

Rio Grande National Forest – Draft Assessment 14 Land Status and Ownership, Use, and Access Patterns



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Introduction

This assessment describes how land status, ownership, use, and access patterns influence the forest plan area and how management of the forest plan area may influence land use and access. It assesses public and private ownership, legal restrictions (easements), and public access that may affect management of the Rio Grande National Forest.

Land ownership and land status are the basic pattern of public and private ownership of surface and subsurface estates, legal restrictions, and permissions on the use of the land. Land ownership and land status includes public domain lands, acquired lands (and the authority under which they were acquired), lands with reserved or outstanding mineral rights, existing rights-of-way, leased lands, lands withdrawn from mineral entry or other uses, and lands in designated areas described in this assessment. Land ownership and land status also includes Indian Trust lands and Treaty rights to resources in the forest plan area. Private land inholdings within the boundaries of the forest are outside of the forest plan area, but are taken into consideration in the planning process because they influence management of the plan area.

Land status also refers to planning, zoning, easements, or other legal designations for private lands and formal management status of other public lands (such as national parks, state forests, and local parks).

Land use is the current use of land, such as residential, commercial, industrial, or agricultural use for private lands, and current land allocations and the uses permitted in existing land management plans for national forest system or other public lands. Permitted land uses under local government authorities may provide important information about how future changes in land use may affect management of the forest plan area.

Access is the ability to move to, from, or through the plan area by any means including pedestrian access from properties adjacent to the plan area and air access to airstrips in the plan area.

Information Sources and Gaps

Sources

- Automated Lands Program
- Colorado Land Ownership Map
- US Census data
- FS NRM-Infra Database
- Forest Service Special Use Data System database
- Land Status Records System
- Transportation Atlas
- Motor Vehicle Use Maps
- 2010 Resources Planning Act Assessment
- Forest Service Enterprise Data Warehouse
- Rio Grande National Forest Enterprise GIS Library

Gaps

- Recent county parcel data for trend comparisons.
- Data on existing right-of-ways for public access to national forest system lands. Public access is a national priority. Some access has been lost due to fragmentation (sub-divisions) of private properties. We need to work to ensure adequate public access to national forest system lands.
- Unsurveyed or unverified land ownership patterns may not be reflected in the current Forest Service GIS.

Existing Forest Plan Direction for Land Status, Ownership and Use

The desired conditions in the current forest plan include:

- Develop a land ownership pattern that improves our ability to meet forest needs and public objectives. Land adjustments through purchases, exchanges, and donations include an array of unique plant and animal habitats, riparian areas, geologic features, heritage resources, and recreational opportunities.
- Retain existing rights where needed. The acquisition or conveyance of non-federal lands should reduce conflicts and improve management efficiency. When acquiring non-federal lands these lands should enhance national forest purposes, improve administration, reduce trespass, and add to available national forest goods and services.
- Special uses standards would be to bury electrical lines wherever possible, and phase out landfills where the use is storage or disposal of hazardous material. Consolidate utility corridors whenever possible; manage the corridors in line with the goals of the management areas that they pass through.

Scale of Analysis

The lands considered in this planning process include the lands within the Rio Grande National Forest boundary, adjacent federal lands that border the forest, including National Park Service; Bureau of Land Management (BLM); U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and the San Juan, Gunnison, Pike-San Isabel, and Carson National Forests. Other lands that share a border with the forest are Colorado State owned lands, private inholdings, and private lands.

Lands Status, Ownership and Use

The Rio Grande National Forest is divided into three ranger districts (Table 1). Within these districts the forest manages four wilderness areas and six research natural areas. The Baca Tract has been acquired by the forest since the last forest plan.

Table 1. Administrative units and acreages

Administrative Unit	Acres
Approximate Acres of Forest	1,835,000
Ranger District	
Conejos Peak	380,000
Divide	940,000
Saguache	515,750
Wilderness	
La Garita Wilderness	55,200
Sangre de Cristo Wilderness	125,700
South San Juan Wilderness	89,000
Weminuche Wilderness	165,000
Total Acres	434,900
Research Natural Areas (RNAs)	
Mill Creek RNA	2556
Deadman Creek RNA	4774
Finger Mesa RNA	3406
North Zapata RNA	6101
Spring Branch RNA	4003
Hot Creek RNA	1857
Total Acres	22697

There are private inholdings scattered through the Rio Grande National Forest (Table 2). These inholdings originated as mining claims, homesteads, and water rights (such as reservoirs and irrigation ditches).

Table 2. Approximate acres of inholdings by ranger district

Ranger District	Owner Classification	Approx. Acres
Conejos Peak	Non-FS	20,800
Divide	Non-FS	72,024
Saguache	Non-FS	6,627

The legend and hyperlink to Figure 1 at the end of this assessment describes all land ownerships in and adjacent to the Rio Grande National Forest.

