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**File Code:** 1950; 2720  
**Date:** January 19, 2017

Dear Interested Party:

In March 2016, Coconino National Forest issued a Draft Environmental Assessment that proposed revising 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 adjacent City of Sedona and private properties as a result of the high volume of motorized traffic accessing the forest.

### **The Objection Process**

On September 16, 2016, we published the Legal Notice of the objection period for the Soldier's Pass Motorized Use Project Final Environmental Assessment (EA) and Draft Decision Notice. By the close of the objection filing period on October 31, 2016, we received 64 email and postal mail submissions related to the project. Of those, 16 were considered eligible objections meeting the requirements of 36 CFR 218.8(d).

This letter contains a summary of the written response to those objections issued by the Objection Review Officer. The actual objection response letters can be accessed on the project website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=38555>.

### **Objection Summary**

The objectors raised approximately 10 distinct issues in their objections. The issues included setting a precedent for management of other roads and trails in the area, concerns over potential negative economic impacts, a lack of mitigations to minimize noise and manage recreational conflicts, and others associated with the selection of modified Alternative B in the draft Decision. By far the most prevalent concern with the draft Decision was the closure of Soldier's Pass Road to all public motorized users, with the exception of exclusive motorized access by a single commercial entity. Most objectors were also in favor of keeping some opportunities for public motorized use access, such as through a permit system.

### **Objection Resolution Meetings**

On November 17, 2016, Administrative Review Coordinator, Roxanne Turley, sent all 16 objectors an email invitation to convene a meeting to discuss objector's concerns about the Soldier's Pass Motorized Use Project. Nine of the 16 objectors attended at least one of three meetings held at the Red Rock Ranger District on December 14, 2016.



The Reviewing Officer also had the opportunity to meet and discuss concerns and issues with the Mayor and City Manager of the City of Sedona, as well as the homeowners surrounding the Soldier's Pass Road.

The Reviewing Officer, considered all information brought forward throughout the objection review and issued the instructions below.

### **Instructions**

I am instructed to choose a different alternative than that reflected in the draft Decision. Rather than selecting a modified Alternative B, I am instructed to select Alternative C, as identified in the preliminary EA. This instruction responds 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 roads and trails.

Alternative C will allow unguided, public motorized use of the road only through a permitting system, which will regulate the amount of use and address issues presented in the Environmental Assessment (EA). This alternative responds to the issue of fairness between permitted outfitter-guide use and public motorized access, which was a key concern in the public comments and objections received as part of the planning process. By continuing to allow motorized public access through a permit system, these instructions also address the overwhelming concern that other motorized trails in the area will be closed to public motorized use due to similar issues.

I am also directed to convene a collaborative group to develop and implement the permit system for managing public motorized use. The intent of the collaborative group will be to develop a permit system that incorporates community and neighborhood values, as well as motorized recreation opportunities for private users of the area. While this process takes place, Soldiers Pass Road will be closed to public motorized use during interim management to encourage as much participation as possible in collaborative efforts to develop a permit system. Once the permit system and associated infrastructure have been developed, a maximum of 12 public use permits per day may be issued for public motorized use on Soldier's Pass Road.

The authorized outfitter-guide for the Soldier's Pass Road will also be allowed 12 vehicle trips per day, no more than 2 at one time, and up to 4,380 vehicle trips per year.

The collaborative effort will develop a framework to ensure that permits are issued to private individuals and not jeep/OHV rental companies and to monitor the system to verify it is working as intended. Results from this monitoring may subsequently be used to make adjustments in the permitting system to continually improve the management of motorized use in the project area, if appropriate.

Through the objections process it was also brought to our attention that we should not have referred to a specific permit holder in the EA, as changes in the permit holder may occur over time. The wording in the EA to be more generic in its description and refer to the "permit-holder" rather than a specific outfitter-guide company.

### **Next Steps**

The instructions in the objection response will be incorporated into a Decision Notice. Once signed, the Decision Notice brings the National Environmental Policy Act planning process to a conclusion and implementation can begin. Implementation of this decision will begin through the installation of a gate and convening of a collaborative group to help design, monitor, and manage a permit system for continuing public motorized access.

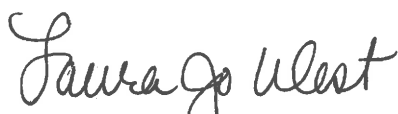
### **Conclusion**

The rationale for this project is based on meeting the purpose and need of addressing conflicts with the current Forest Plan and to reduce conflicts that are occurring on adjacent City of Sedona and private properties. While the final decision will more closely resemble Alternative C than the Modified Alternative B, which was identified in the draft decision, this change will more effectively address additional concerns that were shared through public involvement in comments and objections. . As described above, the agency has made a reasonable and appropriate effort to resolve the concerns that were brought forward, while maintaining a balanced approach to managing the lands and meeting the purpose of the project.

Having received this instruction, I am proceeding with the issuance of a final Decision Notice for this project once all instructions have been addressed. There will be no further review of this response by any other Forest Service or U.S. Department of Agriculture official as per 36 CFR 218.11(b)(2).

If you have questions, please contact Julie Rowe, Project Lead, at 928-203-7516 or [jrowe@fs.fed.us](mailto:jrowe@fs.fed.us).

Sincerely,



LAURA JO WEST  
Forest Supervisor