

## **Trail Challenges and Vegetative Improvement after Fire in the Chiricahua Wilderness: local Forest Service perspective**

**Cindy C...**discussions with Forest Service after fire  
**December 2018**

“Seven years after a fire are when we see most trees coming down,” noted Zac Ribbing, former trails coordinator on the Douglas Ranger District who started work to restore trails in the iconic Chiricahua Wilderness. Given the large Horseshoe 2 Fire of 2011, trail work will be a challenge for some time. Ribbing, who transferred to another ranger district, now confronts trails damaged by the Monument Fire, also in 2011, which burned 30,000 acres in Miller Peak Wilderness in the Huachucas. “So the Huachucas are proving that to me again.”

It’s constant work to keep up these trails; some of them are just brutal to keep open,” Ribbing said. Shortly before our 2018 visit, he had worked several days digging out Snowshed Trail tread on eroding mountain side slope. “I agree it looks like no one ever worked on this trail. We keep losing it to erosion and vegetation.” Ribbing also was amazed by aggressive desert ceanothus which rapidly covers post-fire trails with sharp thorny brush (ironically with sweet-smelling white flowers). “We’ve seen it seven feet high in some of the canyons.”

Ribbing said that ironically, his trail crew completely reworked the Witch Ridge Trail and connecting trails in Fife, Hoovey and Green canyons just before the Horseshoe 2 Fire. “That Witch Ridge Trail was just pristine.” The trail, which contours along a ridge on northwest end of the wilderness, is mostly washed out or covered with down logs and thorny brush.

Ribbing and District Ranger Doug Ruppel offered some background on what we observed in the Chiricahuas. Over the years, Ribbing recruited an excellent volunteer trail crew; some even trained as certified sawyers (able to operate a crosscut saw necessary to saw out big logs in wilderness where chainsaws aren’t allowed). The Sierra Club and Arizona Wilderness Coalition clear trails on yearly service trips. Some heavy maintenance work is done by contract with Arizona Conservation Corps (formerly Southwest Conservation Corps and Coconino Rural Environment Corp) that provide outdoor work for youth.

The Monte Visa Lookout has been staffed in summer with a couple who operate both as fire lookouts and visitor contact, a win-win for fire management and recreation on the district. Ruppel thinks visitor use overall has changed a lot over the years; fewer backpackers, more day hikers. In addition, he thinks some visitors are afraid to camp overnight in more remote southern Arizona mountains because of concerns and internet stories on border crime.

The burned Rustler Park campground, although rebuilt and reopened in 2015, is less used since the fire. When we passed through, it was closed to public from the bottom due to hazard trees, which were subsequently removed.

Asked about more cattle in the wilderness, Ruppel said “cattle are using the country differently because of vegetative response” since the Horseshoe 2 Fire. The Crest and higher elevations formerly were heavily forested with old-growth conifer and had little understory plants.

Abundant post-fire grasses are attracting cattle to forage higher up the drainages and onto the Crest. “We’re aware of it, monitoring the pockets of use.”

Overall, Ruppel added, “the long- term story is still being written after the Horseshoe 2 Fire. Although we had high intensity burn in the higher elevations and negative downstream effects, the lower and mid-elevation areas benefited from the reduction in woody species. Our 22 grazing allotments on the Chiricahuas are in better shape because of the forest response.”

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