There is demand for some types of individual, group, and commercial activities and uses on the forest that require special use permits (Table 3). The special-uses program authorizes appropriate uses of the forest that provide a benefit to the general public while also protecting resources. Some of the special uses have a spatial location, many of which are identified as structures in the Rio Grande National Forest GIS. Budget declines and a loss (nationally) of expertise and staffing of the special use program is causing a backlog of expired permits, inadequate inspections of existing permitted uses, and delays or incorrectly issued new permits.

Table 3. Special use permits (from the Special Use Data System database)

Use Code	Use Name	Number of Authorizations
113	Organization camp	1
114	Shelter	5
121	Isolated cabin	1
123	Recreation residence	51
133	Resort	1
141	Concession campground	3
153	Outfitting and guiding service	53
161	Winter recreation resort	1
165	Snow play	4
171	Target range	1
181	Recreation event	12
191	Non-commercial group use	7
215	Livestock area	3
232	Corral, pen and livestock area	1
331	Marker	2
333	Sign	2
341	Solid waste disposal site	1
364	Shelter	2
373	Other improvement	3
411	Site survey and testing	1
422	Research study	3
423	Weather station	3
431	Military training area	1
511	Construction camp and residence	4
512	Temporary construction activities	3
521	Warehouse and storage yard	1
522	Stockpile site	1
552	Motion picture and tv location	3
561	Geological and geophysical exploration	1
634	Natural gas pipeline - FERC	1
641	Powerline, rea financed	12
643	Powerline	1
731	Railroads right-of-way	2
741	DOT easement	12
751	Forest road and trail act easement	1
752	Federal land policy & management act easement	19
753	Federal land policy & management act permit	32
804	Microwave-industrial	1
806	Private mobile radio service	4
807	Passive reflector	1

Use Code	Use Name	Number of Authorizations
810	Cellular	1
815	Commercial mobile radio service	3
818	Facility manager	6
821	Telephone and telegraph line	9
823	Fiber optical cable	4
832	Other commercial improvement, REA financed	2
911	Irrigation ditch	37
914	Water trans pipeline ≥12" diameter	5
915	Water trans pipeline < 12" diameter	10
916	Water conveyance easement, pl 99-545	41
922	Dam, reservoir	21
924	Reservoir	1
931	Well, spring or windmill	4
935	Water storage tank	1
941	Stream gauging station	3
	Total number of active special use permits as of 2/18/2015	409

Trends

- Several parcels in the San Luis Valley have conservation easements. Most of these conservation easements have a shared border with other federal lands (BLM, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service) that share a border with the forest.
- There are possibilities for future land acquisitions through Land and Water Conservation Fund and land exchanges.
- Forest access can be limited or blocked by private property owners through fragmentation or subdivisions of larger parcels. Private property owners make the decision whether to provide forest access via an easement across their land.
- The creation of “illegal nonsystem routes” across national forest system lands is ongoing and causes resource damage.
- Census data shows that the year-round population of the surrounding counties is fairly stable (Table 4). See Assessment 6 Social, Cultural and Economics for additional information.
- If the area starts to see some increases in development of private inholdings, then there may be an increase in requests for special use authorizations such as roads, power, communication, etc.

Table 4. 2014 census data by county

County	Population
Alamosa	
Population, 2014 estimate	NA
Population, 2013 estimate	16,253
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base	15,445
Archuleta	
Population, 2014 estimate	NA
Population, 2013 estimate	12,194
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base	12,084
Conejos	
Population, 2014 estimate	NA
Population, 2013 estimate	8,277
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base	8,256
Hinsdale	
Population, 2014 estimate	NA
Population, 2013 estimate	813
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base	843
Mineral	
Population, 2014 estimate	NA
Population, 2013 estimate	721
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base	712
Rio Grande	
Population, 2014 estimate	NA
Population, 2013 estimate	11,803
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base	11,982
Saguache	
Population, 2014 estimate	NA
Population, 2013 estimate	6,208
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base	6,108
San Juan	
Population, 2014 estimate	NA
Population, 2013 estimate	692
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates base	699

The legend and hyperlink to Figure 2 at the end of this assessment, describes the land ownership and location of the conservation easements in the planning area.

The legend and hyperlink to Figure 3 at the end of this assessment, describes the location of structures inside and within one mile of the Rio Grande National Forest; and the half mile and one mile buffers that affect wildland-urban interface. The number of private structures close to the national forest boundary, in some cases, may represent areas where there are existing or potential forest access issues.

Influence within the Broader Landscape

The Rio Grande National Forest shares boundaries with the San Juan, Gunnison, San Isabel and Carson National Forests. The forest also shares boundaries with the San Luis Valley Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management, Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve and the San Luis Valley Refuge Complex of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Boundaries are also shared with State of Colorado and private lands. These shared boundaries with other federal and State land owners provide opportunities to collaborate on management.

The legend and hyperlink to Figure 4 at the end of this assessment, describes the interactivity of adjacent land ownership and management in the planning area.

