

SUMMARY REPORT

Travel Management Planning in the Middle Gila Canyons Area

Results of the Collaborative Workshops



Prepared for the
Bureau of Land Management
by the
U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution

June 2007

Introduction

The Middle Gila Canyons area is located in south-central Arizona, in the vicinity of Florence and Superior, in Pinal County. The area has a long history of multiple use including grazing and ranching, mining, wildlife, and recreational use – both motorized and non-motorized – by a variety of users. Following several years of travel route inventory, information gathering and an evaluation through the efforts of the Middle Gila Conservation Partnership (MGCP), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Tucson Field Office set a goal of completing a Travel Management Plan for BLM lands within the area in fiscal year 2007. In developing the Travel Management Plan, BLM sought to encourage the participation of a variety of interested stakeholders through a series of collaborative planning workshops. The goal of the collaborative effort was to try to reach agreement over the key elements of a comprehensive travel management plan for BLM lands within the Middle Gila Canyons area. The planning process took a landscape-scale approach, but focused only on designations for the BLM lands within the area.

BLM requested recommendations from the collaborative workshops to help define a proposed action for travel management designations, which will be analyzed for compliance with appropriate environmental laws and regulations. Input from workshop participants was viewed as essential to ensure that the route designations on BLM lands adequately accommodate needs for administrative purposes and public use, protect resources, and are coordinated among the various land jurisdictions in the project area.



The BLM, (responding to a proposal from the MGCP), engaged the U. S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution (the Institute) to serve as a neutral party to plan, convene, facilitate, and document a collaborative process that would bring together all affected stakeholders to achieve this objective.

The Institute convened four workshop sessions (an initial planning meeting, plus three interactive workshops) during February and April, 2007.

This report offers a summary of the workshops, with discussion of both process and substantive outcomes.

Background

The Middle Gila Canyons area has long attracted the attention of recreationists, particularly from the nearby cities of Phoenix and Tucson, for activities such as hunting, camping, hiking, sightseeing, OHV riding and driving for pleasure. Given the growing

interest in the area, and the potential for user conflicts and resource impacts, a multi-stakeholder coalition, the Middle Gila Conservation Partnership formed to identify strategies to protect the ecological, historical, and cultural resources of the area, and ensure continued appropriate recreational opportunities, support for local economies, and improved collaboration among land management agencies and the general public. The Partnership initially formed in September 2000 at the request of the Recreation sub-group chairman of the BLM Resource Advisory Council, in response to recreation management issues at the time, including an application for a permit for a competitive Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) event in early 2000. The MGCP, as initially constituted, was comprised of representatives of federal and state agencies, recreation user groups, environmental organizations, ranching and mining interests, and representatives of local communities.

A motorized travel route field inventory was completed in 2003 for BLM lands, National Forest lands, and State Lands by the Forest Service's Recreation Solutions Enterprise Team. Following completion of the inventory and development of maps identifying routes, MGCP participants began to work on the evaluation of the routes within a discrete pilot area. The MGCP hoped to collaboratively develop a comprehensive approach to travel management within the pilot area – a plan that would be supported by all of the land management agencies that share jurisdiction in the area. The Middle Gila Canyons Area receives heavy recreational use, and contains a variety of natural and cultural resource values. Some of these resources are considered fragile, and concerns have been expressed over the potential impacts of unmanaged recreational use. In addition, conditions of the travel routes have deteriorated, leading to impaired usability and resource damage on adjacent lands. Visitor information, including guidance materials and maps, have not been made available to the public, in large part due to the lack of an approved, comprehensive travel management plan for the area.

