

Recreation Site Analysis (RSA)

Executive Summary

San Juan National Forest January, 2016

The San Juan National Forest (SJNF) is one of eleven national forest units in the Rocky Mountain Region (Region) of the U.S Forest Service. The Region manages an extensive outdoor recreation program under the overall guidance of the Forest Service Mission, the National Framework for Sustainable Recreation (2010) and the Leadership Intent for Outdoor Recreation for the Rocky Mountain Region (2015), as well as laws and agency policies.

In addition to congressional appropriations, national forests in the Region use a variety of state funds, grants and collections from other governmental bodies, other federal agency funds, various partner groups and agencies, concessionaires, volunteers, outfitters and guides and others. These supplemental funding resources are used to extend the Region's capability to provide for quality, safe, and sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities on the Forests.

The benefits to American society that outdoor recreation provides are needed more today than ever before while at the same time there are unprecedented challenges to providing quality recreation in the long-term. Major drivers affecting the San Juan National Forest's recreation program include new recreational technologies, changed or increasing use levels, changing climatic conditions, static or decreasing financial capacity, and increasing wildfire fighting costs which all affect the future of the Forest's – and Region's - recreation program.

Additionally, the San Juan National Forest (SJNF) recreation program is diverse and the factors described above must be considered across the spectrum of program areas. While developed recreation sites are often high-profile and offer popular types of activities, they represent but one segment that accounts for a high proportion of the Forest's recreation program costs. We also manage wilderness, administer outfitter/guide and ski area permits, visitor and customer services, heritage sites, trails, and motor vehicle travel programs, among others. Each of these components rely on the same limited agency resources and funding for proper delivery and management. While we remain dedicated to providing the best array and quality of recreation services possible, this must be tempered by the reality of available resources and the diverse experiences our public expects from the SJNF.

In consideration of the whole of our recreation program areas, the following Recreation Site Analysis (RSA) for the SJNF is presented here for public review and feedback.

Project Background

The San Juan National Forest manages 129 developed recreation sites, ranging from trailhead parking areas with very limited development, to full-service recreation facilities with intensive developments such as drinking water, flush toilets, electrical, and sewage treatment facilities. The RSA process is a holistic review of the Forest's developed recreation program and builds on a similar analysis completed in 2008. The RSA process is intended to bring our developed site portfolio more closely in-line with projected staffing and funding levels, public demand, and the expressed interests of constituents in the long-term.

Outcomes of this process can range from outright removal of sites (decommissioning) to reconstruction of existing sites from the ground up, or a wide range of options in between. However, it is imperative that our program be sustainable – socially, environmentally, and economically – going into the future. This is the guiding principle of the RSA process.

Even a cursory examination of the San Juan's projected agency resources and maintenance liabilities indicates that our current developed recreation program is unsustainable. This begs the question – what sites and/or services could we forgo and still maintain the recreation opportunities the Forest is renowned for? We need our constituents'

guidance in making difficult decisions, and as importantly, we need to ensure a universal understanding of the tradeoffs and opportunities inherent in this process. Although we may have to give some things up following this analysis, the Forest will be in much better position to sustain its developed recreation program in the long-term.

RSA Guiding Principle:

“Sustainability is the lens through which we make ALL decisions. We will not invest if we cannot sustain.”

