

Rio Grande National Forest – Assessment 15

Designated Areas – 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 designated areas on the Rio Grande National Forest. Designated areas may be statutorily designated on the forest by Congress (national heritage areas, national monuments, national recreation areas, national scenic areas, national scenic and historic trails, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness or wilderness study areas and interstate highways); those administratively designated by the agency (critical habitat under Endangered Species Act, experimental forest or range, inventoried roadless areas, national natural landmarks, national historic landmarks, national monuments, national recreational trails, research natural areas, national or forest service-designated scenic byways, significant caves or wild horse and burro territories); or those designated by the Regional Forester for their botanical, geological, scenic, zoological, paleontological, historical or recreational values.

Designated areas on the forest have a permanent management designation to maintain a unique special character or purpose (36 CFR 219.19). These areas can be landscape scale, such as the Sangre de Cristo, La Garita, Weminuche, and South San Juan Wilderness areas or more specific sites such as the Wheeler Geologic Area, Hot Creek Research Natural Area and John C Fremont Winter Camp Special Interest

Area. Overall, these areas are much more strictly managed than the forest as a whole. Some of these areas, however, have seen significant impacts from recreation since the 1996 forest plan, related to the growing population in Colorado and increasing popularity of hiking fourteen thousand foot peaks, or “fourteeners”. In addition, the 1996 forest plan preceded the designation and management direction for the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, Old Spanish National Historic Trail, Cumbres and Toltec National Historic Landmark and Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area in Alamosa, Costilla and Conejos counties.

What We Asked

We held two meetings to collect specific input from the public on wilderness and designated areas. Peak Facilitation and the National Forest Foundation facilitated the meetings, which were held on May 18, 2015 in Antonito, CO and July 15, 2015 in South Fork, CO. Approximately 45 members of the public attended this meeting. 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 variety of organizations from February through July 2015. Each of these meetings focused on different topics, and many of the meetings had discussions about wilderness and designated areas. These meetings included over 200 attendees.

We asked the same questions at meetings and on-line to give us consistent input for the assessment process related to wilderness and designated areas on the forest.

- What are the most significant special designation areas on the Rio Grande National Forest and how should they be managed? Do they contribute to social, economic, and ecological sustainability? If so, how?
- Other than wilderness or areas that are already designated, are there other rare or outstanding resources or places on the forest? What makes them rare or outstanding?
- What does the word “wilderness” mean to you? What criteria should be met for such a designation?
- How should wilderness be managed?

What We Heard

These public discussions are valuable for helping us understand public concerns, issues, trends and opportunities regarding our management of designated areas and wilderness. A lot of our conversation related to very specific areas of the forest or designated wilderness. Many areas on the forest have some special designation, and all special designations are important to someone. The public wants us to manage special designations to maintain water quality and prevent habitat fragmentation in core habitats and watersheds. We should continue designating Research Natural Areas to help achieve multiple objectives including ecosystem protection. We should manage the Weminuche and South San Juan Wilderness Areas for ecological sustainability. Wildlife corridors should be managed through inter-agency cooperation. Class one fisheries should have a special designation. Ponderosa habitats are important for bears.

Access

Front Range users are increasing especially at popular points such as fourteeners. The San Luis Valley has fewer areas to access so use is more concentrated. The areas in the Rio Grande National Forest are not overcrowded because they are difficult to reach.

Motorized and Non-motorized Uses

Recreation uses have changed significantly in recent years. New technology allows for deeper access into the forest and has increased winter recreation (both motorized and non-motorized). Winter recreation areas should be designated for non-motorized use. We should maintain existing or old roads and trails and use volunteer groups to perform trail maintenance due to lack of resources on the forest. We should allow motorized access in some of these special designated areas to accommodate all user groups.

Specific Suggestions

The public has suggested many areas for us to consider as special designated areas. Wheeler Geologic Area should be expanded to provide access to North Ridge, as well as access to maintain the site. We need to preserve the historical markings in the aspen grove by Kelly Creek. We should designate Kelly Creek for winter motorized use. Elwood Pass is a unique montane ecosystem for ptarmigans and big game. The archery range at Rock Creek could be a recreation designation if it would help with funding and maintenance. We should allow motorized use in Pole Creek and Bear Creek. We need to do a better job of managing trash, especially at Elephant Rock and on the Old Spanish Trail. We should designate Deadman's Creek and New Baca Mountain Track as wilderness since they are surrounded by it and have archaeological significance. Elk Creek trail is treated as wilderness due to lack of defined boundaries. Because there is unique vegetation North of Alamosa River, we should designate it as a research natural area.

Analysis and Management Considerations

Designated areas are necessary, but they are taxing our ability to manage the areas. User fees in certain designated areas could help us with the lack of funding for maintenance. We need to coordinate among agencies on special use designations and management. We should increase funding to protect wilderness resources. We need to quantify human impacts on wilderness using ecosystem services. We should consider new or upgraded designations as a last resort.

