

# **Decision Memo**

## **West Sedona Designated Dispersed Camping and Day-use Areas**

### **USDA Forest Service**

#### **Red Rock Ranger District, Coconino National Forest Yavapai County, Arizona**

May 9, 2022

The USDA Forest Service seeks to improve current conditions in a popular dispersed camping area on the Coconino National Forest's Red Rock Ranger District while protecting resources and public health and safety. The area near Forest Roads 525, 89B, and 9570 have suffered from irresponsible campsite creation; increased littering; inappropriate sanitation; and natural resource damage. The project's purpose is to (1) delineate already designated areas for day-use parking and dispersed overnight camping and (2) to execute an emergency closure order outside of these areas to dispersed camping and campfires to address the negative impacts to wildlife, rangeland, public health, and safety while minimizing soil disturbance and vegetation loss.

### **Background**

Over the past several years, public use of National Forest System (NFS) lands west of Sedona has enlarged substantially with population growth in surrounding communities and increased recreational activity. Use increased in this area, spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Higher dispersed camping participation has resulted in additional off-road vehicle travel along Forest Road (FR) 525 and the surrounding area between Cottonwood and Sedona. The convergence of this high level of use and the effects of multi-decadal drought expanded the "camping footprint" along miles of designated camping corridors resulting in increasing conflict with landowners and permittees; increasing risk of wildfire; and growing damage to vegetation, soils, scenic resources, water quality, and wildlife habitat.

The Coconino National Forest implemented travel management regulations in 2012 under the Travel Management Plan (signed Sept. 28, 2011), per the USDA Forest Service 2005 Travel Management Rule<sup>1</sup> (36 CFR §212 subpart B) governing motor vehicle use in compliance with agency regulations. Dispersed camping use, per the Coconino National Forest's Travel Management Plan,<sup>2</sup> allows:

- Vehicle use and dispersed camping within 30 feet of forest roads, unless designated otherwise.
- Vehicles in designated camping corridors<sup>3</sup> to travel up to 300 feet off one or both sides of designated routes for dispersed camping, with the intent to decrease impacts to visual resources and soil by preventing the loss of vegetation in grasslands/meadows.

The recent increase in recreational use has resulted in resource damage including loss of vegetation cover and native plants, introduction of invasive plants, and disruption of wildlife. Recreation management issues including

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<sup>1</sup> The Travel Management Rule is a collection of laws mandating National Forests designate which roads, trails, and areas are open to motor vehicle use, by vehicle type and time of year. Find more on the Coconino's [Travel Management webpage](#).

<sup>2</sup> Dispersed camping protocols are listed on p. 13 of the [Travel Management Plan Record of Decision](#).

<sup>3</sup> Designated camping corridors are shown on the Coconino's Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM)— see [MVUM webpage](#).

elevated noise levels, unattended campfires, and conflict with local landowners and permittees have also occurred due to the increase in use. As a result, demand for law enforcement patrols continues to increase for this area. Current conditions show that areas along FRs 525, 89B (Deer Pass Road), and 9570 have degraded due to the recreational demands of up to 250 separate dispersed campsites during the busy season, with much higher camping numbers throughout the broader area west of Sedona.

Trends were documented by Coconino National Forest staff from December 2019 through 2020. In 2020, recorded dispersed camping peaked in April and October, with some camping groups observed beyond the 14-day per month stay limit.<sup>4</sup>



**Image 1. Dispersed camping along FR 525 and the surrounding area has resulted in irresponsible campsite creation, expanding the “camping footprint” into unintended areas, interfering with wildlife and livestock access to water (shown in photo). Recreational use has resulted in increasing conflict with landowners and permittees; risk of wildfire; and damage to vegetation, soils, water quality, wildlife habitat, and scenic resources.**

## Purpose and Need

A need exists to better manage recreational activities, with prohibitions to protect resources as well as public health and safety. The purpose of this project, therefore, would be to close impacted lands; create designated areas for managed day-use parking and dispersed overnight camping; and prohibit campfires outside of designated areas to address resource protection and human safety.