Access, Trends that Affect Access, and Opportunities

The forest is accessed by a number of secondary U.S. and Colorado State Highways, as well as numerous county roads, forest system roads, and trails. Interstate 25 is more than 70 miles from the eastern-most boundary of the forest. U.S. Highway 285 runs north-south and U.S. Highway 160 runs east-west through portions of the forest. Both are two-lane highways providing access to several national forest service roads and recreation areas. Colorado Highways 114, 17, and 149 provide additional access to the forest in Saguache, Rio Grande, Mineral, Hinsdale, and Conejos counties.

The plan area has six airports including small operations in Creede, Saguache, Center, and Monte Vista. The San Luis Valley Regional Airport in Alamosa is the largest in the region. The Astronaut Kent Rominger Airport in Del Norte has undergone significant upgrades in their runway and lighting since 2012.

The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (which shares its route with the Colorado Trail) follows the western boundary of the Rio Grande National Forest.

The legend and hyperlink to Figure 5 at the end of this assessment, describes forest access.

The ongoing fragmentation of private lands along the forest boundary is a trend that potentially impacts public access to the forest. We work to acquire access easements across private lands when issues are identified. We can also acquire access by purchasing private lands and inholdings from willing sellers within the forest boundary. The Land and Water Conservation Fund assists with our acquisition of property, land exchanges, and easement acquisitions or donations; to provide the public with better opportunities to access the forest.

Influence of Trends

- Active sub-dividing and an increasing number of structures adjacent to forest lands expands the wildland-urban interface.
- An expanding wildland-urban interface leads to increased requests for use of National Forest System lands for private purposes and increase in special use permit activities.
- There is potential for the spread of invasive species as more people use national forest system lands.
- Acquiring lands and conservation easements can help the forest to retain access and provide open space areas for connectivity to other public lands.

Trends and influences from the 2010 Resources Planning Act Assessment - key findings:

- Urbanization and low density development will continue to threaten the integrity of natural ecosystems.

- Competition for goods and services from natural ecosystems will increase.
- Population growth and demographic shifts will result in more people competing for recreational opportunities on a fixed or shrinking land base, but will also change the patterns of recreation use.

The Resources Planning Act summary can be found at <http://www.fs.fed.us/research/rpa/> .

Social and economic sustainability is discussed in assessments 6 and 7.

Summary

- The Rio Grande National Forest continues to follow forest plan guidelines and issues special use permits for a variety of uses on the forest lands.
- The trend of subdivision of adjacent private parcels is expanding the wildland-urban interface and influencing access to public lands. We are working on acquiring inholdings through such avenues as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, exchanges, and donations.
- Our shared boundary with other federal and state lands provides us with opportunities for collaboration on land use and access.
- We will continue to work and communicate with the public to resolve access and land use issues.