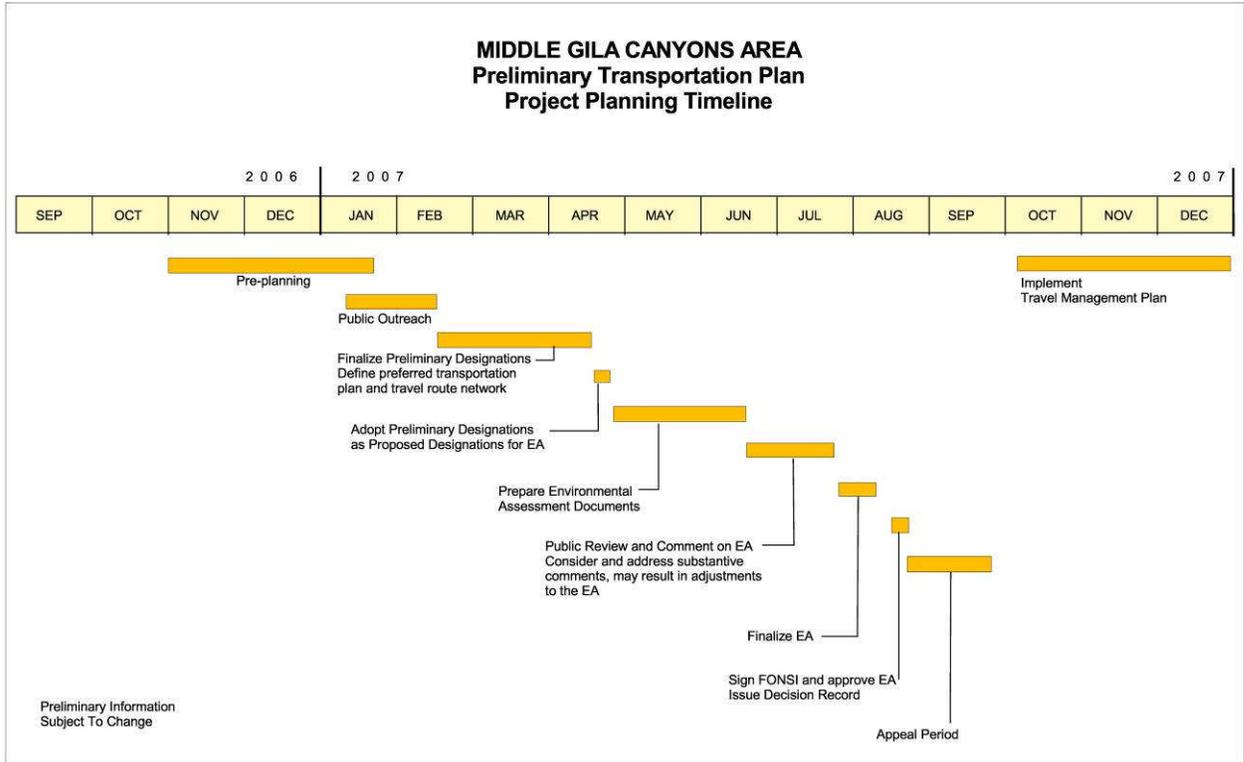
The MGCP collaborative approach hoped to secure broad support for route designations in the area, along with commitment to ongoing management and protection. The MGCP travel route evaluation was completed in 2005 and is described in the September 15, 2005 "Motorized Route Evaluation Report." The route evaluation resulted in three alternative management strategies for accommodating motorized access and resource protection in the area. The MGCP submitted their conclusions to the land management agencies, and requested that they collectively work towards establishing a coordinated travel management plan for the area.

The Collaborative Process

The BLM Tucson Field Office allocated funding for this project in 2007, seeking to develop a proposed action for travel management for BLM lands within the Middle Gila Canyons area based on the information and conclusions from the MGCP's travel route evaluation, and from any newly available information. Given the many interests in the area (e.g., OHV users, hikers, wilderness advocates, ranchers, county and state agencies), the BLM believed that a collaborative approach offered the greatest opportunity to bring these interests together to seek agreement on the key elements of the plan. The collaborative process, viewed as a series of discrete workshops, was considered one of

the elements of the overall planning process (see Figure 1). The U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution was asked to convene the collaborative workshops between February and April.

Figure 1: BLM travel management planning project timeline



Identification of Stakeholders

The Institute worked with BLM, the MGCP, and other stakeholders to develop a comprehensive list of representatives of interested stakeholders. An introductory letter was sent to more than 130 individuals with an interest in the area, seeking to convene a balanced group of participants for the four planned workshops. Potential participants were invited to attend the workshops to work toward agreement on the key elements of a proposed action for a comprehensive travel management plan. Participants were also asked to identify other stakeholders that they felt would contribute to the process. In response to the invitation letter, more than 45 participants attended the initial organizational meeting.

The Workshop Process

The organizational meeting was held at the Institute's office in Tucson on February 22, 2007. The meeting helped identify interested stakeholders, determine the overall design for the workshops, obtain agreement on basic protocols and groundrules, and set the schedule and location for the four workshops. In addition, the BLM staff offered a general overview of resource management and recreation issues in the Middle Gila Canyons area, and a brief description of the BLM decision process.