Dispersed camping and campfire use pose risks to the surrounding lands, including adjacent private properties. Regulating campfire risk in this area will minimize the risk of wildfire and damage to private property.

The impacts in the area south and west of Sedona infringe on management guidance in the 2018 Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan<sup>5</sup>). Dispersed recreation consists of activities in less improved settings outside of or disconnected from developed or concessionaire-operated facilities. Dispersed camping is camping that takes place outside of a developed camping facility. Forest plan direction for dispersed recreation and camping includes:



**Image 2. Resource damage due to dispersed camping.**

<sup>4</sup> 14-day Per Month Stay Limit: Campers are allowed 14 days in a 30-day period on the Coconino National Forest, per a [forest order](#). Note some exceptions exist where the limit is less than 14 days.

<sup>5</sup> [Coconino Forest Plan](#): Find dispersed recreation desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and management approaches, beginning on p. 113.

- Areas used for dispersed recreation across the forest retain their natural character to the extent possible and have minimal evidence of human waste and litter, sanitation issues, and resource damage.
- Motorized vehicle use shall occur as identified on a designated system of roads, trails, and areas, including locations designated for motorized big game retrieval, as defined on the Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM), except for those uses authorized by law, permits, and orders in connection with resource management and public safety.
- To prevent motorized use outside of designated areas and routes, boundaries and routes should be clearly and uniformly identified.
- In designated dispersed camping sites and corridors, vegetation should be retained to provide shade and screening around hardened sites to preserve the recreation setting.
- Develop management plans and/or strategies through collaborative efforts for specific dispersed recreation activities and/or locations to address user needs, visitor safety, and resource protection.

## Proposed Action

The USDA Forest Service proposes to close approximately 32,130 acres<sup>6</sup> to camping and campfires through an emergency forest order and to delineate eight large dispersed camping areas; four day-use parking areas; and four information sites to continue use where it already occurs (see Maps 1, 2 and 3). These dispersed camping areas will accommodate approximately 200 campsites, which is a similar capacity demand as average weekend use.<sup>7</sup>

Currently, the Red Rock Ranger District closes approximately 50,520 acres to camping and campfires in the Red Rock Country-Oak Creek Canyon, Sedona, and surrounding areas. This project will add 32,130 acres to the existing closures, encompassing a total closure of 82,650 acres. This total acreage is less than 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the Red Rock Ranger District's 550,000 total acres (See Maps 2 and 3).

Actions to close areas west of Sedona to dispersed camping and campfires include:

- Removal of four existing designated camping corridors along FRs 525, 525C, 761, and 89B that total 13.3 miles or 483 acres from the MVUM (see Map 2).
- Install physical barriers and post signage to block access to denuded areas off existing roads not intended for public use. Over time, the Forest Service would add infrastructure to block access, as the need arises.
- Establish a [closure order](#) (anticipated for signature in summer 2022) for areas north and south of State Route (SR) 89A to dispersed camping and campfires.<sup>8</sup>
  - **North of SR 89A:** North of SR 89A the boundary will extend to the Red Rock-Secret Mountain Wilderness and the Sycamore Canyon Wilderness. The boundary travels west to FR 761 (Bill Gray Road), including 300 feet on the west side of FR 761. The boundary goes east to the existing Sedona camping and campfire closure.
  - **South of SR 89A:**<sup>9</sup> South of SR 89A, the boundary will extend west of County Road 50 (Page Springs Road) and east to the existing Sedona camping and campfire closure. The boundary travels south toward County Road 50 in Cornville. In addition, FR 9816 will be closed to camping and campfires for its 0.78 miles from County Road 30 (Cornville Road) leading to State Trust Land (to include 300 feet on both sides of the road).

<sup>6</sup> Approximate 32,130 acres of new closure would exist. This excludes overlap with the existing 1999 Sedona camping and campfire closure in [Forest Order #04-99-02-R](#).

<sup>7</sup> This National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process would not set capacity; capacity is assessed by limits to forest resources and to the number of vehicles able to fit within an area or location.

