenic". The project is located in the vicinity of Whitewater Creek, which may be eligible for Wild and Scenic River status. The proposed action along with Best Management Practices and mitigation measures are part of this decision and will not affect wild and scenic eligibility. As a result, conditions are not present which would cause this to be an extraordinary circumstance.

No other condition present, which would lead to an extraordinary circumstance related to this decision, was identified. It is my finding that there are no conditions present that would result in extraordinary circumstances that would affect my choice of categorical exclusion. Detailed information on the relationship of the project to extraordinary circumstances can be found in the project file.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

On February 26, 2001 and October 15, 2001, two open houses were hosted by the Glenwood Ranger District in Glenwood, New Mexico to discuss the project. On November 15, 2001, a letter providing information and seeking public comment was mailed to approximately 90 individuals, organizations and a variety

of State and local agencies. Two comments were received in response to this mailing. In November of 2001, the project was described in the Gila National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) and mailed to the forest-wide mailing list. Two news releases about the project were printed in the Silver City Sun News and the Silver City Daily Press.

A total of 2 comments were received during the public comment period. Three concerns raised were addressed by the application of Best Management Practices and mitigation measures and were found to no raise significant issues. Copies of this decision will be forwarded to all interested parties and stakeholders.

III. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY AND/OR RELATED TO OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

The Whitewater Picnic and Catwalk National Trail project is located on the Glenwood Ranger District of the Gila National Forest. All Best Management Practices and activities of the project are consistent with the management direction, standards and guidelines, and goals and objectives found in the final Land and Resource Management Plan for the Gila National Forest (June 14, 1986), as amended, and its provisions, which were developed in accordance with the National Forest Management Act of 1976. 16(USC 1604(i) and 36 CFR 219.10(e). (list pages)

Endangered Species Act. Biological assessments and consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife is complete. There is a No Effect determination to threatened, endangered, or sensitive species.

National Historic Preservation Act. Heritage inventory, assessment of eligibility and effects, and report were completed. Significant historic properties are within and adjacent to the project area. Consultation with the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office is complete. There is a conditional No Adverse Effect determination for the historic properties.

Executive Order 11988 and Executive Order 11990 (floodplains and wetlands). Consultation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and New Mexico State Environment Department and acquisition of project permits is complete.

National Forest Management Act. The proposed action is consistent with the Gila National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LMP). The project supports the long-term goals and objectives listed in the LMP (pages 11-13). All applicable standards and guidelines found in the LMP will be followed (LMP pages 22-30,36,38,39,122,123)

A project planning worksheet for Wild and Scenic Rivers has been completed. A No Effect finding is on file at the Glenwood Ranger District.

IV. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW AND APPEAL

This decision is not subject to the appeal procedures for National Forest System projects and activities pursuant to 36 CFR 215.8(a)(4), Decisions Not Subject To Appeal.

V. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision may be implemented immediately.

VI. CONTACT PERSON

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Chris Hill at the Glenwood Ranger District, Gila National Forest, P.O. Box 8, Glenwood, NM 88039, or by calling (505) 539-2481.

LARRY RALEY
District Ranger

Date