

Rio Grande National Forest – Assessments 11 and 14 Lands and Infrastructure – Executive Summary



Introduction

This document is a brief summary of the first step in the forest planning process; our assessment, and public input we solicited; for lands and infrastructure of the Rio Grande National Forest.

Land Status, ownership, legal restrictions (easements), public access and types of uses all influence public and private patterns of use and may affect the management of the Rio Grande National Forest.

Infrastructure within the Rio Grande National Forest plan area can have a substantial impact on social, cultural, economic, and ecological conditions both within the plan area and in the broader landscape. Infrastructure can include facilities for energy generation or transport, communications, water delivery, transportation (including airstrips), or recreation. Our developed infrastructure includes roads, trails, utility corridors, dams, and buildings for administrative, recreation, or special use purposes. These facilities directly affect conditions and uses within the forest plan area and may support delivery of goods and services in the broader landscape.

What We Asked

We held one public meeting Monte Vista on March 18, 2015 to collect input specific to land use, ownership, and infrastructure issues. Peak Facilitation and the National Forest Foundation facilitated the meeting. Approximately 40 members of the public attended these meetings. In addition, the National Forest Foundation provided a web-based tool that allowed us to ask the same set of questions to those who could not be at the meetings.

We also participated in meetings with a diverse set of individual organizations from February through July 2015. Meetings with Mineral and Hinsdale Counties, SLV Cattleman's, SLV County Commissioners, and SLV Rural Electric Coop included conversations about land use, ownership, and infrastructure. These meetings included over 50 attendees.

We asked the same questions at meetings and on-line to give us consistent input for the assessment process, covering topics such as roads, trails and recreation, land ownership and connections, water infrastructure and utilities, and rangeland improvements.

- What are the current conditions of roads, trails, and recreation?
- What are the impacts to ecological integrity and species diversity from roads, trails, and recreation?
- What are the impacts to the local economy from roads, trails, and recreation?
- What are uses on private lands or inholdings that impact the Rio Grande National Forest?
- What types of public access is necessary?
- What are the impacts to wildlife and the local economy from land ownership and connections?
- What are the current conditions of water infrastructure and utilities?
- What are the impacts to ecological integrity and species diversity from water infrastructure and utilities?
- What are the impacts to the local economy from water infrastructure and utilities?
- What are the impacts to ecological integrity and species diversity from rangeland improvements?
- What are the impacts to the local economy from rangeland improvements?
- What are the current conditions of rangeland infrastructure?

What We Heard

Land Ownership and Access

Where access is limited, we need to pursue access to the forest across private land via private roads. There also needs to be more access for users of all abilities. Because our forest is the driver for much of the economy in the area, there need to be more effective ways for the public to communicate with us about

their concerns. New development of inholdings and the sale of private lands along the boundary is causing fragmentation.

Forest Infrastructure and Maintenance

Properly functioning infrastructure has minimal impacts but there is a deferred maintenance backlog creating safety issues. Examples include roads, trails, beetle kill areas, and trashed campgrounds. Roads and trails need better signage, including an interactive map on our website. We need to do a better job about communicating road closures with the public. We should explore opportunities for more non-motorized trails, winter use, and new emerging trends such as fat tire biking. One suggestion was that we should pursue more partnerships to help with construction and maintenance. Motorized user groups help maintain motorized trails and it was suggested that we partner with other groups to maintain non-motorized trails.

Infrastructure and Wildlife

Infrastructure and recreation activities can affect ecological integrity. Surveys inform us of the areas people are using. We can use that information to protect lynx, bighorn sheep, and other species. We need to better inform the public when areas are closed due to wildlife issues.

Water and Utility infrastructure

Water and utility infrastructure through the forest are important to the local community. The forest plan should be open to the use of a fiber optic line. Currently there are not enough communication sites, but there is also changing technology. The new plan needs to address new technology, including the use of drones on the forest. Options could include alternative energy sites, communication towers, fiber optic, and partnering with others for operation and maintenance. We should have an interactive website that includes critical wildlife habitat and proposed infrastructure. We need a more transparent process for sharing information with the public.

Grazing

The public suggested we allow more grazing but also address issues with grazing within campgrounds. We should post information online about timing and location of grazing. We should protect the sensitive information but educate the public on the importance of grazing. We should fix the fences that are damaged from trees falling and use more laydown fencing, and log along the fences to protect them from falling trees. We should manage burned areas appropriately so they are not grazed too soon before recovery.

Where We're Headed

The forest plan provides standards and guidelines for special use permits for a variety of uses on forest lands. We will continue to work with the public to resolve access and land use issues. We will continue to acquire inholdings appropriate for the management and continuity of forest land. There is opportunity for us to collaborate more effectively with other private, state, and federal land owners that border the forest.

With an aging infrastructure and a decreasing budget, we are not maintaining infrastructure to a desired standard. The deferred maintenance backlog continues to go up. Increases in user created routes places an extra burden on us by increasing resource damage and time it takes to repair the damage. This is not sustainable over the long term. We need to be more transparent with the public about when and why closures are occurring and find partners to help address infrastructure issues where possible.