<sup>8</sup> Within the closure area, recreationists would not be able to park vehicles within 30 feet of any Forest Service road with an intent to camp or to park and hike into a dispersed area with an intent to camp remotely.

<sup>9</sup> This West Sedona camping closure will encompass prior closure areas along Deer Run Trailhead along FR 89B (closure order 03-04-19-10) and the Mormon Crossing/Spring Creek area (closure order 04-00-01-R).

Actions to improve day-use and designated dispersed camping areas include:

- Delineation of eight designated dispersed camping areas<sup>10</sup> in already disturbed areas along FR 525, 89B, and 9570 (see Map 1)—totaling 35.87 acres. Use of these eight areas will be on a first-come, first-served basis for dispersed camping with no fees. Dispersed camping areas will be identified with signs and the areas defined with large boulders.
  - Areas along FR 525 will be: Surprise (3.72 acres), Windmill (1.41 acres), Cockscomb (3.23 acres), Greasy Spoon (2.47 acres), and Nolan Loops (11.85 acres).
  - Areas along FR 89B will be: Javelina (1.24 acres) and Angel Valley (1.14 acres).
  - One area along FR 9570: Rockview (10.82 acres).
- Delineation of four day-use parking areas<sup>11</sup> with additional parking at two information portal locations in the FR 525 area utilizing previously disturbed areas (see Map 1). These day-use areas will support day-use activities such as hiking, hunting, OHV riding,<sup>12</sup> horseback riding, and star gazing.
- Install interpretive kiosks at four locations to map the newly designated camping areas and message camping regulations, Leave No Trace ethics, and natural and cultural resource information. Locations include newly designated information portal locations at Deer Pass Trailhead and Rockview dispersed camping area. Additional kiosks may be installed, including at the FR 525-152.C intersection, as needed to share information with the public.
- Enforcement of the Coconino National Forest's 14-day stay limit and closure areas.

Once established, this proposed project is expected to reduce conflicts among visitors and private property owners, who express growing concerns about illegal and abandoned campfires. The project will also reduce human waste, trash, stays over the 14-day limit, and further creep of campsite creation. Improvements would occur for wildlife habitat, restoration of fragile desert landscapes, resource monitoring, public safety, law enforcement, and fire risk.

## Decision

In response to the purpose and need for action, it has been decided to proceed with delineating the designated dispersed camping areas and day-use areas while closing other areas to these uses and to campfires.

## Decision Rationale

The decision to implement the West Sedona Designated Dispersed Camping and Day-use Areas project is based on the need to provide for resource protection and improve public health and safety. This project supports Forest Plan objectives and guidelines for dispersed recreation activities and the desired conditions, standards, and guidelines of the House Mountain-Lowlands Management Area.<sup>13</sup> In making this decision, feedback from key stakeholders and local government input has been considered.

**Phased Approach for Future Recreation Management:** This project is a temporary emergency action to address unacceptable resource impacts. Forest Service staff will monitor the results of these actions within and outside of the closure area for resource recovery and protection, as well as satisfaction with recreation opportunities and

<sup>10</sup> Camping would not be allowed outside of the designated dispersed camping areas.

<sup>11</sup> For day-use activities, vehicles are allowed to pull off any forest road up to 30 feet; therefore, day-use activities would not be affected within the closure area.

<sup>12</sup> Four established OHV trails exist in the project area: Ranch Loop OHV trail (near the FR 525 and SR 89A junction); the Diamondback Gulch OHV trail (close to FR 152C); Outlaw OHV trail (farthest down FR 525); and Cliffhanger OHV trail (east of FR 89B).

<sup>13</sup> Find House Mountain-Lowlands Management Area guidance in the Coconino Forest Plan, beginning on p. 154. A desired condition: "Low-density human uses are provided in the House Mountain-Lowlands MA. Examples of these uses include scenic viewing, OHV touring, hunting, wildlife viewing, and firewood cutting."

displacement of campers to other areas. Further development of recreation amenities within the day-use and dispersed camping locations may occur depending on recreation management direction and funding. The Red Rock Ranger District would plan to conduct additional NEPA environmental analysis, if needed, to establish infrastructure—like vault toilets and volunteer camp host sites—and long-term closures.