During the initial meeting, BLM Field Office Manager Patrick Madigan emphasized that the BLM had no route designations already in place, and that every current existing trail would be open for discussion among the group. He challenged the group to focus their efforts on developing recommendations to the BLM in defining the proposed action for the travel management plan. At the same time, he reminded participants that the BLM maintains the final decision-making authority for the plan, and would still need to analyze any proposed plan for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Anything that the group could not reach consensus on would clearly be turned over to the BLM for a final decision.

The Institute developed a website for the project (<http://gila.ecr.gov/>) where all participants could gather information about the process, upcoming workshops, maps, and background documents. This website was updated throughout the process with new reference documents as well as all of the workshop dates and times, the agendas and meeting notes. The website served not only as a resource for all the workshop participants, but also as a place where any member of the public could go for information about the workshops.

Workshop One (March 15, 2007)

The goals for Workshop I were to:

- ❑ Review and clarify the key elements and requirements of the BLM travel management planning process, including the criteria for route designation
- ❑ Review Map 4, and identify areas of agreement and remaining areas of concern
- ❑ Cluster and prioritize areas of concern, and determine appropriate ways for resolving them



BLM staff provided an overview of the travel management planning process, including the key requirements of the plan, the process for route designation, and an explanation of the decision-making process. Map 4 was presented by BLM as a compilation of the three alternatives presented in the original MGCP report. All the routes for which agreement

had been achieved (i.e., open or closed) in all three alternatives were highlighted. There were three exceptions – routes that the BLM resource specialists determined to be ‘closed’ based on resource protection concerns. These included lower Cottonwood Canyon (aka ‘Lower Woodpecker’), the entrance to ‘Upper Woodpecker’, and middle Martinez Canyon (aka ‘Jawbreaker’). Other routes with different designations among the three alternatives were marked as “pending” routes, and were left to be determined through the stakeholder workshops. Participants identified areas of agreement and remaining areas of concern, clustered and prioritized areas of concern, and discussed appropriate ways to resolve them.

The participants broke into four small groups to review Map 4,¹ visually marking areas on large maps. The small groups reported on their discussions, and the plenary group then synthesized the areas of agreement and disagreement, indicating the level of priority for each area, in order to identify priority sites for discussion in future workshops. These include:

General areas of agreement

- 1) White Canyon Wilderness area
- 2) Main Access routes from public highways
- 3) Green line in Box Canyon

General areas of disagreement, including level of priority

- 1) Martinez Canyon-high
- 2) Jawbreaker-high
- 3) Gila River-high
- 4) Box Canyon-high
- 5) Cottonwood Canyon, Woodpecker, Petroglyph-high
- 6) Mineral Mountain Complex Area – high
- 7) Battle Axe-medium
- 8) Whitlow Ranch-medium

¹ Map 4 showed in red line the routes that were identified as ‘closed’ under the three MGCP route evaluation alternatives, along with the two routes determined by BLM resource specialists that should be closed (“Lower Woodpecker” and the Squeeze into “Upper Woodpecker”). Middle Martinez Canyon (“Jawbreaker”) was identified by BLM specialists for a “Non-Motorized” designation. At the group’s request, another map – “Map 5” – was subsequently produced to only show in red line those routes identified as ‘Closed’ under all three alternatives from the MGCP route evaluation. The “Non-Motorized” designation was also removed from Jawbreaker, since the MGCP evaluation indicated different strategies under the different alternatives. Map 5 eliminated the blue overprint indicated in Map 4 for routes needing further evaluation, indicating only thin black lines for the route inventory.

Participants agreed to begin addressing the high priority areas of disagreement during the second workshop. The BLM was asked to bring information to Workshop II on the routes that were designated as open in Map 4, but only intended to be open for administrative access.² Clear route analysis was also requested, along with any documentation of issues in these priority areas.

