

Rio Grande National Forest – Assessment 9 Recreation – Executive Summary



Introduction

This document is a brief summary of the first step in the forest planning process; our assessment, and public input we are soliciting; regarding the Rio Grande National Forest’s recreation resources in the forest planning area.

One of the most remote forests in the Southern Rockies, the Rio Grande National Forest is also one of the most isolated, with a low population density around its borders. Interstate 25, the primary north-south travel corridor in Colorado, is nearly seventy miles from the closest trailhead at Lake Como and the Blanca Peak complex. The forest’s remote location and comparatively undeveloped nature means that many recreational users often find themselves in solitude, or more likely to interact with wildlife or cattle rather than other recreational users. Since the 1996 forest plan, recreation use has increased significantly on the forest both in numbers of recreational users, and types of recreational activities.

What We Asked

We held three meetings to collect input specific to recreation. Peak Facilitation and the National Forest Foundation facilitated the meetings, which were held on March 03, 2015 in Crestone, CO, on April 6, 2015 in Monte Vista, CO, and on June 23, 2015 in Conejos Canyon, CO. Approximately 95 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 diverse organizations focused on recreational use between February and July 2015. These organizations include Mineral County, Hinsdale County, the San Luis Valley Great Outdoors Coalition (SLVGO), Saguache County Sustainable Environment and Economic Development, San Luis Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Conejos County Clean Water, Conejos Canyon Lions Club, San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council, Wilderness Society, Defenders of Wildlife, Quiet Use Coalition, Rocky Mountain Wild, Crestone Spiritual Alliance and High Valley Cyclists. These meetings included over 100 attendees.

We asked the same questions at meetings and on-line to give us consistent input for the assessment process related to recreational uses on the forest

- What opportunities are there to enhance or expand recreational opportunities to meet current or future demands?
- What trends may affect future demands for recreation, including emerging new or unique recreational interests?
- What types of recreation are important on the Rio Grande National Forest?
- How are different types of recreation compatible or conflicting?
- What draws people to the Rio Grande National Forest from distant places? Are there recreation opportunities unique to the Rio Grande National Forest?
- What opportunities are there to enhance or expand recreational opportunities to meet current or future demands? What trends may affect future demands for recreation, including emerging new or unique recreational interests?
- What opportunities are there to foster greater connection between people and nature through education, experience, recreation, and stewardship?
- Are there issues or dynamics that may prevent or preclude minorities and other underrepresented groups from seeking, accessing, or participating in recreational activities on the Forest? What opportunities are there to foster greater connection between people and nature through education, experience, recreation, and stewardship?
- How does recreation on the Rio Grande National Forest contribute to social, economic, and ecological sustainability? What trends are influencing the demand for various types of recreation activities (such as changing population demographics, traditional uses, or income levels)?
- What do you think is the current condition of the Rio Grande National Forest?

What We Heard

These public discussions are valuable for helping us understand the range of use that occurs as well as some of the issues, trends and opportunities.

Currently there is a broad range of recreation activities occurring on the Rio Grande National Forest. These uses include motorized and mechanized uses as well as non-motorized and winter use. Examples include:

- Snowmobiling
- Adventure and long-distance motorcycle riding
- ATV and UTVing
- Hiking
- Trail running
- Camping
- Backpacking
- Fishing
- Bird watching
- Mountain biking
- Hunting
- Rock climbing
- Kayaking
- Rafting
- Horseback riding
- Wildlife, nature, and cultural viewing
- Mushrooming
- Photography
- Snowshoeing
- Skiing
- Ice climbing
- Cross-country skiing
- Sledding
- Tubing

Opportunities for recreational use on the Rio Grande National Forest are extremely important to both local users and visitors. Recreation opportunities on the forest sustain many local valley communities socially and economically. Conversely, the health and recreational appeal of the forest is dependent on how recreation use is managed across the forest landscape.

Recreation Opportunities and User Conflict

Some individuals and groups are looking for specific types of expanded recreational opportunities, while others are concerned with balancing or separating recreational user groups to reduce conflict. The public suggests we have longer trails for all different types of use, quiet and traditional uses such as horseback riding, hunting, and fishing. Some individuals suggest there is plenty of space on the forest for different types of recreation. However, sometimes there is potential for conflict among users. Conflict has occurred between mountain bikers and dirt bikers, non-motorized and motorized users, bikers and hikers/horseback riders. Commenters point out that voluntary separation among recreation user groups does not always work, and we should designate specific trails to separate groups that conflict. There is also concern about recreation use and other activities on the forest such as grazing permittees, commercial uses such as oil and gas development, timber, and the ability to law enforcement or trail volunteers to minimize criminal activity such as illegal motorized trail use, sign vandalism, and building cairns.

Interagency Planning

The National Park Service and BLM both manage land close by and there is an opportunity to assess compatibility of recreation uses among management areas. There is an increasing need for interagency planning and management.