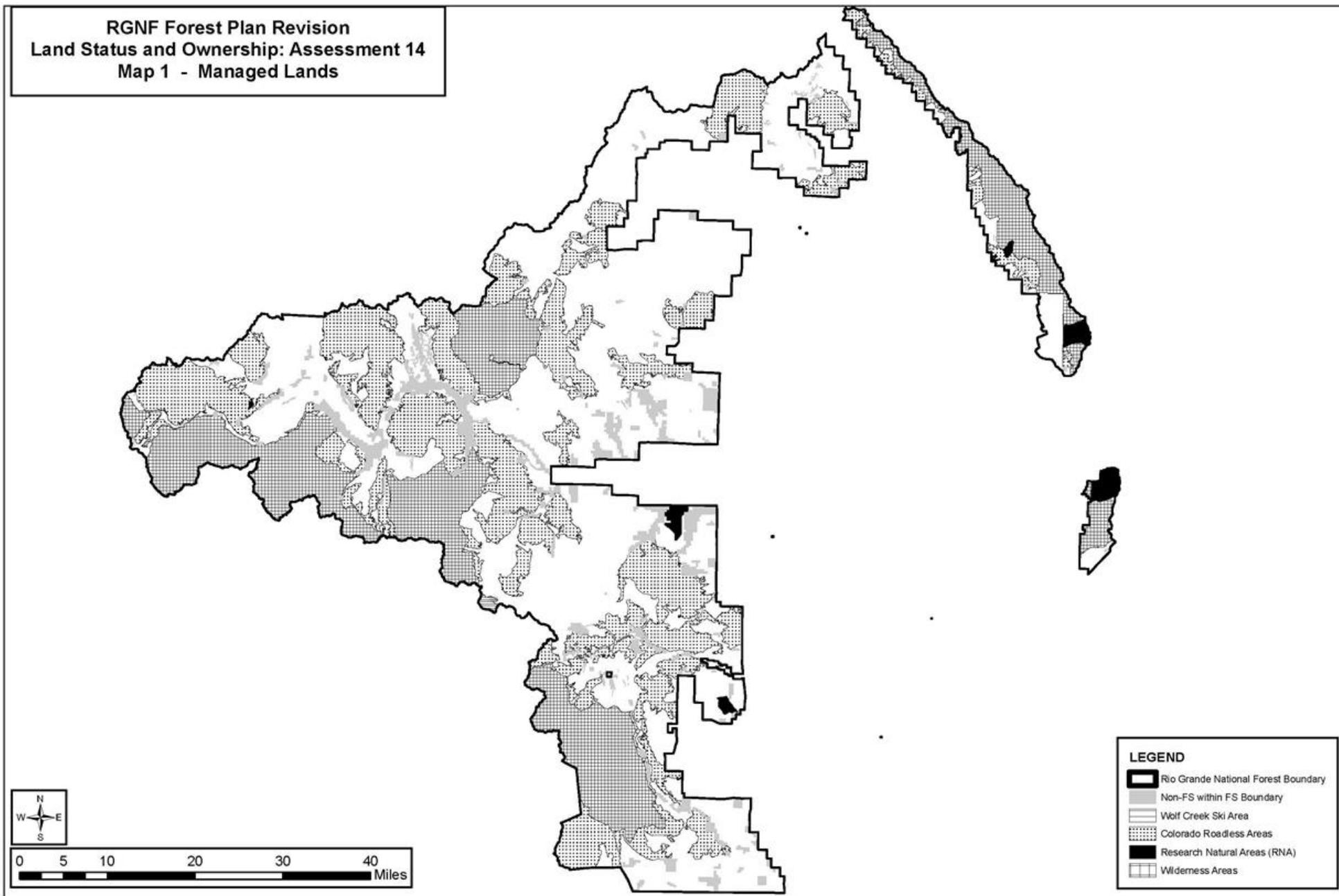


Figure 1. Land ownerships in and adjacent to the Rio Grande National Forest

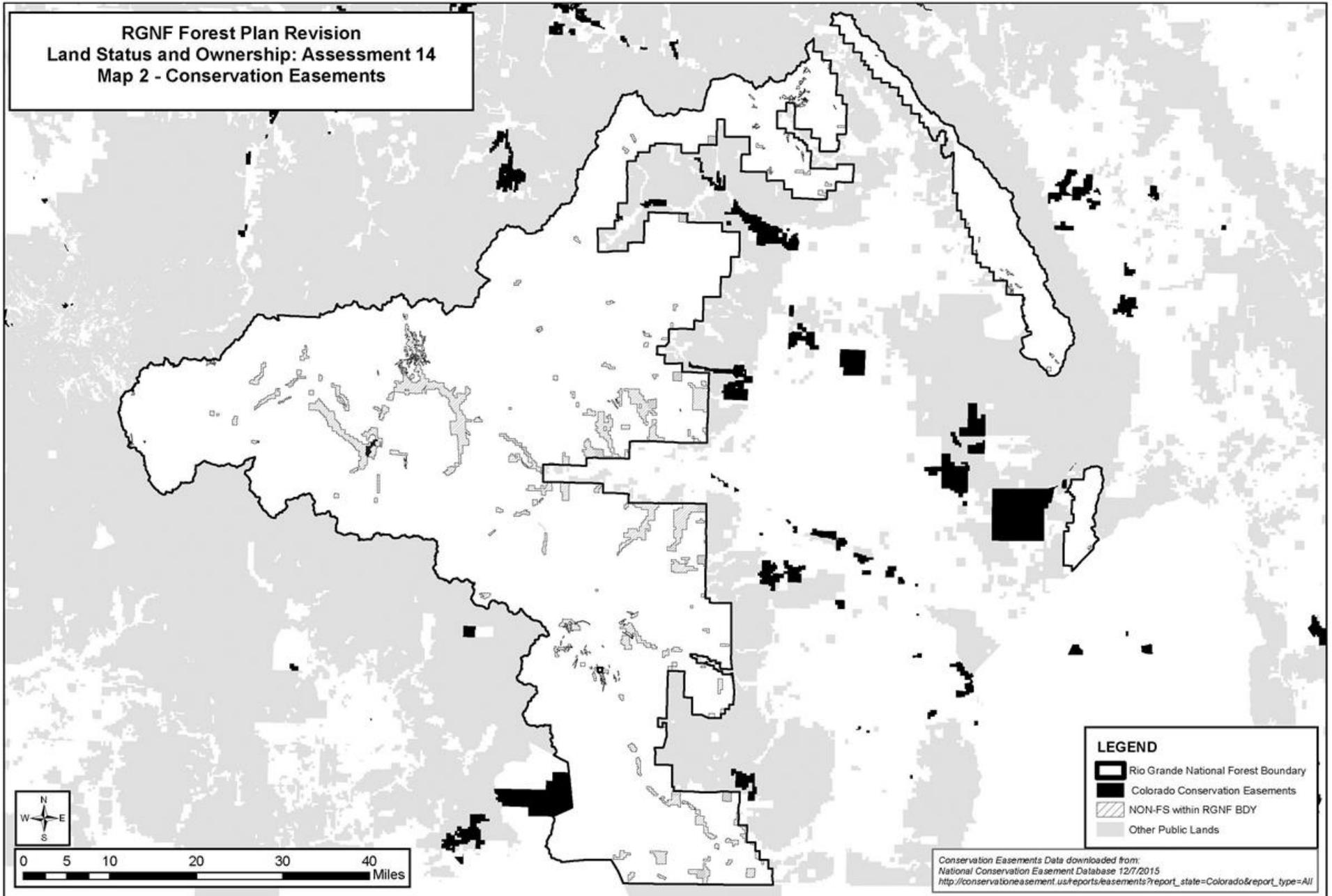


Figure 2. Land ownership and location of the conservation easements in the planning area

