**9-7-25 GOB/UGWA Meeting – Gila Bird Conservation Area**

Attendees: UGWA – Carol Ann and Mike Fugagli, Dylan Duverge; GOB - Donna Gianoulis, Marty Eberhardt, Marcia Stout, Nancy Coates, Diane Smith, Denise Smith

The Gila Bird Conservation Area was the topic of the meeting, although grazing monitoring in general was also discussed. UGWA plans to submit a grant application, likely this next spring, for the NMED River Stewardship Program to improve the gates and fencing to keep out trespass cattle in the Bird Area.

Trespass Cattle – UGWA and GOB have monitored this area for many years and we wanted to share information on what we have found. There are 2 sources of trespass cattle, McCauley’s private land upstream of the Bird Area, and Ogilvie’s allotment that straddles both sides of the river. The Bird Area is supposed to be protected from these cattle, but more often than not, cows can be found causing damage to the river banks and the riparian vegetation within the exclosure.

Ogilvie’s cows are Hereford crosses and McCauley’s cows are usually black angus. The Black angus are the ones most often seen in the Bird Area. Both GOB, UGWA and other organizations and individuals have documented numerous locations over the years where trespass cows get into the Bird Conservation throughout the entire reach, from both the allotment and the private land. The FS has patched some of these fences, replaced some, put locks on gates that have been removed, responding in a case-by-case manner without coming up with any permanent solutions to the problems.

Carol Ann asked how often our survey reports get acted on, and we said that as far as we know the owners of the cattle are notified and the cattle are removed, but the FS feedback is spotty and we usually have to ask them what happened. We also recognize that we are in a new reality though where, in general, ranchers feel empowered and the FS staff and offices have been gutted of personnel and the FS is being directed to prioritize mining and timber production, after fire response.

GOB has met with the Silver City RD and with Carolyn Koury, the Forest hydrologist many times over the years and written emails and letters concerning the trespass cattle problem in the Bird Area, but there has been no change in the management. GOB shared our latest letter that we addressed to the Gila Forest Supervisor from February 2, 2025 about our concerns about the Bird Area, and Carol asked what the response was. We were planning to meet with the FS Supervisor and Carolyn as our next step but the FS wasn’t able to respond as they were just starting reorganization, with many folks getting fired/let go and others retiring early. There is still a lot of turmoil within the agency.

Dylan prepared some maps, photos and hydrology information of the Gila Bird Area that we looked at. We talked about each area of concern, starting with Pancho Canyon and going downstream.

Pancho Canyon – the fence across the river (the water gap area) gets damaged during high flows, which allows the McCauley cows from his private land to get into the Bird Area. The FS has fixed it but it still keeps getting blown out. Vandalism is also a problem, as cut fences have been found.

UGWA proposed to put in a pipe rail fence with hanging poly pipes that will float during high flows. The fence would be wired in sections so that if one area fails, the whole fence won’t fail. UGWA has learned lessons from fencing Bloodgood Springs that will help with better fence design. Dylan provided hydrology information and proposes putting the top of the fence at the 10-year flood line, which would make it about 200 feet wide. The outer posts would need to be very sturdy. They are going to check with Nolan Tuff, a contractor they have worked with in the past, about the best design.

Floodplain Fencing – downstream of Pancho Canyon but upstream of the River Vista TH there is an area of fencing that runs along the edge of the floodplain that gets frequently damaged by floods. UGWA proposes to move this fence line and build a new pipe rail fence on top of the bluff. This would also solve a problem with the gate close to River Vista that keeps getting left open and can no longer be latched shut because the latches are out of alignment.

Upper Trap – UGWA proposes to divide this trap into 2 parts, with one area available for temporarily holding rounded up cattle, while the other half is passively restored to native vegetation. This may be more palatable to the permittee rather than complete removal of the trap and may decrease resistance. There are 4 gates into this trap, UGWA proposes only one gate.

Lower Trap – UGWA proposed to remove this trap as it appears to be redundant to cattle management needs.

There is a corral available on the other side of the road that appears to be used for cattle containment, as it has a water source. The traps do not have any water source.

Ira Canyon – GOB described the conditions at the Ira Canyon outlet where the barbed wire gate to keep out trespass cattle is about ¼ mile from the river. This gate is often down on the ground, sometimes the middle wires are bent down where a cow can pass over them, and sometimes the gate wire closure is missing so the gate is tied with baling wire. GOB has recommended that this gate be replaced with just a fence across the river since a gate is not needed for cattle management at this location. A pedestrian gate could be provided for hikers/hunters.

Next Steps: UGWA will share meeting notes with Todd Schulke, and a meeting can be scheduled for his input if desired. We will then meet with the Forest Supervisor, Silver City Ranger District, and eventually, with the permittee (Dave Ogilvie) to talk about how the permittee manages the area and what his needs are. GOB will provide one representative for this meeting. Marty Eberhardt has volunteered, as she has been active in corresponding with the RD when we find cattle, fencing, and gate problems. CBD should also be involved.

Other information that could help a successful grant application - finding out the water quality issues and including how the project would help solve them. Researching the history of why the Bird Area was set aside (originally for the Mexican Duck). Researching how the RNA just downstream of Ira Canyon was designated and why. Researching when the access road was moved up out of the floodplain and onto the bluff.