Socio-economic Trends

Any changes in recreation use should be a balance of appropriate activities for that area, according to some. Consideration should be given to social and economic trends in the state. Colorado residents love to vacation inside the state and the population is increasing on the Front Range. There has been an increase in use on the forest but the local population has not seen the same increase. Towns continue to compete for tourism. Shifts in user groups include an aging population, increasing family use, vacationers

staying for longer periods of time, increasing use of popular wilderness areas, and increasing use of technology.

Recreation Trends and Adaptive Management

There are recommendations that we should create opportunities for current recreation users while ensuring we put management tools in place that allow us to adapt to new and emerging technology and uses. New recreation uses and trends are emerging, often more quickly than the forest can keep up. There has been an increase in all-terrain vehicle use, hybrid snowmobiling, new ski and snowboarding techniques and equipment, and fat tire biking.

Specific Ideas

The public is interested in increasing recreation opportunities as well as access. Some users request we improve our maps and signage and increase trail maintenance. Others would like us to remove the motorized buffer around wilderness areas. There is interest in an access trail closer to Lost Creek Trail and allowing access via Clear Creek and to create more loop and connector trails. Other suggestions include closing some areas to motorized use, however not removing any snowmobile use. Specific ideas offered by the public include:

- Connect trails with local towns
- Increase commercial snowmobile and UTV opportunities in Upper Rio Grande area
- Increase skiing on Continental Divide; decrease snowmobiling (need separation)
- Designate more hybrid use areas, especially around Elwood and Tucker Ponds
- Increase ATV outfitting numbers
- Increase wilderness use via additional recreational opportunities
- Maintain recreation at existing levels (budget issues; deadfall on many trails)
- Limit commercial capacity for outfitting
- Increase commercial service capacity (currently maxing out commercial services)
- Streamline permitting process for races (positive impacts to tourism and revenue)
- Increase designated dispersed camping areas

Infrastructure

The public is mindful of our need to maintain and fix infrastructure, and some recommend we maintain a manageable infrastructure by closing some areas if new areas are going to open.

Education, Partnership and Accessibility

The Rio Grande National forest should consider proactive planning as new opportunities emerge. Proactive planning needs to include education in schools, access and recreation opportunities for poor and underserved communities as well as individuals with disabilities. The forest also needs to reach out to Hispanic communities during the planning process. There is potential for partnerships with not only these communities, but also youth groups, recreation club. Partnerships, other sources of revenue, and programs such as “adopt-a-trail” are all opportunities for the forest to become more proactive in future planning.

Where We're Headed

Based on information in our assessment and what we are hearing from the public regarding recreation, we need to revise this section of the forest plan. In our recreation assessment, we describe the current state of recreation on the forest and identify information we need to revise our recreation management planning in response to public input and to changes in law, regulation and policy.

- We need more studies to evaluate the interactions between recreation use and the impacts to ecological integrity, especially in terms of the effects of dispersed recreation on species diversity, distribution, and ecological integrity.
- We have limited data regarding the concept of sustainable recreation, given that sustainable recreation is a new and recent requirement in forest planning.
- We have limited documentation regarding the location, type, or frequency of recreation user conflicts.
- We have limited winter use data, including surveys of user types and impacts on the Rio Grande National Forest, nor a recreation opportunity spectrum inventory specific to seasonal variations between summer and winter settings and our capacity to support winter opportunities.
- We have limited data regarding public preferences and demands for site-specific recreation activities on the Rio Grande National Forest.
- The recreation opportunity spectrum tool is limited as a form of outcome-focused management, given that the 1996 Forest Plan currently assigns prescriptions for all resource areas tied to watershed boundaries, which does not always accurately reflect recreation use in a particular area. For example, when the public was asked to identify areas important to them during Forest Plan Revision public engagement, those lines often do not match watershed boundaries or management area prescriptions.
- We lack recreation opportunity spectrum inventories assessing current and future recreation demand needs. The actual supply of recreation opportunity spectrum summer and winter settings is unknown and it is unknown whether recreation opportunity spectrum allocations established in the 1996 Forest Plan have been met.
- National visitor use monitoring is limited as a tool to gather accurate recreation data on the Rio Grande National Forest, particularly in regard to low income and Hispanic users. We know that low-income and Hispanic user groups often will not participate in the national visitor use monitoring survey process due to general suspicion of surveys and survey locations. Further, the methodology of the survey doesn't clearly define a Hispanic category on the form so many respondents end up labeled as white.

We must understand the current recreation trends and plan for potential future changes in order to sustain the forest and local communities socially, economically, and ecologically. It is critical that the desired conditions and objectives are broad enough to incorporate existing and future recreation uses. The standards and guides section of the forest plan should reflect concerns raised in the public meetings and gaps identified by forest staff. Many of the identified gaps address information or documentation we do not have, that we need to help make informed decisions on recreation trends. The forest plan needs to be written so that we are able to adapt and incorporate new information or changes in recreation.