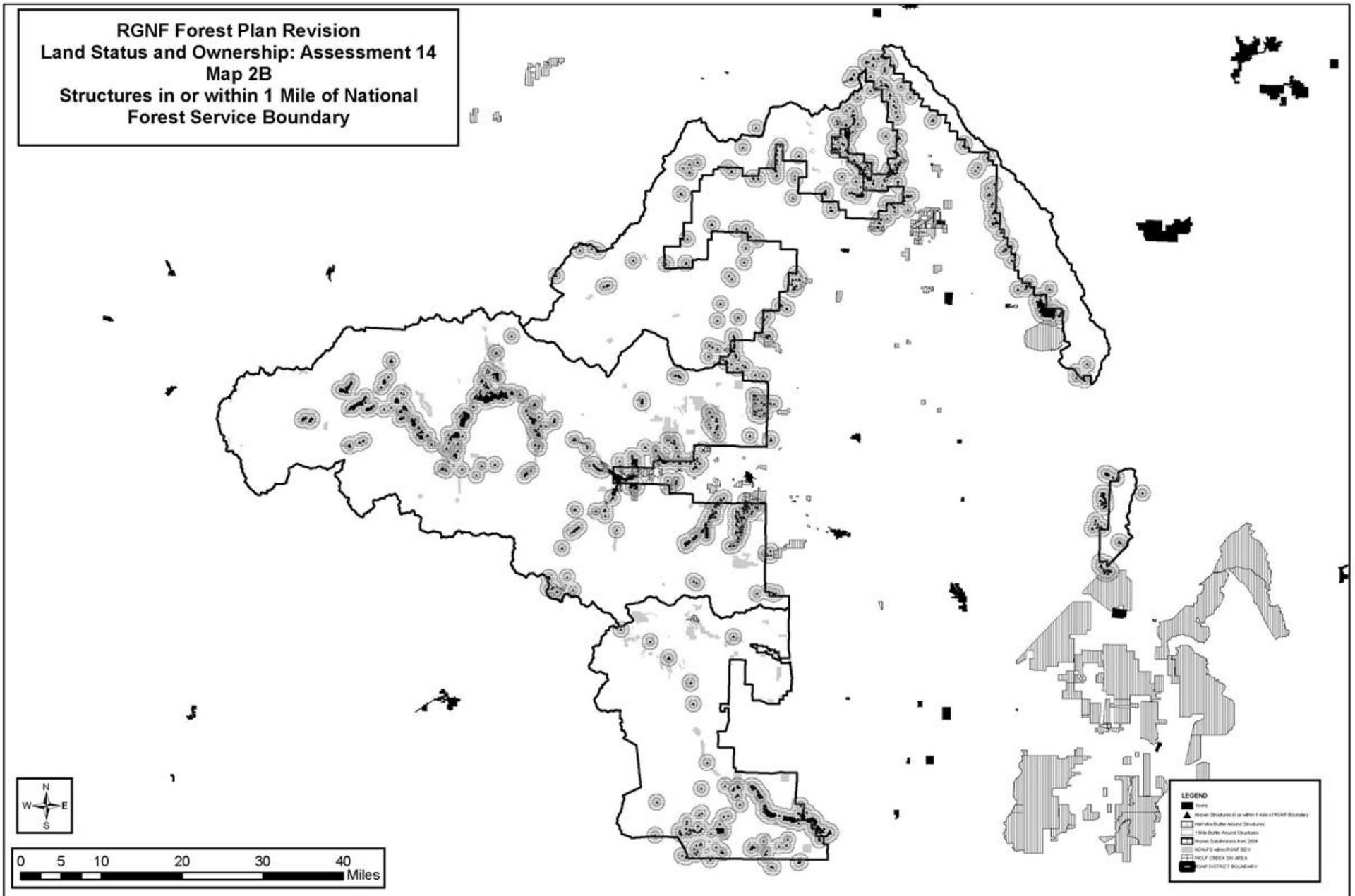


Figure 3. Location of structures inside and within one mile of the Rio Grande National Forest; and the half mile and one mile buffers that affect the wildland-urban interface