Key Principles of the RSA

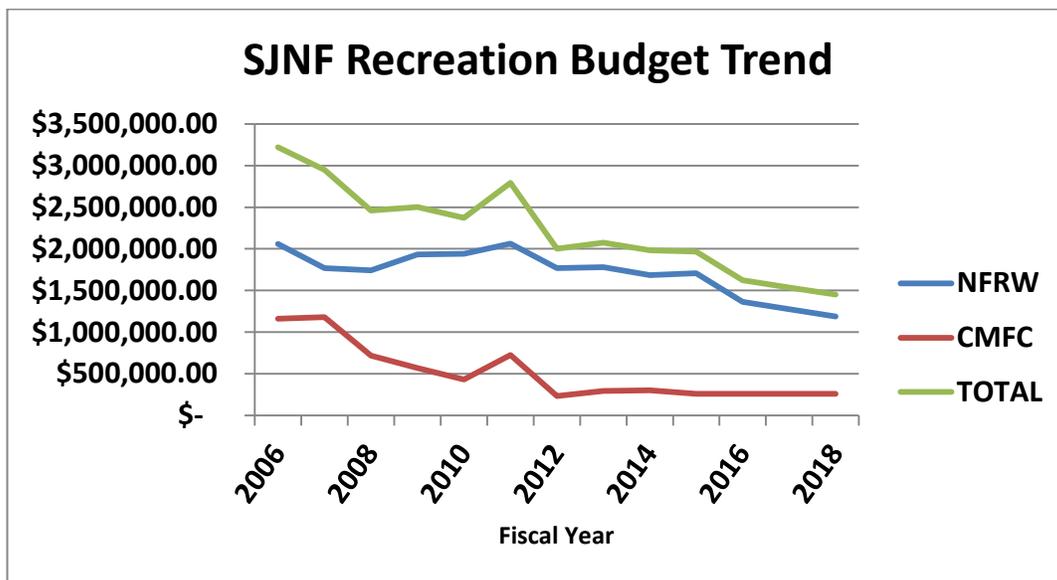
- ☞ When projected downward trends in budget and staffing are considered, it is obvious that tradeoffs and tough decisions will need to be made. The Forest is no longer able to maintain all of its current sites to standards, which impinges upon the public's expectation of safe and attractive recreation facilities.
- ☞ If budgets rebound after the program is streamlined, the Forest will be in excellent position to use any excess funding to catch up on work backlogs in trails, annual and deferred site maintenance, and special uses, among other program areas.
- ☞ Early in the process, we invited our constituents to identify sites/facilities of high value or interest to local communities and travelers. These sites/facilities are highlighted later in this document, and the recommendations for these sites – along with the rationale and implications – are described in detail.
- ☞ Recreation program cost-saving measures have already been taken by the Forest in 2014, including reducing our permanent workforce from 18 to 11 while also cutting the visitor information program (front desk/bookstore) operating costs by about 30% while maintaining adequate service levels. We are confident that such in-house actions have reduced program administrative costs as much as possible. Now we must specify changes to be taken on the ground to develop reasonable workloads for our remaining staff members.
- ☞ This effort is focused on *preserving quality recreation opportunities* provided by the San Juan National Forest, while not necessarily retaining all services and facilities at the same levels as

previously offered. The following types of questions are guiding the RSA process: Is each component of the site essential to preserving the opportunity? Is the site meeting the needs of today's recreationists per recent visitor-use survey data and user trends? Does the site's use level dictate continued maintenance or investment?

Evaluation of Resources and Costs

The Forest is applying sound business principles to objectively evaluate its work capacity and site management obligations. The agency's developed recreation site database (INFRA) provides detailed cost information and other site data that are being used to inform management options and set realistic program goals across the Forest for the next five to ten years.

The following table shows budget trends in the two primary appropriations the Forest receives annually to manage its recreation and trails programs. It is obvious we cannot sustain the same services and facilities today as we could 10 years ago when our budget was twice as large.



Note: NFRW is the recreation operations budget and CMFC is used for annual and deferred recreation facility maintenance.

It is important to note that CMFC, a closely related budget area, has also decreased significantly over time. Prior to 2012, CMFC funded the bulk of recreation facility maintenance. However, with reductions from over \$1 million per year on average in 2007 to less than \$300,000 per year over the last few years, that is no longer the case. This reduced funding level no longer allows us to undertake significant maintenance projects and has led – in part - to significant increases in deferred and annual maintenance across the Forest. This situation has also rippled into other program areas as we struggle to find funding for even annual maintenance projects on the ground.

In summary, The Forest's budget dedicated to the developed recreation program has actually declined by nearly 50% over the last decade, even without factoring in inflation. It is obvious that significant restructuring and cost-savings measures are in order to reach a sustainable recreation program in the long-term.

The Draft Plan of Work (Draft POW) proposed by the Forest – if fully implemented – would realize a savings of nearly 30% in annual site management costs across the Forest. Additionally, deferred maintenance would be reduced by about 17%, reducing our long-term maintenance backlog significantly. The following table (excerpted from page 10 of the Draft POW) shows the aggregated cost savings that would be realized from full implementation of the POW by 2021.

San Juan National Forest Developed Recreation Program Costs				
	COST CATEGORY	CURRENT COSTS	REVISED COSTS RESULTING FROM RSA IMPLEMENTATION	% COST REDUCTIONS AFTER RSA IMPLEMENTATION
EXPENSES	OPERATING COSTS	\$103,943	\$106,473	2%
	ANNUAL MAINTENANCE COSTS	\$125,729	\$87,447	-30%
	DEFERRED MAINTENANCE COSTS*	\$3,630,394	\$3,289,648	-9%

Note: Operating costs = toilet cleaning/stocking, litter cleanup, travel time/fuel, salaries, etc. Annual maintenance = Painting, refinishing, facility repairs, site grading, salaries, etc. Deferred Maintenance = Backlog of work projects not conducted in a timely manner.

