

# **History and Operation Of the Friends of the Sandia Mountains**

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And volunteers on the Jemez Ranger District

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## **Beginning of the Friends of the Sandia Mountains**

In 1996, the Sandia Ranger District had an active volunteer program. The district ranger, Floyd Thompson, mailed a letter to the volunteers requesting that they form a nonprofit Friends organization to support the ranger district. He stated that the Friends would be able to accept donations, raise and spend funds independent of the Forest Service budget process, manage volunteer programs, train volunteers, and sponsor educational and field projects.

## **Formation of Friends of the Sandia Mountains (Incorporated as New Mexico Friends of the Forest)**

The Friends organization was originally incorporated as New Mexico Friends of the Forest (NMFOF) in 1997. In 2005 the registered trade name of Friends of the Sandia Mountains (FOSM) was adopted to better reflect the mission of the organization and reduce the possibility of confusing the Friends with other organizations having similar names.

**Mission Statement** – Monthly meetings of volunteers interested in forming a Friends group were held in the ranger station in Tijeras and occasionally in a business office in Albuquerque. A few dozen volunteers and interested persons attended the first meeting, but the numbers dwindled to less than a dozen several months later. This core group continued to discuss plans for the organization and eventually completed a mission statement. The following is the mission of the Friends as stated in our original bylaws:

New Mexico Friends of the Forest is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to working in partnership with the United States Forest Service and other groups and individuals to maintain, protect, and restore the natural, cultural, and scenic resources of New Mexico's forest lands for the enjoyment and use of present and future generations. Our focus is on conservation and education activities within the Sandia and Mountainair Ranger Districts of the Cibola National Forest and adjacent lands.

**Bylaws and Election of Officers and Board of Directors** – The core group wrote bylaws for the Friends based on their past experiences and examples of bylaws from the New Mexico Cross Country Ski Club and the Open Space Alliance (City of Albuquerque). Officers were president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer. A non-voting member of the board is a USFS employee representing the ranger district.

I do not remember the original committees we formed. We currently have the following committees: finance, publicity, projects, education, membership, fund raising, and newsletter. When appropriate, we appoint other committees to oversee such activities as publication of the Field Guide to the Sandia Mountains and preparation of a tabloid-type recreation guide to the Sandia Ranger District. On some committees, only the chair person is active.

**Incorporation** – I incorporated the organization as a nonprofit corporation after having done that earlier for the Ski Club. Articles of Incorporation forms may be downloaded from the N. M. State Government web site. Go to the Regulation Commission, nonprofit corporations, and forms. It is a simple fill-in-the-blanks type of form. A fee is also required. After the initial official board meeting where the bylaws are approved and annually after that, an Annual Corporate Report with a \$10 fee must be filed with the State Regulation Commission. It is not necessary to incorporate to function as a Friends group, but incorporation is required before applying for 501(c)(3) status with the I.R.S.

**Obtaining 501(c)(3) Status** – In order to be an educational and charitable nonprofit organization to which donations may be made and for those donations to possibly be tax deductible for the donor, it is necessary to have the 501(c)(3) status with the I.R.S. Obtain a copy of another organization's 501(c)(3) application and adapt it for your friends group.

### **Miscellaneous Information**

**Fiscal Year of the Friends** – Our project year is the Federal or USFS fiscal year from October 1 to September 30. Most of the field projects are completed by September 30. By using the USFS fiscal year, our planning and reporting period is the same as that of the ranger district.

**Friends Membership Year** – Our membership year is the calendar year. We initially used the fiscal year as our membership year, but it was too confusing and members forgot to renew in October.

**Monthly General Meetings** – We have public monthly meetings from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. on the first Tuesday of each month except December. The meetings are held in the large conference room at the ranger station. The agenda usually includes brief reports and comments by the president, USFS representative, treasurer, and projects chair. Short descriptions of completed and future projects are given. Leaders of special projects give very short reports. The program is usually forest or natural history related and is considered formal training for the ranger district volunteers. The program is followed by a social period which is an important time for attendees to talk with friends, the speaker, Friends officers, and USFS personnel.