## Public Involvement

The USDA Forest Service sought input multiple times from key stakeholders on the proposed activities. Stakeholders included entities with jurisdictional or operational responsibilities in the areas west of Sedona—including the cities of Sedona and Cottonwood; the Yavapai County Sheriff's Department; and the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

On Aug. 23, 2021, the Forest Service presented the proposed project to approximately 75 people at a Sedona Chamber of Commerce pulse event, meant to allow for community engagement on current events, including Forest Service, city, and business updates.

On Sept. 1, 2021, a project proposal letter was sent to approximately a dozen key stakeholders to seek input through Sept. 15, 2021. Supportive comments for the proposed project included its benefit to resources and the landscape and protection to private landowners. An additional comment suggested additions to the closure area to improve rangeland conditions. These suggestions were considered.

Two issues arose, however, from comments tied to project implementation.

**Issue 1:** Displacement of long-term campers to nearby communities.

**Response 1:** The Forest Service will install kiosks in the area with information on rules and regulations. Maps showing the eight delineated dispersed camping locations in the area will be posted. Additionally, locations of developed and dispersed camping sites outside of the closure area will be referenced to visitors, including with links to the Coconino National Forest's MVUM map. Implementation of the project will be communicated with local communities and law enforcement to coordinate mitigation efforts.

**Issue 2:** An increase in altercations between visitors due to less area available for dispersed camping.

**Response 2:** Delineated dispersed camping and day-use recreation areas will be in the same locations where use has been occurring. Closure of other locations within the area to motorized use will reduce the camping footprint; however, law enforcement patrols may increase to assess the smaller area open to these uses.

## Tribal Consultation

Tribal consultation was conducted, with 13 letters sent April 1, 2022, to American Indian Tribes and Nations concerning the project. Tribal representatives requested an in-person meeting with District Ranger Amy Tinderholt to discuss the project. A meeting took place on April 28, 2022, and information about the project was discussed in detail. The tribal representatives present expressed support for the project plans.

## Exclusion from Further National Environmental Policy Act Analysis

The Forest Service NEPA regulations (36 CFR 220) provide that a proposed action may be categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation through an environmental impact statement (EIS) or environmental assessment (EA) only if no extraordinary circumstances exist. The applicable category in 36 CFR 220.6 is:

- (d)(1): Orders issued pursuant to 36 CFR part 261 – prohibitions to provide short-term resource protection or to protect public health and safety.

Evaluation of the following resource conditions indicates that no extraordinary circumstances are present in the project areas. As a result, further analysis and documentation as an EA or EIS is not necessary.

**Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species** – The biological specialist review, dated March 11, 2022, found the proposed action will have no effect on any federally threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate species or critical habitat. The project will not change habitat or population trends for any Forest Service-designated sensitive species, nor would it alter habitat conditions for these species. The project will not result in take of bald or golden eagles as described in the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. Nor would this project result in a change in population trend for any migratory bird species.

**Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds** – There are no floodplains or flood-prone areas, wetlands or municipal watersheds in the project area. Compliance with Executive Order 11988 (Floodplains) requires that agencies restore and preserve the natural and beneficial values served by floodplains, evaluate potential effects on floodplains, consider alternatives to avoid adverse effects in floodplains, and minimize potential harm to floodplain function. The decision is compliant with Executive Order 11988 because the project will not have any potential effect on floodplains.

**Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas** – The project does not occur in any wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.

**Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas** – The project does not occur in any inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas.

**Research natural areas** – No research natural areas are within or adjacent to the project area. There will be no effect to research natural areas.

**American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites** – Tribal consultation in April 2022 indicated the need to protect sites and places where events took place of importance to American Indian Tribes in and around the project area. If any additional places of spiritual or traditional cultural importance are discovered during project activities, further American Indian Tribal consultation will be carried out.

**Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas** – A cultural resources report, No. 2009-27-I, was completed for the project on May 2, 2022. The project area has been 100% surveyed for cultural resources. Avoidance measures as well as periodic construction inspections are recommended at sites: AR-03-04-06-00037, AR-03-04-06-00536, AR-03-04-06-00559, AR-03-04-06-01314, AR-03-04-06-01514, AR-03-04-06-01519, and AR-03-04-06-01523. If any additional cultural resources are discovered during project activities, a Forest Service archaeologist will be notified; work will stop within 30 feet of the discovery; and site protection measures will be undertaken.

## Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

**Coconino National Forest Plan:** This project is consistent with the goals, objectives, and management standards of the 2018 Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan.

**National Historic Preservation Act:** Cultural resource surveys have been completed and reviewed by the Forest Archeologist in Report No. 2009-27-I, dated May 2, 2022. Results indicate that there will be no effects to the cultural resources of the area provided that sites AR-03-04-06-00037, AR-03-04-06-00536, AR-03-04-06-00559, AR-03-04-06-01314, AR-03-04-06-01514, AR-03-04-06-01519, and AR-03-04-06-01523 are avoided. Monitoring or site inspections shall take place during construction to ensure that the conditions of the cultural heritage clearance are carried out.

**American Indian Religious Freedom Act:** American Indian Tribal consultation occurred for this project. Letters to 13 tribes or nations were mailed on April 1, 2022. Responses, to date, have been supportive of the project.

**Endangered Species Act:** The Forest Service biologist has developed a biological review for the proposed project area, which considered potential impacts on federally threatened, endangered or proposed species and their habitats. The biological specialist review found that this project will have no effect on any federally threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate species or designated or proposed critical habitat.

**Migratory Bird Treaty Act:** On Jan. 10, 2001, President Clinton signed an Executive Order outlining responsibilities of federal agencies to protect migratory birds. Upon review of the information regarding neotropical migratory birds and the scope of the project, the Forest Service wildlife biologist determined that no significant loss of migratory bird habitat is expected from implementation of this project.

**Clean Water Act:** Public Law 92-500, as amended in 1977 (Public Law 95-217) and 1987 (Public Law 100-4) (also known as the Federal Clean Water Act) provides the structure for regulating pollutant discharges to waters of the United States. In Arizona, the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality enforces the Clean Water Act.

**Clean Air Act:** This decision is in compliance with the Clean Air Act, which defines the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for various sources of pollutants that must be met to protect human health and welfare, including visibility.

**Executive Order 12898 - Environmental Justice:** No environmental justice concerns are anticipated to arise or were raised by the public during scoping.

## Administrative Review Opportunities

This decision is not subject to administrative review opportunities, including objections pursuant to 36 CFR 218.

## Implementation Date

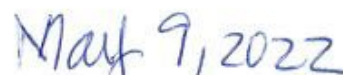
Implementation may begin immediately upon signature of this decision. The National Forest Foundation is assisting the USDA Forest Service with funding for the project.

## For More Information

For additional information concerning this decision, contact District Recreation Program Manager Chris Johansen at 8375 State Route 179, Sedona, AZ, 86351, or by email at [christopher.johansen@usda.gov](mailto:christopher.johansen@usda.gov) or by phone at (928) 203-7529. For project documents, see the West Sedona Designated Dispersed Camping and Day-use Areas [project website](#) or <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61655>.