Project Timeline

- ✓ November-December, 2014. **Review/revise recreation site database (INFRA).** Intensive data review/editing to ensure data moving forward in the RSA process is as accurate as possible.
- ✓ December, 2014. **Rank all recreation sites using objective criteria.** Resulted in scores from 12 (lowest value) to 60 (highest value).
- ✓ May, 2015 and ongoing. **Public Outreach.** Outreach efforts have included news releases, editorials, newspaper articles, a public workshop May 6 in Durango, Board of County Commissioner briefings, and significant one-on-one communication with key stakeholders – both individuals and groups.
- ✓ May 26 and 27, 2015. **Assign “actions” for each site.** “Actions” were identified for each site from among 66 choices, ranging from “no change” to “decommission” and everything in between. These actions, also known as Management Options, were assigned following evaluation of each site using data analysis/cost evaluations, internal program/site knowledge, external feedback (local government, interest groups, other stakeholders), and internal feedback from the San Juan National Forest Leadership Team.
- ✓ July/August 2015. **Draft and review “Plan of Work” (POW).** The POW is the primary outcome of the RSA process, and lines out actions to be taken at each site (if any), to reach sustainability over the next five years.
- ✓ Completed July 28, 2015. **Review Draft POW with Forest Leadership Team (FLT).** Received preliminary approval from FLT to move forward. Significant changes to be reviewed by FLT before Regional Office briefing and public release.

- November 13, 2015. Release revised draft summary documents and Draft Plan of Work to the public/stakeholders and government entities.
- November 4, 2015. **Brief USFS Regional Recreation Director and Staff.** Share Executive Summary and Draft POW with Rocky Mountain Regional Office staff. Revise Draft POW based on substantive feedback.
- January 21, 2016. **Release Draft POW to public, constituents, and local government for 30-day feedback period.**
- February/March, 2016. **Revise Draft POW** based on substantive feedback/new information.
- March, 2016. **Release Final POW to public, constituents, and local government.**
- January, 2016. **Initiate Forest-wide NEPA analysis** for proposed significant actions. Anticipate decision by May to allow for 2016 implementation of key actions.

Summary of Draft Plan of Work (POW)

The following table shows a summary of Management Option Codes (MOCs) that indicate what is proposed at each site (if anything) over the five year life of the POW.

Site Action Description	# Sites Affected
A - Decommission (all or partial)	10
B - Closure	5
C - Change Season	9
D - Remove Or Eliminate Cost Source Or Service Season	17
E - Reduce Service Frequency	28
F - Increase/Improve Services	5
G - Construct A New Site	0
H - Change Operator	14
I - Change Fees	4
J - Change Capacity	1
K - Site Conversion	19
L - Replacement/Repair	9
NC - No Change	51
Total	172

Note: All sites must have at least one code assigned, but some required more than one code. Total number of sites analyzed is 129.

Of note is the fact that no change is called for at 51 (about 40%) of the Forest’s 129 recreation sites. An additional subset (C, D, E, H, and J codes) calls for administrative changes only, such as reducing maintenance frequency or reducing the open season. Fifteen sites are proposed for decommissioning or closure, and these sites were typically ranked low and/or exhibited high operating costs due to their location, or may also have poor overall facility condition (please see RSA Draft POW). The sites recommended for decommissioning or closure also tended to have low visitation, lacked access to other nearby opportunities, and all but two were not directly commented on during the public outreach (see following table).

The following table summarizes actions proposed at the 18 sites which received specific or general comments during project outreach this spring. The table also includes rationale for the proposed site alterations.