Workshop Two (April 7, 2007)

The goals of Workshop II included:

- ❑ Review and identify areas of agreement and remaining disagreement over major route designations identified in “Map 5”
- ❑ Discuss and seek resolution over the areas of concern identified in Workshop I
- ❑ Document points of agreement and remaining points of disagreement for each of the areas discussed
- ❑ Identify remaining opportunities for discussion for Workshops III and IV



BLM presented a new iteration of Map 4, having changed designations from “open” to “limited access” for routes intended only for administrative access. The BLM interdisciplinary team’s preliminary designations closing the access “squeeze” to Upper Woodpecker, the closed designation for Lower Woodpecker, and the preliminary BLM designation for Jawbreaker were also taken off the map. This new map – referred to as Map 5 – was presented by BLM as a more accurate representation of the route system, displaying all of the routes with agreed upon allowable use designations in the MGCP report.³

² The designations in the three MGCP route evaluation alternatives were queried. The road from Cottonwood Canyon Road to the private property on Mineral Mountain was the only route identified in the alternatives for administrative vehicle access only. This road was gated and locked at the time of the evaluation under the plan of operations for the mine. AZ Game and Fish Department representatives were under the impression that the designations for the technical trails were commonly identified as “administrative access” or “permit only access routes.” That turned out not to be the case.

³ Map 5 was developed by the BLM based on the route evaluation alternative designations. Closing Lower Woodpecker and “the squeeze” to Upper Woodpecker was identified by BLM resource specialists as necessary to protect cultural resources at those locations from direct impact by OHV rock crawling use in developing the preferred alternative. The BLM made a decision to stop allowing organized group use under a Special Recreation Permit (SRP) on Jawbreaker in 2003. It is not recognized by the BLM as a route open to motor vehicle use under current regulations.

Participants then focused their attention on reviewing all routes within or crossing the Gila River riparian area. The river bed and the river valley (riparian woodland), were identified as the principal areas of concern. This included bottom-land and the channel, meaning the whole valley bed, including trees and the riparian area. In addition, the group looked at all routes crossing the river within BLM-designated lands. Three working groups completed the task; each group then reported their progress to the plenary session, and a synthesis of areas of agreement and disagreement among the entire group was recorded.

- **Consensus for access below the dam:** Diversion Dam Road is now closed and gated by San Carlos Irrigation Project (SCIP) due to concerns for vandalism, trash, and damage to facilities associated with the diversion dam. The SCIP indicated willingness to consider construction of a bypass route that avoids passing by the diversion dam and associated facilities. Much of the federal land administered by the BLM along the Gila River is under a withdrawal for SCIP purposes, and facilities, improvements and other interests required for the use, maintenance and operation of the SCIP are present along the river.⁴
- **Consensus that sections in Clump 25 and sandy wash SW3230 (routes that go north to the river) be kept open.**
- **Consensus to maintain access from SE4212D and SE4212A.**
- **Consensus that there should be a route straight across the river (90 degree access road), that limits access to the riparian area if there is permission to cross the railroad from the Copper Basin Railway. Agreement that excessive routes in riparian areas are undesirable.**
- **Consensus on keeping West Cochran Crossing open.** The west river ford crossing access route is the most reliable, it is the “long traverse” recommended by AGFD.
- **No agreement on SW3014 (access to the Gila River from Box Canyon Rd down a wash) and crossing under the railroad.**

The group agreed the river bed should be closed to overland travel for motorized vehicles, a problem that occurs only when the river is dry and the channel bottom and gravel bars are exposed. The group also agreed to close some of the spurs into the floodplain, including those on the south side of the river.

For the Mineral Mountain Complex, discussion focused on “technical trails” – trails that have a high difficulty rating for OHV users, providing recreational opportunities for

⁴ The MGCP recommended that the Diversion Dam and buildings be developed as a Historical Site and Information Center. However, the interpretive potential of SCIP irrigation project features must be pursued separately with the SCIP.

extreme driving in the area. These included key routes such as Lower, Middle, and Upper Woodpecker, Jawbreaker, Axle Alley, as well as Upper and Lower Ajax, Martinez Canyon, and others. Individual trail maps were made available. The group was also encouraged to identify and discuss other routes that provide similar recreational opportunities not already identified.