AMY TINDERHOLT  
District Ranger



DATE

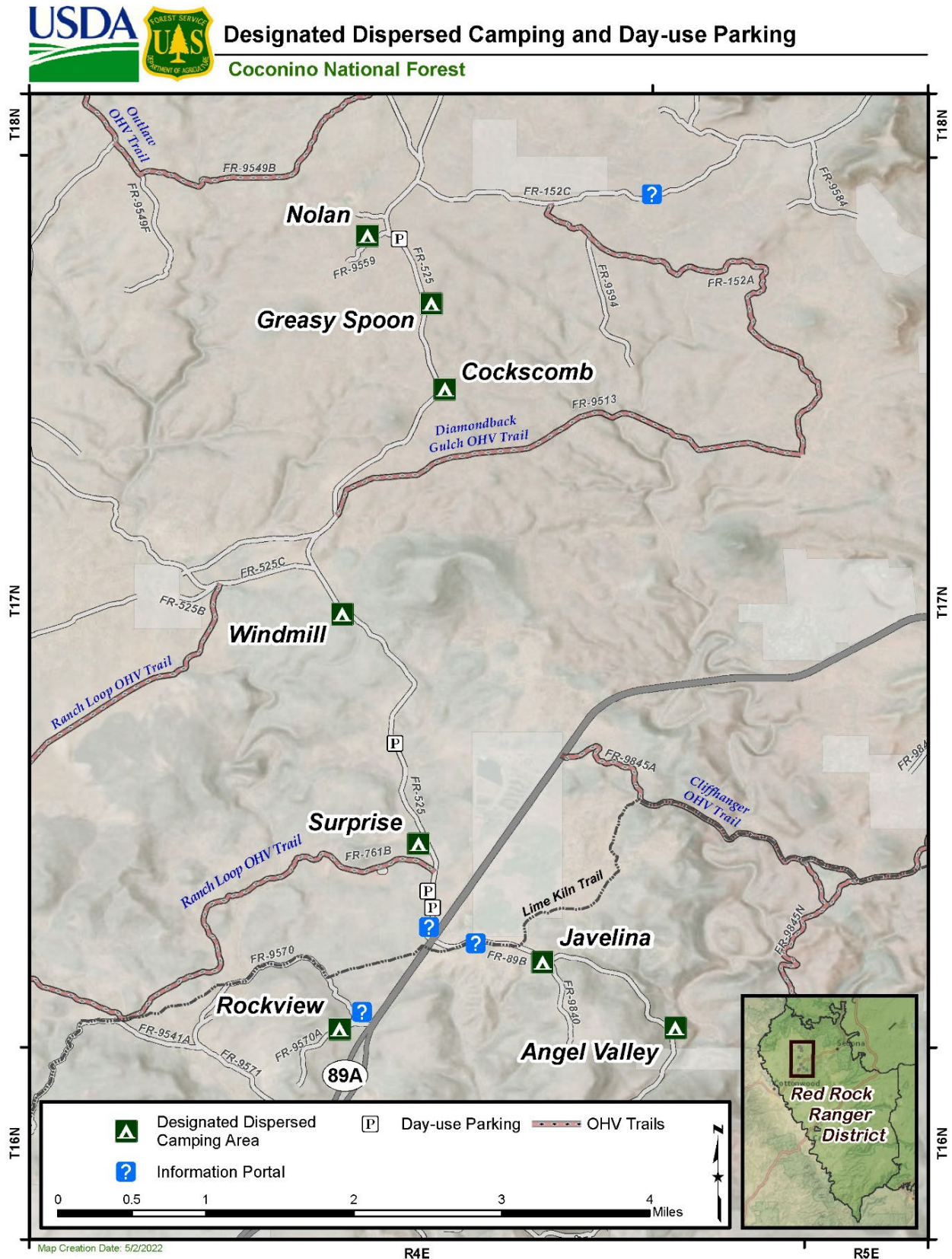
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Map 1: Designated Dispersed Camping and Day-use Parking Areas

