

Rob Adams

From: Edward_Bennett@nps.gov on behalf of Paula_Homan@nps.gov
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To: spirithorse@clearwire.net; president@sbbchidaho.org
Subject: Availability of Environmental Assessment for Mule Operations and Stock Use in Grand Canyon National Park

Attachments: 3.16.10 News Release Mule Operations and Stock Use Available.doc



3.16.10 News
Release Mule Ope...

(See attached file: 3.16.10 News Release Mule Operations and Stock Use Available.doc)
Grand Canyon News Release

Release date: Immediate
Contact(s): Maureen Oltrogge
Shannan Marcak
Phone number(s): 928-638-7779
928-638-7958
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National Park Service Announces Availability of Environmental Assessment for Mule Operations and Stock Use in Grand Canyon National Park

Grand Canyon, Ariz. – Grand Canyon National Park Superintendent Steve Martin today announced the availability of an Environmental Assessment (EA) for Mule Operations and Stock Use in Grand Canyon National Park. The EA will be available for public review and comment for a period of 45 days, beginning March 16, 2010.

The purpose of this EA is to examine environmental impacts associated with commercial, private and administrative stock use – guided by the following objectives:

- Provide opportunities for mule and stock use within Grand Canyon National Park to as large a cross section of visitors as practicable.
- Establish appropriate levels and types of stock use (i.e. number of stock per day, group size) on park trails that will allow for improved maintenance and reduced resource impacts and costs associated with trail maintenance.
- Through improved maintenance and operations, reduce conflicts between stock users and hikers on park trails.
- Identify optimal stock facility locations, including associated infrastructure size and locations for improving health, safety and overall visitor experience.

The EA evaluates five alternatives including a No-Action Alternative. The No-Action Alternative would continue current mule operations and stock use within the national park. The four Action Alternatives, including the Preferred Alternative (Alternative B), propose the following common elements: continued limited commercial use at Tuweep, no commercial stock use on Whitmore Trail, trail monitoring, use of an adaptive management strategy, continued trail maintenance and funding, temporary trail closures, removal of mule waste from trails, education of trail users, implementation of annual limits on commercial mule rides, general retention of stock facilities, and continued administrative stock use.

The Preferred Alternative, Alternative B, also includes the following pending the ability

to maintain park trails:

South Rim Commercial Stock Use

Up to 10,000 commercial mule rides, including inner canyon and above rim rides would be offered each year. (current annual average use - 8,315 rides)

On Bright Angel Trail, up to 10 rides per day would be allowed to Phantom Ranch. Plateau Point day rides from the South Rim would not be offered under this alternative.

On South Kaibab Trail, up to 10 rides per day from Phantom Ranch; plus up to 12 pack stock would be allowed to Phantom Ranch each day (round trip).

An above the rim ride from Yaki Point area east toward Shoshone Point would be allowed at a level of 40 rides per day (the concessioner would be responsible for maintenance of the rim trail through their operating plan).

The current mule barn in Grand Canyon Village would house a small number of concessioner stock; the majority of concessioner stock operations would be moved to the South Kaibab Trailhead.

North Rim Commercial Use

Up to 8,000 commercial mule rides, including inner canyon and above rim rides, would be offered each year. (current annual average use - 7,072 rides)

On the North Kaibab Trail, up to 40 rides per day would be allowed to the Supai Tunnel with no more than 20 rides on the trail at one time. The North Kaibab Trail would be open for commercial stock to the Supai Tunnel, but not to Roaring Springs.

Up to 40 one-hour rides on the Ken Patrick Trail to the Uncle Jim junction would be allowed per day with no more than 20 mules on this section of trail at any one time.

Up to 20 half-day rides to Uncle Jim Point would be allowed daily.

The hitching rail at Uncle Jim Point would remain in place and a one-stall composting toilet would be installed to replace the existing temporary toilet.

Private Stock Use

Overnight below the rim groups would be allowed with up to six stock and six people per group. Day use (allowed both above and below the rim) would be allowed up to 12 stock and 12 people per group.

As stated above, under all Action Alternatives, a monitoring and adaptive management strategy would be used to assess trail and resource conditions.

Inner canyon corridor trails are subject to significant annual erosion, seasonal flooding and rockslides, and acute wear from mule concessions on both the North and South Rims of Grand Canyon National Park. Due to years of continuous use and limited funds the trails have fallen into disrepair.

Inner canyon corridor trails are difficult to navigate for both hikers and mules, and in some areas, multiple trails have developed because the trails are too steep or extremely rutted. Support walls and structures need upgrading and rebuilding to improve safety conditions for both hikers and stock users alike.

Each year, the park receives numerous complaints regarding trail conditions and mule waste on the trails. Both stock users and hikers have expressed concerns regarding the safety of stock users, the lack of knowledge regarding trail etiquette from hikers and discourtesy from some stock users.

An annual budget of approximately \$3 million dollars is needed to adequately maintain the park's corridor trails; however, the park only receives between \$1.5 and \$2 million annually through entrance fees, concessions franchise fees and other sources for trail maintenance and repair. Additionally, deferred maintenance costs on inner canyon corridor trails currently exceeds \$24 million (GRCA PAMP 2006) - unless management actions are taken in the near future, trails will continue to fall into disrepair and deferred maintenance costs will continue to increase.

Through the proposed adaptive management strategy, the park would monitor the cost of trail maintenance, trail conditions, total deferred maintenance costs, stock and hiker use levels, and resource conditions. This information would be used by park managers to implement additional actions if necessary (i.e. park managers could choose to further limit stock use or close trails to stock use permanently or seasonally or limit human use (seasonally, number per day, etc.)).

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, calls on federal agencies to consider environmental impacts as part of their decision making process and to involve interested parties in the process.

The NEPA process for this project was initiated in May of 2009 with a public scoping letter soliciting issues and concerns on preliminary proposals. Responses to these scoping efforts were used during preparation of the EA.

The EA can be reviewed online at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/grca> by clicking on the project name, and then scrolling to "Open for Public Comments." Comments can be submitted online at the same Web address (the preferred method), mailed to Steve Martin, Superintendent, Grand Canyon National Park, Attention: Stock Use EA, P.O. Box 129, Grand Canyon, Arizona 86023 or provided at one of the public meetings listed below. Comments will be accepted through April 30, 2010.

The National Park Service will host three public meetings, as announced last week, to provide information and answer questions on the EA. The meetings will be in an open house format with a brief introduction at the beginning of each meeting provided by park staff. The public is invited to stop by at any time between 4:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. at one of the following locations:

March 22, 2010	Grand Canyon, AZ	South Rim/Community Building
March 24, 2010	Kanab, UT	Holiday Inn Express 217 South 100 East
March 25, 2010	Flagstaff, AZ	Little America Hotel 2515 E. Butler Avenue

The National Park Service encourages public participation through the NEPA process. After the public review period, the comments received will be carefully considered before a decision is made regarding implementation of actions on mule operations and stock use in Grand Canyon National Park.

For additional information, please contact Rachel Bennett, Environmental Protection Specialist, at 928-638-7326.

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Maureen Oltrogge
Public Affairs Officer
Grand Canyon National Park
(928) 638-7779
(928) 638-7609 fax
maureen_oltrogge@nps.gov

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