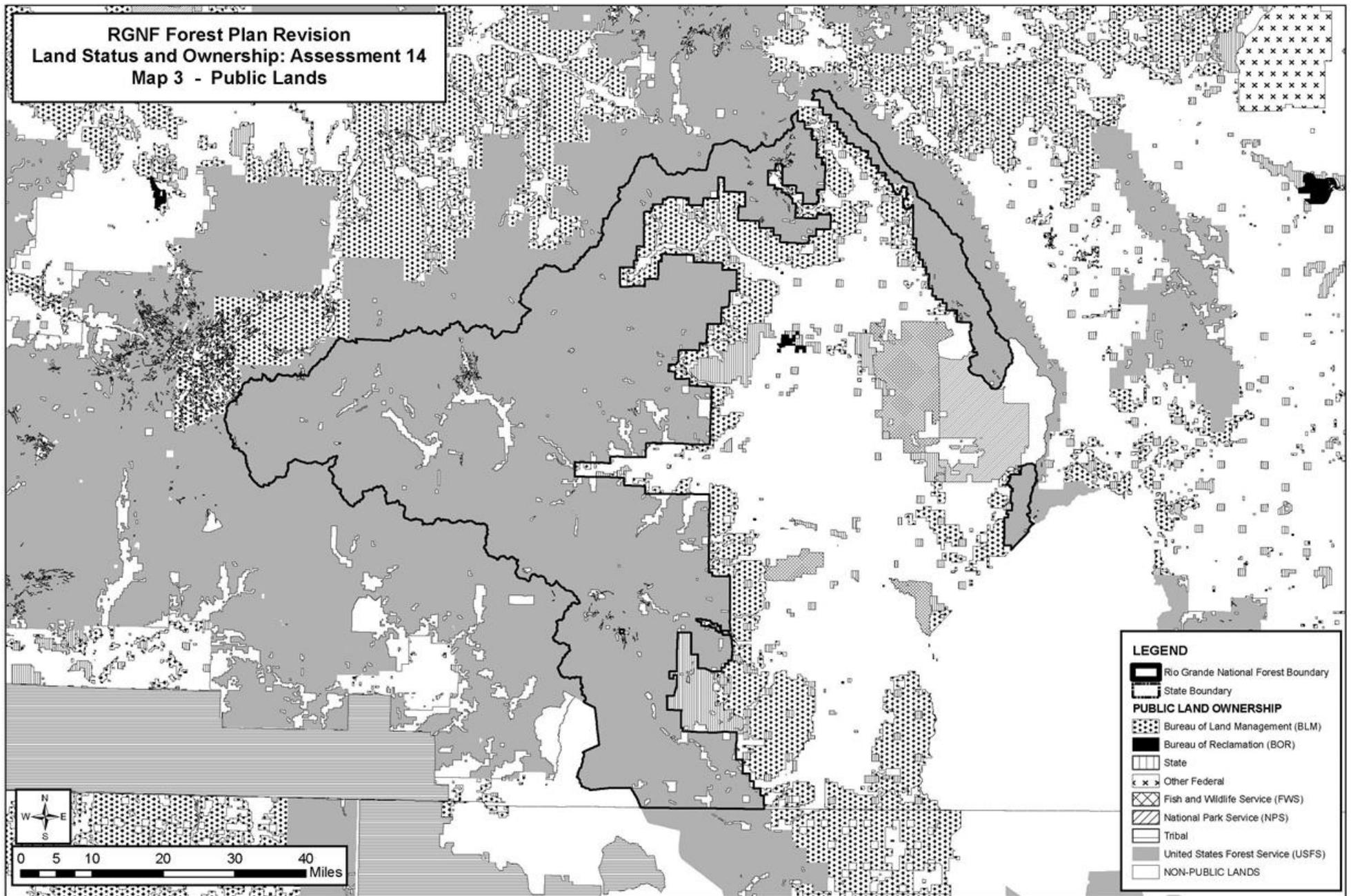


Figure 4. Interactivity of adjacent land ownership and management in the planning area