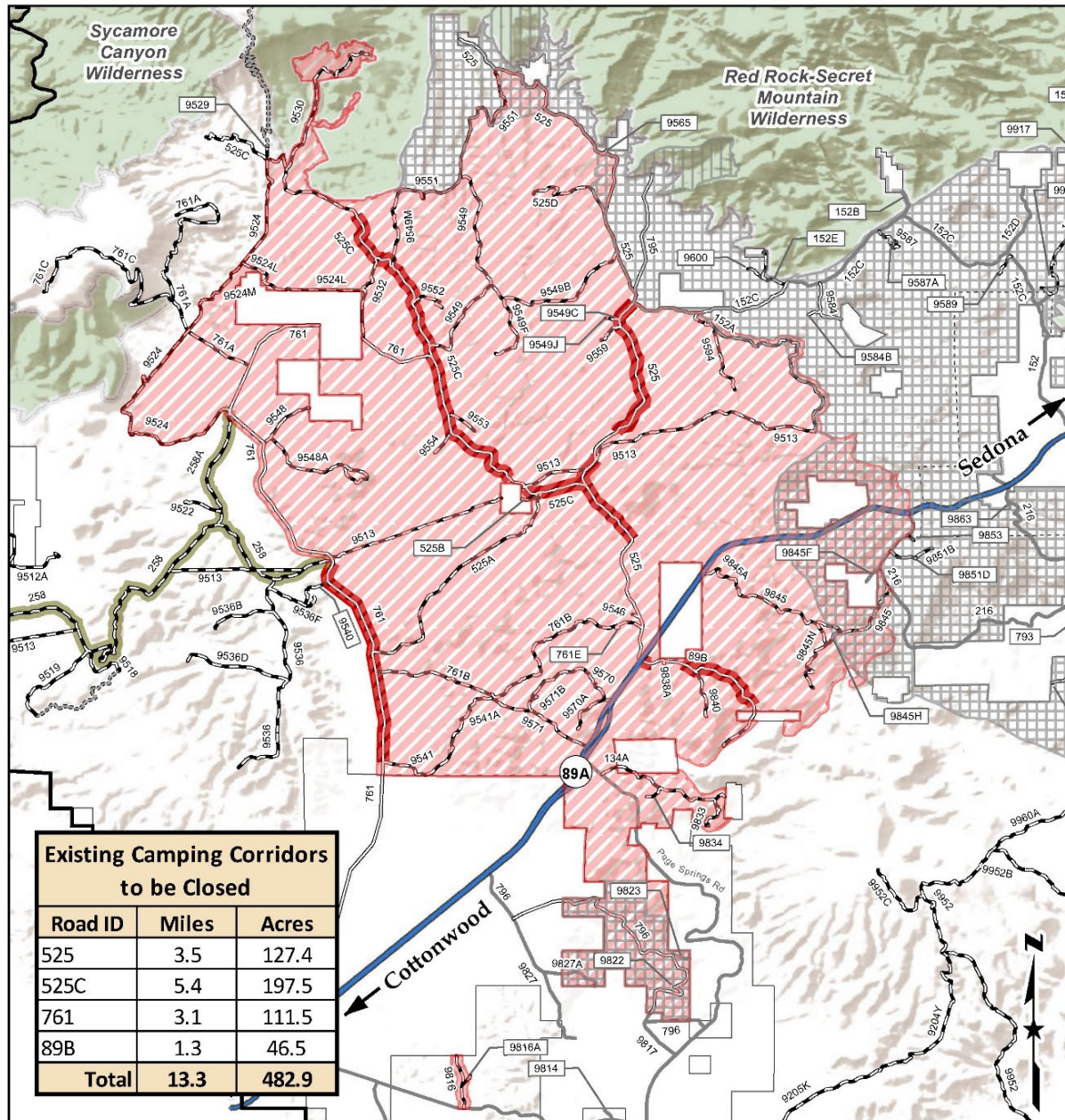


Map 2: Closure Area with Closed Camping Corridors



## West Sedona Dispersed Camping and Campfire Restrictions

### Coconino National Forest, Red Rock Ranger District

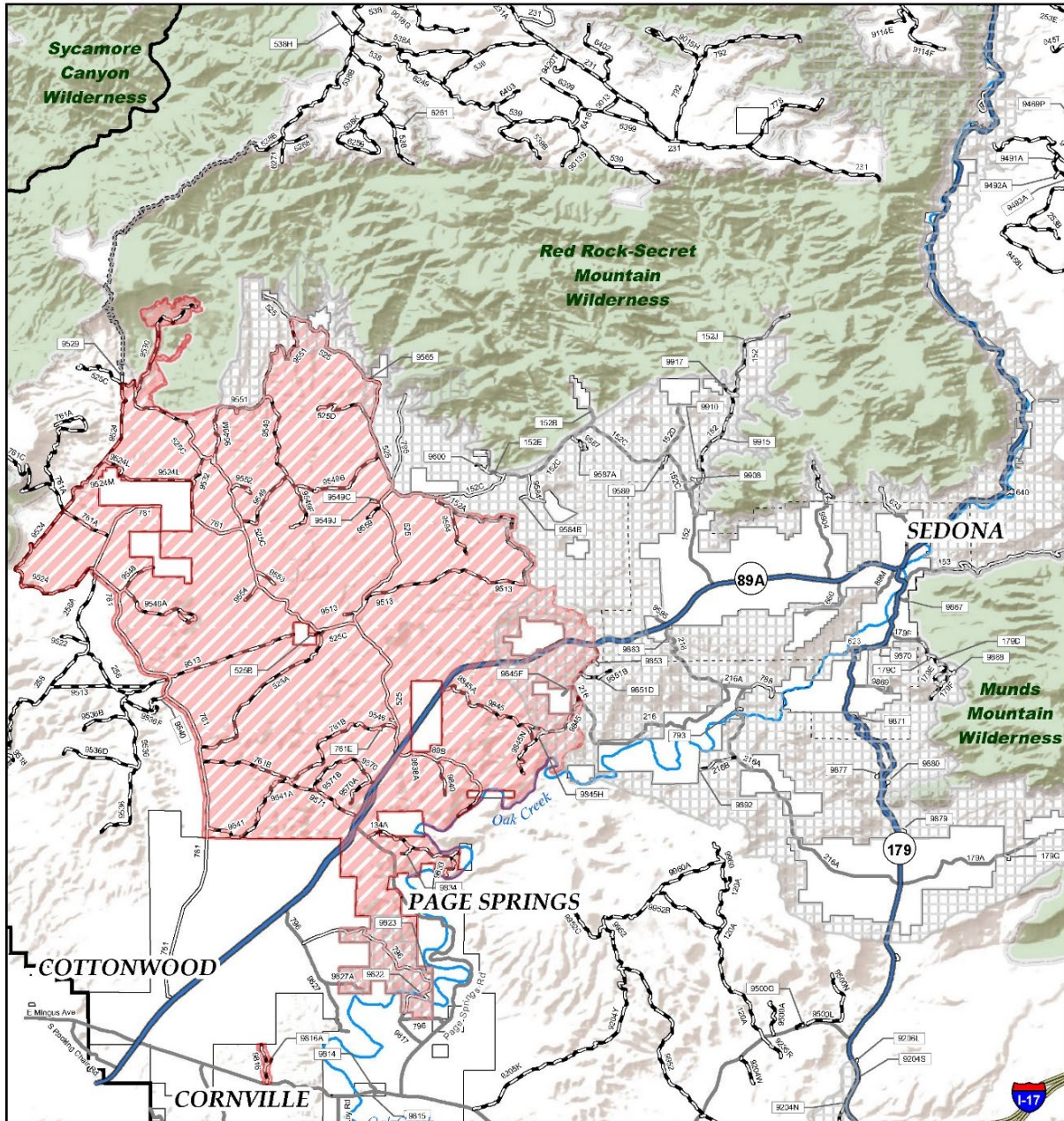


Map 3: West Sedona Closure Area Beside Existing Sedona Camping and Campfire Closure



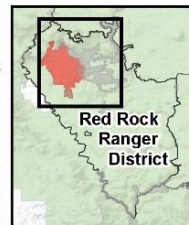
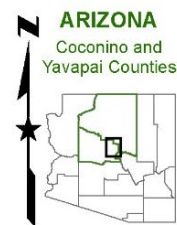
## West Sedona Camping and Campfire Restrictions

### Coconino National Forest, Red Rock Ranger District



#### Legend

- Restricted Area
- Current Forest Orders**
- Camping and Campfire Restrictions
- Campfire Restrictions



Map Creation Date: 5/2/2022