SITE NAME and TYPE	RANK (12-60)	ACTIONS/RATIONALE
Little Molas Camping Area/Colorado Trail Trailhead	56	Existing gate on primary access will be used to allow a change in operating season with site open from mid-June thru fall color viewing (appx. 110 days/year). The gate on the road to campground would be used to control vehicle access and limit open period to mid-June through mid-September. One of the site's two toilets would be removed with users directed to the nearby Colorado TH toilet which will remain in place with reduced service frequency. As a result of this analysis the Colorado Trailhead and the Little Molas Camping Area will be separated administratively in the Infra database to reduce confusion and capture more accurate costs for each site.
Navajo Lake Trailhead	50	No change. Comment from Dolores BOCC member indicated a need for a toilet at this trailhead.
House Creek Boating Site	49	Facility could be operated in part by campground concessionaire already on site, decreasing use of FS appropriated funding for operations and maintenance.
Andrews Lake Fishing Site	49	Install gate at primary access road to allow for change in operating season with site open from mid-June thru fall color viewing (appx. 110 days/year). Damaged upper toilet will be removed and trash service eliminated. Convert composting toilet in lower loop to sealed vault type, lowering long term costs. Clean lower toilet once per week instead of multiple times a week. Initial costs estimated at \$20,000 for toilet conversion and \$3,000 for gate to limit operating season.
Lower Hermosa Trailhead/ Dispersed Campground	49	Camping area to be converted from a dispersed camping area to a concession-operated fee campground. Host site to be installed with sewage vault for Concession host site, no electrical. Implementation costs (\$8,000) are for host sewage vault and installing missing tables and grills. A new toilet would be installed in the future if fee revenue and campground occupancy dictate. Appropriated FS recreation funding required to manage this site would be reduced by 65%. The trailhead component of the site would remain unchanged.
McPhee Boating Site	48	Facility could be operated in part by campground concessionaire already on site, decreasing use of FS appropriated funding for operations and maintenance.
McPhee Campground	48	No change.
Junction Creek Trailhead	47	Assumption is that maintenance partnership will continue in near term with volunteers continuing to provide toilet servicing. If partnership dissolves, removal of toilet is proposed as it is not critical to maintaining the recreation opportunity (hiking/walking/biking) and toilet is the primary cost factor at the site. In the latter case, toilet would be removed and stored, vault would be pumped and back filled in place. One time cost of removal of toilet would be \$15,000.

Dry Canyon Fishing Site	45	Reduce toilet pumping to once per three years. Recruit volunteer support for routine toilet servicing.
House Creek Campground	45	Current occupancy rates suggest that using gates to restrict use within one or more camping loops would not adversely affect camping opportunities at the site. This action would be reversible if occupancy rates increased over time.
Upper Hermosa Trailhead	43	Reduce cleaning of site and toilet for summers of 2016-2017 and consider removal of the restroom, tables and grills to reduce operating costs, if not in conflict with decisions made in ongoing Hermosa Special Management Area (SMA) Plan. This action would reduce FS annual operating costs by 50% at this site. Any irreversible actions will be deferred until the Hermosa SMA Plan is finalized.
Molas Pass Interpretive Site	42	Pursue cost-sharing partnership with stakeholders to defray annual FS toilet operating costs - the toilet would remain in place and operational under this scenario. Interpretive information and other site features would remain in place. Set firm time limit for partnership development – remove toilet if long-term partnership is not in place by 2018. FS operating costs for this site would be reduced by nearly 60% under this scenario.
Piedra Picnic Site	37	No change. After considering comments from Hinsdale County, reducing the number of picnic units was dropped from further consideration.
South Mineral Dispersed Camping Areas	36	Primary plan is partial decommissioning - evaluate what part, if any, of current dispersed camping areas are in the 100 year flood plain and decommission what is determined to be in flood plain for public safety reasons. Reduce operating (open) season to Memorial to Labor day. Reduce trash clean up and restroom cleaning from twice a week to once a week, reducing FS annual operating costs for this site by nearly 50%. Dependent on outcome of floodplain survey, consider converting the dispersed sites to designated campgrounds with required improvements and begin to charge fees under the Concession program. All of these options may be limited or adjusted based on decisions stemming from a public planning process for Travel Management (TM). The TM process is to be initiated in fall of 2018 or spring of 2019. Relevant decisions from that Plan would be considered in relation to RSA recommendations to ensure they do not conflict.
Coal Bank Interpretive Site	33	Remove toilet, leaving remaining site features in place. The toilet accounts for over 50% of FS annual operating costs at this site. The toilet is not critical to the interpretive site's recreation opportunity.
Animas Overlook Picnic Site	29	Remove toilet if current partnership for toilet servicing ends. In that case, clean toilet and site once a week until restroom is removed. It is estimated servicing the toilet is almost half the FS costs for maintenance at site. Once toilet is removed, annual maintenance visits would be reduced to 2x/month.

Sage Hen Fishing Site	23	Decommission toilet if potential partnership with Montezuma County or other organization to share operating costs does not materialize. Toilet is not critical to providing the site's recreation opportunity – fishing and lake access.
Ferris Campground	19	Close without demolition or facility removal, deferring full decommission of site. Low-use site is not economically viable to operate and is not a priority site per site rankings. There may be opportunity to maintain some degree of access or facilities at the site for fishing, etc. in cooperating/partnering with Dolores and/or Montezuma Counties.

The “Action Summary Table” accompanying this Executive Summary lists every site and the recommended action(s) for that site. This is intended to be an easily understood summary of RSA recommendations, while the more comprehensive table is available in the RSA Draft Plan of Work (pgs. 17-43).