

Proposal for a National Conservation Area in the Walnut Canyon Study Area

Goals of National Conservation Areas

“National Conservation Areas (NCAs) are designated by Congress to conserve, protect, enhance, and manage public land areas for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. NCAs feature exceptional natural, recreational, cultural, wildlife, aquatic, archeological, paleontological, historical, educational, and/or scientific resources.” The defining quotation is from the website of the Bureau of Land Management, which administers a dozen or more National Conservation Areas. Three of those NCAs are in Arizona: Gila Box Riparian, Las Cienegas, and San Pedro Riparian. Any federal land management agency may administer a National Conservation Area.

Proposal (in broad outline)

The Walnut Canyon Study Area, exclusive of the existing Walnut Canyon National Monument (WCNM), will become a National Conservation Area, designated congressionally and administered by the Forest Service.

Noteworthy features and exceptions, which will be embodied in the legislation, are as follows.

Land

1. A jurisdictional issue will be settled definitively: the National Park Service will receive explicit and full administrative jurisdiction over the two 500'-wide strips of land along WCNM's paved entrance road, an area whose status has been the subject of debate.
2. The State Land Department will retain all rights to its lands within the Study Area.
3. Owners of private land in the two county islands near Lake Mary Road will retain all of their existing rights.
4. The inholders of the “Santa Fe dam” private property will retain all of their existing rights.
5. The private land in the extreme northeastern corner of the Study Area will be excluded from the NCA.
6. “Congressional designation” of the NCA implies, of course, that all federal land within the NCA is protected from exchange or development. Only an additional act of Congress can

change that status. Thus the federal land will enjoy the *same* high level of protection that Congress gives to national parks.

Uses

1. *Hunting*. The Arizona Game and Fish Department will retain management responsibilities where they currently exist. Thus, subject to prudent management decisions, hunting will continue where it currently exists.

2. *Grazing*. Grazing will continue to be permitted where it is currently permitted (subject to prudent management decisions).

3. *Hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding* will continue as currently permitted (subject to prudent management decisions). [Implicit here is that the Flagstaff Loop Trail will be completed as currently planned and that appropriate connections will be constructed.]

Other uses will be addressed in the management plan.

Management Plan

Within two years of the establishment of an NCA, the Forest Service will develop a comprehensive management plan for the long-term management of the public lands within the NCA. Consultation with the NPS will be at the forefront. The Forest Service will consult also with state, county, and city agencies and commissions, with Native American tribes, with the public at large, and with current permittees. Integral to the process will be the formation of an advisory committee. The committee will consist of representatives from the constituencies that currently use, own, manage, or venerate the land within the Study Area.

Among the items addressed by the management plan will be motorized access and potential special protection for the western inner canyon (the canyon segment below the rim from the western boundary of WCNM to the meadow below Fisher Point).

More information about NCAs

As noted earlier, Arizona currently has three National Conservation Areas. The most recent addition is Las Cienegas NCA, located south of Tucson and established in the year 2000. A copy of the legislation that established Las Cienegas NCA can be found on the NCA's home page. The easiest route is this: type "Las Cienegas NCA" into Google and then select a site that starts with "www.blm.gov." Finally, click on "Public Law 106-538" in the right-hand sidebar.

A *Fact Sheet* for Las Cienegas NCA said "Activities that were permitted on BLM lands before the designation of the NCA are still permitted except for the filing of new mining claims and mineral leasing." In practice, you can think of a National Conservation Area as a multiple-

use area (in the sense that the Forest Service uses the phrase) that Congress has protected against land exchange and hence against development.

In September 2002, at a joint meeting of the Flagstaff City Council and the Coconino County Board of Supervisors, Jerry Flannery, Deputy County Manager, presented a staff report on options for addressing the future of the Walnut Canyon Study Area. Among the options was pursuit of a National Conservation Area administered by the Forest Service.

Perspective

An article by Anne Minard in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, 13 February 2002, had the following to say about remarks by Sam Henderson, who at that time was Superintendent of the Flagstaff Area National Monuments.

The area doesn't have to become a park, Henderson says, to be managed effectively for the resource values at hand. "There are endless opportunities for compromises," he said. "There are alternatives that require no expansion at all."

In a spirit of seeking middle ground, I propose a National Conservation Area, designated by Congress and administered by the Forest Service.

Proposed by

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