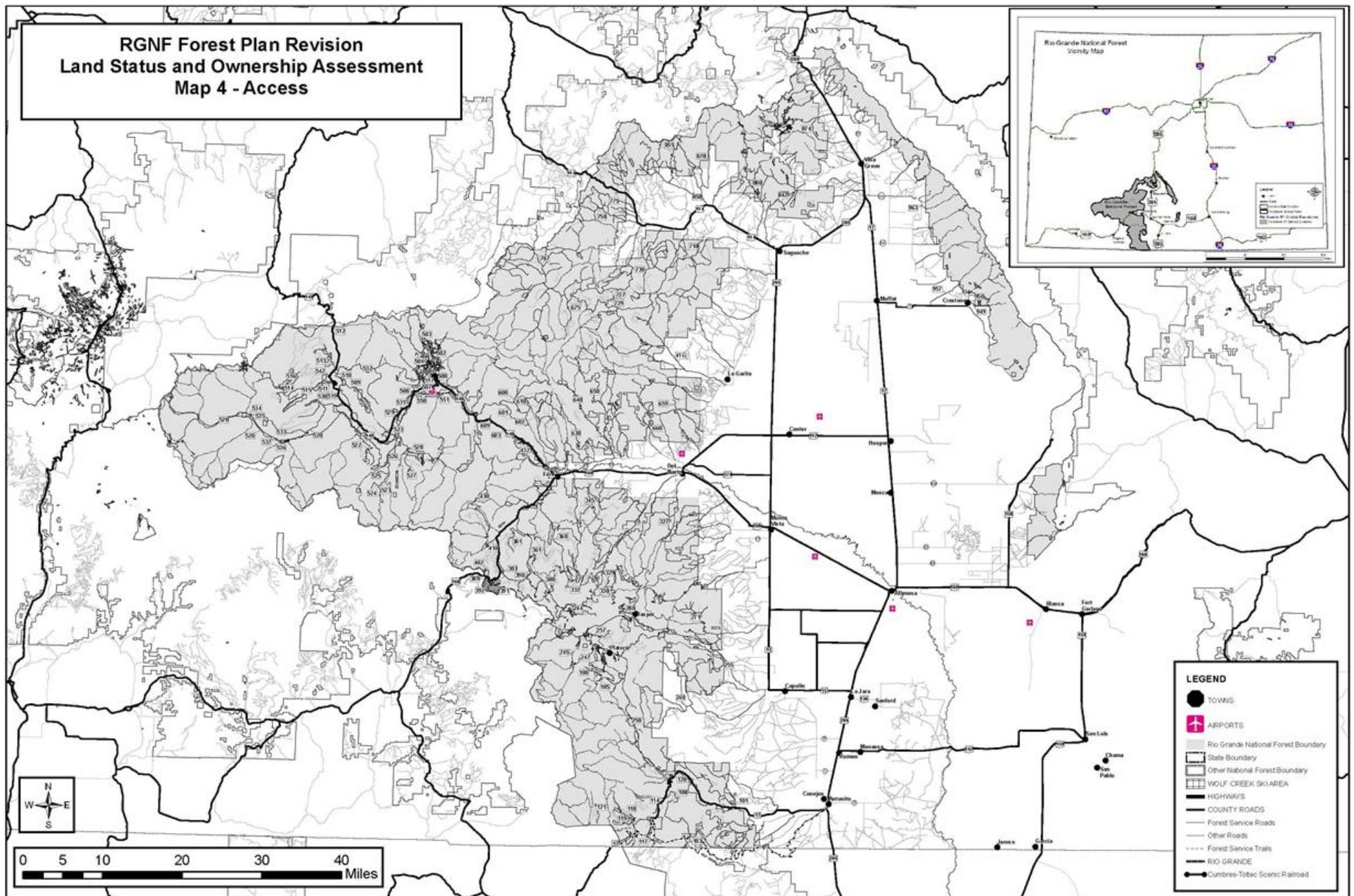


Figure 5. Forest access

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Land Status and Ownership: Assessment 14
Utilities**