Some of the key points of discussion regarding individual routes or areas:

- 1) The section of Martinez Canyon referred to as the “Jawbreaker trail” was determined by the BLM in 2000 as ‘not open’ to motorized vehicle use under current designations during review of a Special Recreation Permit (SRP) application for use of this canyon in an organized event. The BLM permitted use of this section of the canyon in several organized 4WD events under strict permit stipulations to protect resource values, and with the understanding that the decision to allow use authorized under the SRP was not making a determination the route was open to motor vehicle use by the public generally.
- 2) The group agreed in principle to close the Lower Woodpecker section of Cottonwood Canyon. OHV advocates requested that that BLM continue to explore opportunities to enhance rock crawling opportunities on the technical trails that would be designated in the plan, not only at Middle Woodpecker, and possibly with in-channel structures that would also serve to control erosion or down-cutting of the channel and promote sediment retention.
- 3) The Squeeze Rock entrance into Upper Woodpecker was agreed as closed. OHV advocates requested that the BLM consider increasing the challenge to the by-pass entrance. Other enhancements of obstacles on Upper Woodpecker could also be considered in the wash upstream from the petroglyph site.
- 4) Representatives from the AZ Game and Fish Department noted that xeroriparian resource values were of concern in Axle Alley Canyon, however there was disagreement from the OHV advocates about these values. The principle issue is concern for erosion on steep sections, particularly at the top. OHV advocates pointed to potential mitigation measures (e.g., erosion control, adding winch points), as outlined in previous proposals.
- 5) Upper Ajax: There are some cultural sites along Upper Ajax, but they are out of immediate harm’s way and OHV groups believe they can be mitigated. There is a spring seep associated with a small patch of riparian vegetation.
- 6) Lower Ajax is not considered a technical trail, but it crosses the road numerous times. It is located on both BLM and State Land. It has some technical obstacles along the way, but can be maneuvered without having to go through the obstacles.
- 7) The Martinez Canyon proposals continued to reflect the greatest controversy. Environmental advocates generally insist on closing the Canyon to motorized travel, recognizing the area’s unique riparian and resource management values. OHV advocates reject the idea of closure, instead proposing gating Upper Martinez Canyon and allowing

permitted access for 3 years, to allow for evaluation of OHV impacts. OHV advocates have also requested data confirming any measurable OHV damage.

The group engaged in extended discussions about the possible trade-offs between routes, identification of potential study areas, limited use designations, and possible options for permitting access. Martinez Canyon appeared to be the focal point of much of this discussion, which several participants described as “emotional,” and “based on opinions, rather than facts.” In the end, it was agreed that the group was at an impasse on Martinez Canyon and Jawbreaker, and that these areas should be “taken off the table” and eliminated from the collaborative discussion for Workshop II.

There was considerable discussion and exchange over the Woodpecker routes (Upper, Middle, and Lower). The group did reach a general agreement that Lower Woodpecker should be closed; for OHV advocates, however, the proposal for closure was linked to exploring alternatives and approaches to permitting or mitigation (e.g., physical barriers or “gate-keepers”) for the Middle and Upper portions. OHV representatives agreed to allow Squeeze Rock entrance if they are allowed to develop the challenge of the by-pass entrance.

Summarizing participants’ preliminary views at the end of Workshop II on the key technical trails within the Mineral Mountain Complex:

- **Martinez Canyon – No progress – eliminated from group discussion at this session.** Conservation advocates pressed for full closure of the Canyon to motorized access; OHV representatives proposed 3 years of limited access (via a gate and permit system) to allow for evaluation of impact from OHV.
- **Jawbreaker – No progress – eliminated from group discussion at this session.** Jawbreaker is currently considered closed and has been for a number of years. However, OHV advocates have asked that it be kept on record for future consideration.
- **Lower Woodpecker – Agreement to close.** However, OHV advocates agree to closure only with the understanding that Middle Woodpecker would be allowed as a technical play area (with BLM approval and NEPA analysis).
- **Middle Woodpecker – Discussion of options for physical limitations.**
- **Upper Woodpecker – Discussion of possible physical limitations** (e.g., close the Squeeze Rock entrance into Upper Woodpecker if there are plans to increase the challenge of the by-pass entrance). **Note: The closure of the ‘squeeze’ is needed to protect the petroglyph site, and not contingent on making the bypass driveway an obstacle course.**
- **Box Canyon – Leave as open.**

Other routes and discussion points:

- Lower/Upper Ajax: Some suggested that there could be opportunities for exploring various engineering solutions, and that this area might provide an opportunity to develop new technical trails to make up for others lost. Others commented that there is no way to put obstacles in Lower Ajax – it is considered too wide, and with too many access points.
- Axle Alley: Some felt that the trails here are self-limiting, and that the area is not as sensitive as other areas. Others commented that the route is in a more fragmented area – it has soils that are erodible and steep waterfalls, and that access should be limited by number of vehicles and days.
- There was extended discussion about the suitability of locating technical trails, or other designated motorized routes, within washes. The Arizona Game and Fish Department representatives, as well as the conservation advocates have maintained that no motorized use should be allowed in washes. AGFD, in particular, has stated that it is ecologically damaging to allow motorized access to washes, and they believe that the amount of driving in washes is adversely impacting wildlife in the Middle Gila Canyons area. Nevertheless, because BLM has permitted driving in washes for special events, AGFD indicated that it would support a compromise that would decrease the impact of driving in washes. AGFD suggested that this compromise might include a limited number of washes that could be used for special OHV events (and by permit only), restricting the number of vehicles, the number of days of use, and the type of vehicles that would be permitted. OHV enthusiasts, on the other hand, disagreed with this view, regarding it as unrealistic in the Mineral Mountain Complex. They also maintain that the BLM State Office has also supported trails within washes where there is no significant vegetation. All participants requested clarification on BLM’s position regarding allowing trails within or crossing through washes.

The group agreed to continue working on resolving remaining issues in the Mineral Mountain Complex during Workshop III, and then work on other priority areas as time permitted.

Workshop III (April 17, 2007)

This workshop used a more focused format, in which representatives from several stakeholder groups (as well as “unaffiliated” participants) were encouraged to have more direct discussions to negotiate the key remaining points of disagreement – in



particular, the technical trails within the Mineral Mountain Complex.

After extended discussion, participants agreed to remove Martinez Canyon from consideration; they acknowledged that there were fundamental differences in perspectives between motorized groups and those that have a strong conservation perspective. The group did, however, agree to:

- Close Lower Woodpecker (for OHV advocates, with the provision that Middle Woodpecker would be developed as a technical site)
- Maintain closure of Jawbreaker at this time, but (for OHV advocates) with the understanding that the route be kept on record for future discussion.

The remaining technical trails for which no agreement was reached included:

- Middle Woodpecker
- Upper Woodpecker
- Overdose
- Highway to Hell
- Bad Medicine
- Broken Ankle
- Woody's Wash
- Upper Ajax

The group dedicated some time to review these trails individually, but the discussion was often hampered by participants' strong and often highly differing opinions on the current conditions of trails; the discussion was also colored by participants' views on the factors contributing to these current conditions.

One proposal suggested that BLM should consider designating a group of named canyons in the Mineral Mountain Area as a "technical OHV trails area" that would be publicized, managed, and used for specific technical OHV uses under prescribed conditions. There was less than complete agreement on this proposal, but support for the concept was expressed by many of the OHV advocates present.

In the end, the group decided they were uncomfortable trading routes, or negotiating for different routes and areas without appropriate data and analysis. Several also felt the area should be treated as a whole, and didn't think certain areas should be 'sacrificed' for others. At that point, the group agreed to end any further collaborative discussion, that they had come as far as they could, and they agreed that decisions over these remaining routes would be the responsibility of the BLM. Since the group acknowledged that they had reached an impasse on these remaining technical trails, they agreed to cancel the planned fourth stakeholders' workshop.

Conclusion

While the group did not come as far as some had hoped, many stakeholders indicated that the workshop had been worth the effort. Many acknowledged that the workshops were a valuable opportunity for exchange among stakeholders; others expressed frustration that the group was unable to resolve the final issues involving the technical trails.

Nevertheless, there were a significant number of general agreements:

- **Agreement that all main access roads from the public highway system into the project area should be designated as 'Open'.**
- **Consensus for access below the dam. (Work with SCIP on this)**
- **Consensus that sections in clump 25 and sandy wash SW3230 (routes that go north to the river) be kept open.**
- **Consensus to have access from SE4212D and SE4212A.**
- **Consensus that there should be a route straight across the river (90 degree access road), that limits access to the riparian area if there is permission to cross the railroad from the Copper Basin Railway.**
- **Consensus on keeping West Cochran Crossing open.**
- **Consensus on closure of Lower Woodpecker (for OHV advocates, with proposed creation of a comparable technical trail)**
- **Consensus on leaving Box Canyon open.**
- **Consensus on current status Jawbreaker (closed); however, OHV advocates have asked that it be left on record for future discussion**

The BLM now faces the task of designating the remaining routes in the Middle Gila Canyons for the Proposed Action. They have set a goal to complete the Travel Management Plan by the end of September 2007 and begin implementation in federal fiscal year 2008.