

Land, Water and People

Trashing Public Lands

By Dan Dallas

It has been one year now since my family and I moved to the San Luis Valley. We have really come to appreciate the majestic landscape, rural lifestyle and wonderful people of the Upper Rio Grande Basin.

We should all feel very lucky to live in such a special area surrounded by *our* spectacular public lands. Unfortunately, during my one year of working and recreating in this area, I've come across many places that have been trashed by people who do not respect our beautiful land. In fact, in my short time here, I've noticed an increase of trash in some areas.

This trash comes in many shapes and forms. In some cases it is bottles, cans and other debris associated with parties. At other sites, people have left old furniture, appliances, batteries, dead animals and lots of tires. Some folks even drop off their yard waste on public lands, probably thinking that it shouldn't be a problem because it is biodegradable. Yard waste may contain noxious weed seeds, which can lead to weeds displacing native vegetation on Bureau of Land Management and national forest lands, and it acts as a magnet for more trash.

Each year, \$8,000-\$10,000 is spent to clean up BLM lands in the Valley. That cost includes the use of an excavator and dump truck, and to pay employees. In many cases, these cleaned up sites stay trash free, but many new sites are dumped on every year.

Our law enforcement officers write several tickets every year to people they catch trashing public lands. These tickets start at \$175 and can be much higher depending on the seriousness of the offense. Even these hefty fines don't seem to deter people, maybe because they don't think they will get caught.

Last week, I noted a new heap of construction debris dumped near the Spanish Trail monument between Monte Vista and Del Norte. The irony of this new site is it is less than a half mile from the entrance to the regional landfill. Is a sure five dollar charge compared to a potential \$175-\$300 ticket worth it? Obviously, someone thought so. I want to change that thinking.

Our law enforcement officers can't be everywhere at the same time, so we need help from SLV citizens and visitors to catch people trashing our public lands. There have been several instances where citizens have helped us to successfully catch and prosecute people dumping on national forest and BLM lands. If you see or hear of people littering or dumping on public lands, please contact the appropriate public lands office, or the Colorado State Patrol, with license plate information and/or descriptions of the people. The Colorado State Patrol will relay the information to our law enforcement officers.

The Rio Grande National Forest and the SLV BLM attract over one million visitors a year. These visitors are a huge boost to the economy of the San Luis Valley as many buy groceries and products from our merchants, eat in our restaurants, use local guides and stay at local hotels, guest ranches and RV parks. These people recreate here because of the beauty of our public lands. Please help keep *our* public lands healthy and beautiful by properly disposing of your trash and appliances, and by helping us catch those that don't.

Thank you.

Dan Dallas is the forest supervisor/center manager of the SLV Public Lands Center. In his spare time, Dan stays busy keeping up with the activities of his wife and two children