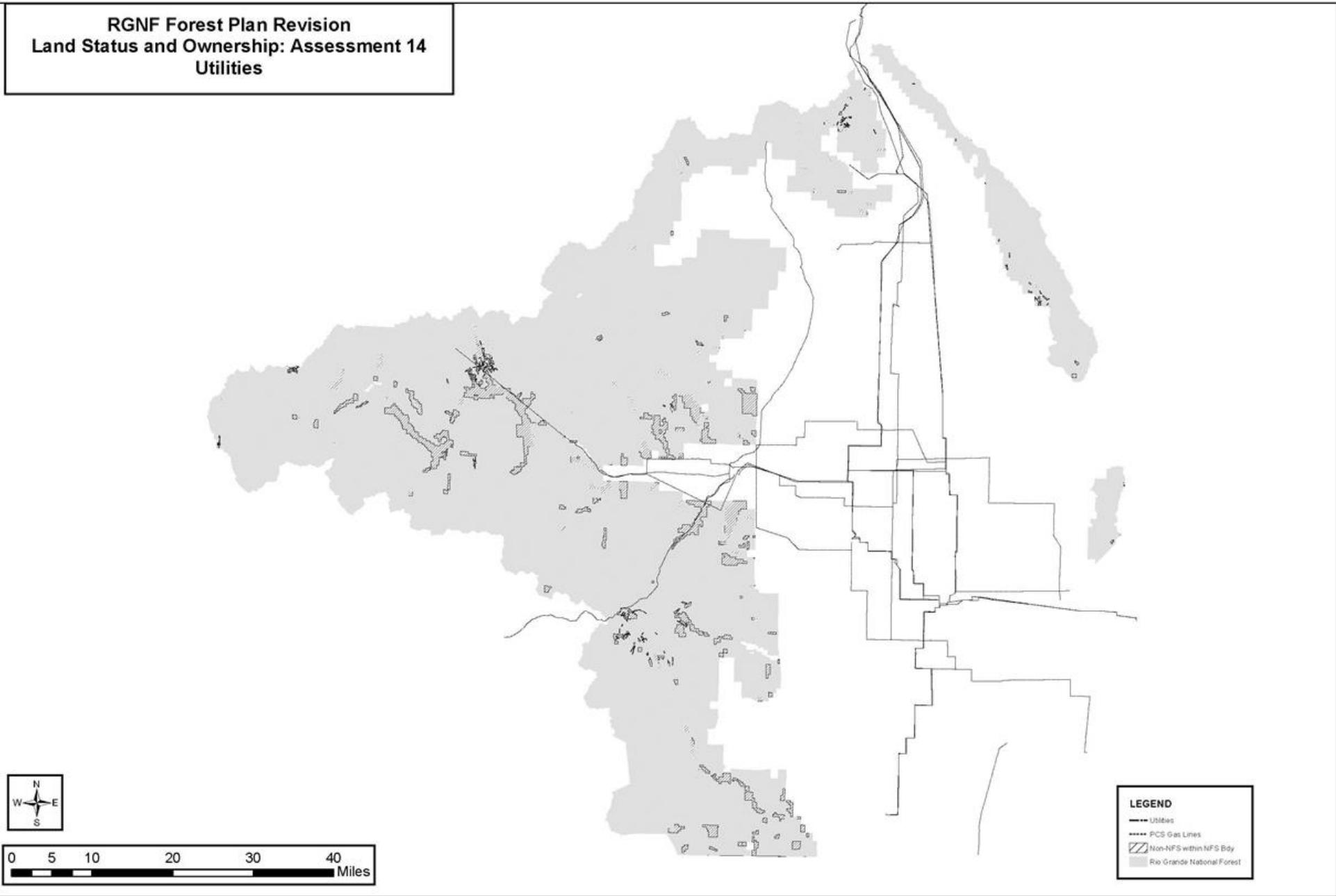


Figure 6. Utilities

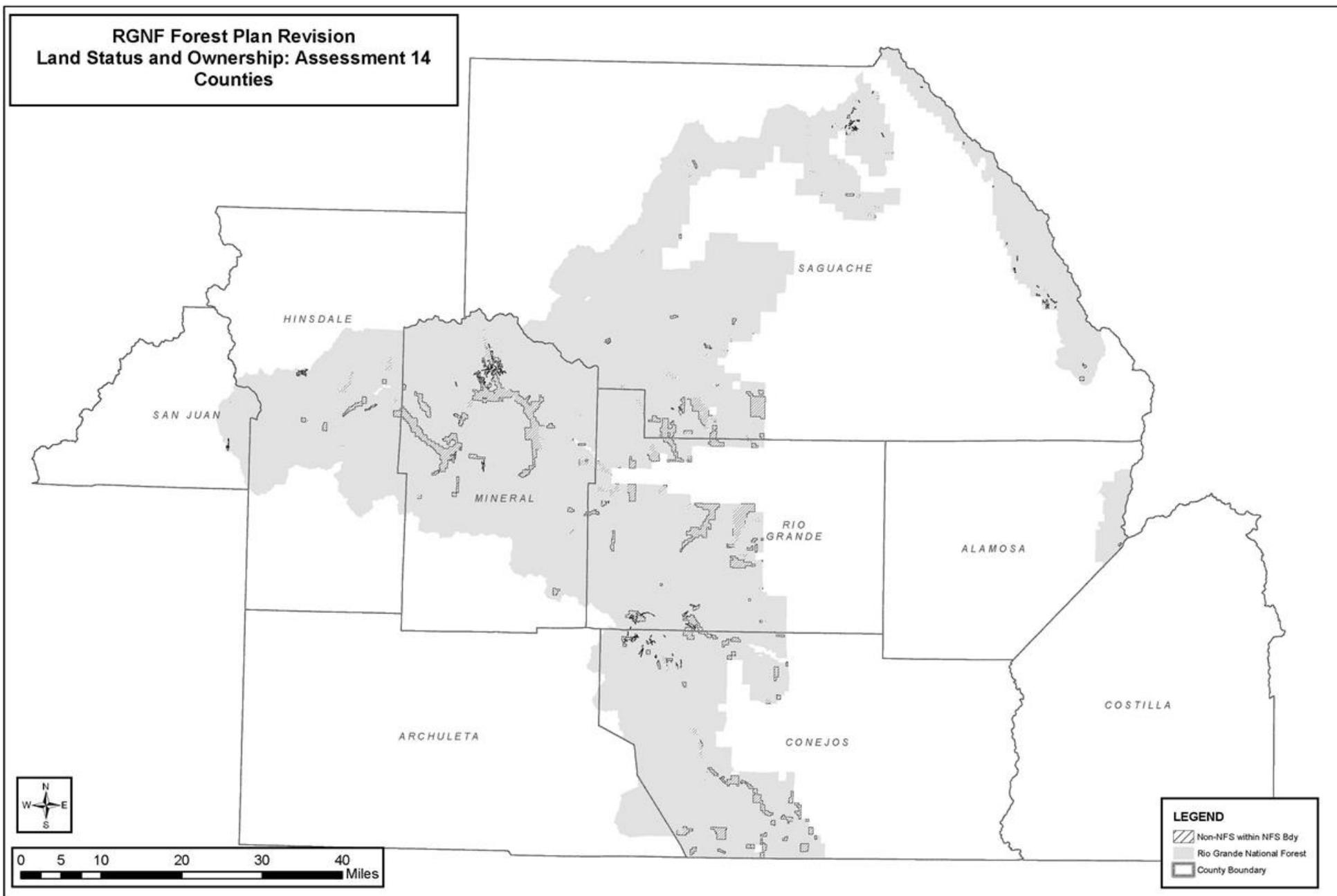


Figure 7. Counties