

Rio Grande National Forest – Assessment 5

At-risk Species – 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 federally threatened, endangered, proposed, and candidate species under the Endangered Species Act; species of conservation concern; and species where we are concerned about their ability to persist over the long term (collectively referred to as at-risk species). The goal in this section of the forest plan is to create desired conditions, standards, and guidelines to manage and protect habitat for these species while allowing other uses on the forest.

What We Asked

We held three public meetings to collect input specific to at-risk species. Peak Facilitation and the National Forest Foundation facilitated the meetings, which were held on June 22, 2015 in Alamosa, CO, July 16, 2015 in Saguache, CO, and July 21, 2015 in Conejos Canyon, CO. Approximately 30 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 one meeting on March 11, 2015 with the San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council, which included five different groups.

We asked the same questions at meetings and on-line to give us consistent input for the assessment process related to species important to these individuals and groups, and their concerns for those species.

- What plants, fish, animal, and invertebrate species are important to you on the Rio Grande National Forest?
- Do any of these species need special management attention? If so, why?
- What plant and animal species are unique to the RGNF and what is the habitat that supports them?
- What management concerns might influence the long-term health of these species? How can the future management of the forest address some of those concerns?

What We Heard

Important Species

We received extensive comments from Rocky Mountain Wild and Defenders of Wildlife identifying species of conservation concern. The public also stressed the importance of considering species of conservation concern during our forest plan revision process. A variety of flora and fauna on the forest are considered important species.

- Rare plants
- Unique riparian communities
- Floor plants
- Engleman spruce
- Blue spruce
- Ponderosa pine
- Wild asparagus
- Mushrooms
- Berry plants
- Osha
- Harvesting plants
- Lynx
- Elk
- Beavers
- Deer
- Cattle
- Moose
- Bighorn sheep
- Mountain lions
- Bobcats
- Pronghorn
- Bats
- Snowshoe hare
- Bears
- Sport fish
- Fisheries
- Rio Grande sucker
- Rio Grande cutthroat trout
- Goshawk
- Three-toed woodpecker
- Dusky grouse
- Ptarmigan
- Golden crown kinglets
- Boreal owl
- Birds of prey
- Turkeys
- Song birds
- Hummingbirds
- Chorus frogs
- Boreal toad
- Pollinators
- Mollusks
- Bees
- Butterflies
- Insects
- Candidate species under ESA
- Declining native species
- Aquatic species

Five species were mentioned as being unique to the Rio Grande area. The lynx rely on a habitat corridor between South San Juan and Weminuche. There is a bat species at the Valley View Hot Springs unique to the area. The Uncompahgre Fritillary is a butterfly that lives on cirques and snow willows. The Stonecrop Gillyflower is located above tree line in volcanic areas. The Rio Grande cutthroat trout and sucker live in the Rio Grande River and tributaries. Each of these species relies on habitat provided in some way on the Rio Grande National Forest.

Managing At-risk Species

Mammals

The public also identified concerns for managing the above list of species. For mammals, it is suggested that we manage to increase the beaver to improve watershed health. We should manage the elk so as not to endanger other species. Elk and bighorn sheep are not as common as before. Deer need protection in Aspen Springs and Conejos Ranch. Moose are causing an increasing amount of damage to riparian areas. Chakita peak has seen a decline in bighorn sheep habitat. We need to manage corridors and landscape connectivity to allow predator and prey species enough habitat. We need to provide enough landscape for predators to survive and monitor for human-predator interactions. Bobcats are becoming a popular trophy species for the pelt. We should monitor species susceptible to climate change such as the pika. We should not close off all mines or caves because they provide habitat for bats.

Birds

Suggestions about birds include monitoring the health of all animals to provide forage for raptors. The population of bandtailed pigeons in the wildland urban interface seems extremely high. Populations of ground bird species are declining. The dusky grouse has lost a lot of the spruce habitat it needs to survive.

Fisheries

Addressing watershed and water quality issues will help native Colorado fish survive. Our vegetation treatments need to retain some cover over streams to maintain a cold-water temperature. We should consider and monitor for the effects of early snowmelt on fisheries. We should monitor select species to help inform the impacts of climate change. We need to protect the genetics of rainbow trout. We need to provide for alternate habitats for species adaptation.

Flora

Logging in areas changes the conditions for mushroom communities. Plants collected for medicinal purposes, such as osha, gentian, histort, and elephant ear, need our protection. We need to protect and improve riparian habitats due to damage by moose. Floor plants help determine moisture levels in the forest. Floor and regenerative plants are damaged by logging and ATV use. The spruce-fir forests have lots of dead and dying trees. Spruce in particular are impacted by changes in water levels.

Other Management Suggestions

We should provide individualized management for species listed under the ESA. Natural cycles of fire or beetle kill occur and we need to manage these cycles properly. We need to protect unique plants from human impact and protect local pollinators from the impacts of insecticides, pesticides, or herbicides.

We need to monitor for harvestable plant and animal resources and consider enforcement for improper or over-harvesting. Hunting helps to keep wildlife populations at healthy levels. However, ATV game retrieval can have detrimental impacts to habitat, especially in riparian areas. We should create an education campaign to inform the public how to protect sensitive species. The goal should be to balance human development with sustainability.

Where We're Headed

Identifying At-risk Species

Based on information in our assessment and what we are hearing from the public regarding at-risk species; in our forest planning process, we will identify federally listed species as well as species of conservation concern. The species we identify will be based on our assessment, and public input. The forest supervisor will recommend a list of species of conservation concern known to exist on the forest to the regional forester for approval. We are already in the process of analyzing and identifying species of conservation concern. The region has developed a model to help us identify which species should be included on the list for the Rio Grande National Forest. Because of the complexity of data analysis, we do not currently have a list for the public. Once our list of species is complete, we will release it to the public.

Managing At-risk Species

The new forest plan will provide direction on protecting and improving habitat for threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate species, as well as species of conservation concern.

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