We should manage for current and projected future use, but the current areas need to be better managed before future areas are considered. Education is important but also proper use of special designated areas should be enforced. Above all, uphold high standards for the management of special designated areas, whether it is designated wilderness or some other special area.

Areas of Emerging Concern

Areas of emerging concerns, or areas with potential for expansion or enhancement were listed by the public at the meeting.

- Continental Divide National Scenic Trail has issues with increased use. The trail is damaged by equestrian users in wet conditions.
- Blanca Peak is overused by both motorized and non-motorized users.
- Treasure Creek Trailhead has undesignated trails that damage vegetation.
- Wilderness areas do not have proper trail maintenance, need more trails to better disperse users.
- Timber management money could be used to create and maintain roads.
- Drones entering wilderness from non-wilderness areas would be invasive.

Areas of Existing Concern

Areas with current concerns were also discussed.

- Fisher Creek Trail is not maintained.
- Wheeler Geologic Area has trails braided from jeeps, access road needs significant maintenance.
- Hope Creek and other trailheads have parking issues.
- Hunter Lake Road is difficult for horse trailer and camper access.
- Archuleta Lake Trail is inaccessible due to major blowout.
- Bear and Pole Creek have damaged riparian areas due to grazing issues.
- Garner and Major Creek Trail signage is unclear about new trailhead alignment.
- Information and signage for visitors is lacking in wilderness areas.
- Beetle epidemic across forest has impacted trails, camping, and safety.
- Chainsaws should be allowed for trail maintenance in wilderness areas.

Wilderness

Socioeconomics

The Rio Grande has a large impact on the local economy. The forest and wilderness areas are essential for the future as recreation is a large part of the economy. Wilderness areas provide landscapes for climate change studies and discourage expansion of development and logging. Grazing is allowed in wilderness and we need to address the impacts to grazing.

Public Values

When asked what wilderness designation meant to those at the public meetings, a long list of values was generated.

- Non-motorized
- Solitude and quietness
- Nature sounds
- Remote
- Exclusionary of certain users
- Inclusive
- Natural habitats for wildlife
- Quiet
- Expensive
- Strict
- Untouched and unmanaged
- Timeless
- Native landscapes
- Natural cycles of pine beetle and fire
- A place where hand of man has never set foot
- Natural settings
- Undisturbed by humans
- Natural plants
- High levels of biodiversity
- Lack of interactions
- Not a park
- Isolation
- Silence and solitude with a lack of noise pollution
- Possible mechanized usage with strict guidelines and time limits
- Wildlife viewing and biodiversity
- Lack of structures and roads
- Natural viewsheds and scenery
- Physically challenging and required use of primitive skills

Management Recommendations

Suggestions were given on how to manage wilderness into the future. Some members of the public wanted access for all users, including motorized, while others wanted the forest to continue to prohibit motorized use. A broad user access would help avoid conflicts among users. Mechanized tools and vehicles should be allowed for trail maintenance to protect resources. Do not use large volunteer groups as their presence would conflict with the reason for designated wilderness. Instead use small groups with mechanized tools to increase the work capacity and lessen the impacts to the ecosystem. The forest should maintain large blocks of natural areas to provide a buffer for climate change. Management practices should be adjusted to changing budgetary needs.

Monitoring and Adaptive Management

Our monitoring strategy should use adaptive management to monitor users in certain areas to better understand changes over time. Monitoring could help us identify thresholds and management actions if conditions change.

Where We're Headed

Based on information in our assessment and what we are hearing from the public regarding designated areas, we need to update this section of the forest plan. In our designated areas assessment, we describe the current state of these resources on the forest and identify information we need to revise our management of these areas in response to public input and to new designated areas (Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, Old Spanish National Historic Trail, Cumbres and Toltec National Historic Landmark and Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area in Alamosa, Costilla and Conejos counties). The public has given us additional information that will help guide our management recommendations and direction in the future.

The 1996 forest plan provides extensive direction on all levels for designated areas. We will continue to manage congressionally designated areas according to laws and policy. The regional forester and the Rio Grande National Forest have identified, but not administratively designated, several special areas on the forest. Our forest plan revision will continue to provide desired conditions, standards, guidelines, and management area prescription for current designated areas.

Evaluating Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River Potential

Our designated areas assessment does not address the required inventory and evaluation process which is governed by Chapters 70 and 80 of the 2012 Planning Rule. This is a separate process which requires us to identify and evaluate lands which may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (see FSH 1909.12, Chapter 70) or the Wild and Scenic Rivers System (see FSH 1909.12, Chapter 80). We will conduct these inventories through a separate public engagement process concurrent with our development of alternatives during the formal forest plan development process governed by the National Environmental Policy Act.

Other areas previously identified in other plans, such as the Natural Arch, identified by the regional forester or the forest, or requested as a part of this public involvement process will be evaluated in the new forest plan for designation.