**Board Meetings** – Board meetings are held at the ranger station every two or three months or as needed. One or more USFS employees attend. We conduct organization business and plan projects and activities.

**Ranger District Support of the Friends** – In addition to project support and encouragement, the ranger district provides meeting rooms and a copier for making small numbers of copies. Newsletters are copied, collated, and stapled commercially with the Friends paying for these services.

**Memberships for Ranger District Employees** – Most ranger district employees are given complimentary Friends membership, receive all our printed communications, and are included in the email groups.

**Memberships in the FOSM** – The Sandia Ranger District (SRD) has over 200 individual volunteers. Some are active weekly, and others may volunteer only once a year. The FOSM membership is about 100 including active members and individuals who support the organization but do not participate in activities. SRD volunteers are not required to be members of the FOSM. Because many of the volunteers did not understand the role of the FOSM, we mailed a letter of explanation to all the volunteers last year.

**Another Membership Option** – In the San Juan Mountains Association, a large, very active friends group with headquarters in Durango, almost all of the National Forest volunteers are members, but they are not required to pay dues. Those who make a donation at one of several levels are known as Donors. Donors are not necessarily Volunteers, but they may be.

**Name of Your Friends Organization** – Select a name that clearly indicates to the public what your mission is and what you support. I suggest that you not be the friends of the Jemez Ranger District. To me that name sounds too much like you are supporting the Federal Government instead of an entity more appealing to the forest user. Our initial name of New Mexico Friends of the Forest was too general, and the public and other volunteers did not immediately understand the focus of our efforts.

### **Communication with Members, Sandia Ranger District Employees, And Volunteers**

**Newsletters** – We publish an annual newsletter reporting our activities in late September. It is emailed to the large email group described below. Paper copies are published to hand out at meetings and to mail to those members without email. A spring newsletter and occasional flyers contain mostly announcements of future activities.

**Sandia Volunteers and NMFOF (SVANMFOF) Email Group** – A Friends member maintains this Yahoo Egroup for electronic communication with Friends members, SRD volunteers, and USFS personnel. It is a moderated Egroup and all emails must be approved by selected Friends board members or USFS staff. Most messages are from the board members or SRD staff. This egroup currently has about 250 members.

**Cibola Trail Rangers (CTR) Email Group** – This unmoderated Yahoo email group includes mostly volunteers who hike year-round and/or cross country or snowshoe in the

winter. Egroup members email trail conditions to the group, and other members take appropriate action such as removing a fallen tree from a trail. This egroup currently has about 100 members.

### **Friends Projects on the Sandia Ranger District**

The Friends projects on the SRD include field projects, Adopt-A-Trail management, email group management, publication of the Field Guide to the Sandia Mountains with UNM Press, publication of a free tabloid-style Recreation Guide to the Sandia Ranger District, and management of the Junior Ranger Program. Each winter I prepare a Word table summarizing the activities of the previous fiscal year.

**Project Selection** – The FOSM board receives suggestions of projects from the SRD staff, members, and the projects chair. As I travel around the district, I look for ways in which we can make improvements, such as painting restrooms and signs or removing small dead trees and pruning branches around the ranger station. In cooperation with the SRD staff, the board selects projects for the coming year. Some projects suggested by the FOSM board are not approved by the USFS due to lack of funds or personnel. Throughout the year, we also complete numerous informal projects as needed.

**Volunteer Operator Certification** – Certification to operate certain equipment on a National Forest is now required for volunteers. Examples are operating a chain saw, driving a government vehicle and towing a trailer with a government vehicle. We work with the SRD to obtain these certifications for our members and volunteers.

**Other Volunteer Training** – USFS employees train volunteers to perform certain task such as general trail maintenance and construction, pruning branches, sign fabrication and installation, and performing Job Hazard Analyses (JHA) and safety talks.