

Kingman Daily Miner

Nature Page

January 16, 2008

The Great Outdoors

Story: Wilderness groups stop water project in Black Mtns.

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Everyone knows that the key to life in the desert is water.

Without it, nothing can live in that harsh environment.

So why would a number of wilderness groups oppose the renovation of a pre-existing critical wildlife water in the southern end of the Black Mountains?

That is the question that I am trying hard to figure out.

The project that was proposed is at a small desert pothole that is called Tipperary Tank. The waterhole has been there for many years and serves all the animals including the native desert bighorn sheep that live in this desolate and rugged portion of the Blacks.

The Arizona Game & Fish Department, who initiated the request to renovate the waterhole, and the Bureau of Land Management who oversees requests for projects like this in wilderness areas, got together and wrote a report called “Minimum requirements decision process for the renovation of Tipperary Tank (MRDG).”

Here is what the authors of the report said the project would do.

- 1) “The project is necessary to increase water retention by reducing evaporation and sealing cracks in the pothole.”
- 2) “The project would also replace the existing fence with one that requires little or no maintenance.”
- 3) “The renovation would improve wildlife access to water in the catchment and would reduce the number of maintenance inspection trips required to the site from monthly to semi-annually.”

The bottom line is that this project would ensure a permanent water source that would be available to the native bighorn sheep and other game and non-game species that inhabit the area.

Seems like a no brainer, right?

Wrong.

Because this project is in the Warm Springs Wilderness Area, it stirred quite the interest with three Arizona wilderness groups, none of which I might add are from this area.

The three groups, which included the Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club, the Arizona Wilderness Coalition and Wilderness Watch, sent in letters that have effectively stopped the project in its tracks.

Here is the crux of the problem. To get to the site requires either a three or four-mile strenuous hike through some rugged country, depending on where you start out from.

The renovation project would use volunteer labor, primarily members of the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society, who would be flown into the site by helicopter. Choppers would also fly in the needed materials including a camo shade to cover the water from the blazing sun that would blend into the surrounding environment.

But this project concept did sit well with these groups. Here are some excerpts from the actual letters that were sent in to the BLM blasting this project.

Sandy Bahr is the conservation outreach director for the Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club. Bahr wrote in her two-page letter, "First of all we question the purpose and need for a tank renovation."

George Nickas, executive director for the Wilderness Watch group wrote in his four-page letter, "We believe the proposed project is incompatible with the areas wilderness designation....the forces of nature, not the whims of man, should determine the numbers of bighorn sheep in this area."

Kevin-Gaither-Banchoff is the executive director of the Arizona Wilderness Coalition . Banchoff wrote that the group's mission statement is "to permanently protect and restore Wilderness and other wild lands and waters in Arizona for the enjoyment of all citizens and to ensure that Arizona's native plants and animals have a lasting home in wild nature."

Yet one of the concerns that the letter from AWC listed was stated, "Generally the EA addresses that a MRDG process was conducted but the key questions of, is the project necessary to protect or enhance wilderness values, and what is the minimum tool is not clearly explained as it would and should be in the MRDG."

I have a couple of questions for these folks.

I wonder if any of them has ever set foot in this area and know what it looks like and where the project is located?

They suggest that all materials and the volunteers who would work on the project should go to the site by foot, and not by helicopter. The items to be brought in include but are

not limited to pipe railing, cement, corrugated metal, two generators, a rock drill, two electric drills, electric screw guns, and a chop saw.

Does anyone really think that the impact on this wilderness area would be less with having 20 or more people and mules traipsing in and out on foot for a long period of time versus being flown in and out by helicopter?

What happens now is that the local BLM office must address the questions that have been posed by the three groups.

Don McClure at BLM will then make a decision. McClure has basically three options.

He can stop the project, and not allow it to happen at all, modify the proposed plans and allow it to proceed, or he can approve it as proposed.

Then the interested parties, in this case the wilderness people, will have 30 days to make a written protest of McClure's decision if they don't like what he does.

If that happens, the project is put on hold indefinitely. The case is then transferred from the BLM to the Department of the Interior's office of hearings and appeals. Ultimately it could before the Bureau's Interior Board of Land Appeals, where an administrative law judge would make a final decision.

That process could take years before a decision is finalized.

In the mean time, the animals out there that have been relying on this water source for years will be at the mercy of fickle rains.

I accept the fact that we have designated wilderness areas and the actions allowed therein are subject to more stringent rules.

I accept the fact that these same groups will never offer monetary support nor labor to help out wildlife in wilderness or other areas.

Sportsmen have in the past and will continue into the future carry on their backs the burden of providing for the protection and preservation of all wildlife in this nation, whether in wilderness or not.

However, for these groups to purposely stop or delay the renovation of a pre-existing water source that is desperately needed by the wildlife that live in this harsh desert environment is just outrageous!