

**Rio Grande NF Forest Plan Revision
Land Use, Ownership, and Infrastructure Meeting
March 18, 2015
Monte Vista, CO
Meeting Summary**

Attendees

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *Forest Service*: Mike Blakeman, Jennifer Dobb, Adam Mendonca, Erin Minks, Amy Waring
- *Peak Facilitation*: Kristin Barker, Heather Bergman

Approximately 40 members of the public were also present.

Meeting Overview

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) recently began revising the forest plan for the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF). Members of the public attended this meeting to discuss land use, ownership, and infrastructure on the RGNF. Information gathered from this discussion will help inform the initial assessment phase of the forest plan revision process.

Forest Plan and Revision Process

Adam Mendonca, Deputy Forest Supervisor of the Rio Grande National Forest, introduced himself as the USFS employee primarily responsible for the forest plan revision. Mr. Mendonca explained that the forest plan guides every activity on the forest and is typically revised every 15-20 years. The last forest plan for the Rio Grande was finalized in 1996; the process of revising the plan recently began. The revision consists of three steps: a year-long assessment phase, a two-year National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase, and finally a monitoring phase.

Rather than creating an entirely new plan, plan revision aims to revise the current forest plan by first identifying which aspects need to be changed and which aspects are working well. USFS is currently seeking public input to help inform this need for change determination; this meeting focuses on input about land use, ownership, and infrastructure. Questions asked at this meeting were drawn from official Forest Service directives. USFS is legally required to answer questions related to these topics and wants to incorporate public input into their answers.

Erin Minks, Forest Planner for the Rio Grande National Forest, thanked attendees for their participation and encouraged everyone to remain involved throughout the plan revision process. Giving input at public meetings is not the only way to participate in the plan revision process. Members of the public also can provide input on the interactive plan revision web site at <http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com>, by email at comments-rocky-mountains-rio-grande@fs.fed.us, or by sending mail to or stopping by the office at 1803 W. Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144.

Community Discussion

Participants broke into groups to discuss four main topics: roads, trails, and recreation; land ownership and connections; water infrastructure and utilities; and rangeland improvements. A summary of key themes from the discussion follows.

-ROADS, TRAILS, AND RECREATION-

Current Conditions

Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas requiring maintenance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lost Trail Creek (unsafe area where ATVs roll; life flights occur yearly) ○ Campgrounds (no toilets, toilet paper everywhere) ○ Motorcycle trails (becoming horse and foot trails) ○ Pinos Trail parking area ○ Beetle kill areas ○ 520 Road • Motorized users maintain multi-use trails; other trails are not being maintained <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Need to identify funding and partnerships including nonmotorized users • Maintenance backlog is impacting safety (roads, trails, beetle kill, erosion) • Keep all system roads maintained for use
Winter Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct winter use survey to determine user types and impacts • Find good place for snow mobiles - winter “B” use includes undesirable places • Identify new areas for Nordic skiing if Wolf Creek development occurs • Define status of Rock Creek (not clear whether winter use is allowed) • Wolf Creek – proposed 85 acre expansion of MA 8.22
Maps & Signage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure trails are signed well (will reduce single track trail damage) • Need maps of open and closed roads and trails, fat tire trails, and wildlife viewing • Put interactive maps online so public can check for closures • Bring back the signs saying, “Enjoy your forest”
Access & Connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase trail connectivity (make loops; connect to local communities; allow access to more opportunities; connect with BLM trails) • Decrease road and trail closures (closures have concentrated use and impacts) • Decrease campground closures – only close one gate at a time • Keep non-system roads closed (currently have OHV conflicts and sign removal)
New Recreational Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve accommodation of new uses (e.g., hybrid skiing, fat tire biking) • Acknowledge and accept opportunities • Offer fat tire trails
Communication & Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify opportunities, funding, and partners for maintenance and trail work • Explain what is closed and why (can do this online) • Connect people to projects via media and partnership coordination • Partner with Rio Grande Emergency Action Coordination Team (RWEACT) • Use press releases to mitigate damage by mainstream press
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer more non-motorized trails • Remember that bikes sink on gravel trails • Develop more tie-ups at horse trail trailheads • Allow wider machines for backcountry access (increase 50” trail widths to 60”) • Prevent special interests from dictating or monopolizing uses • Offer more motorcycle trails and prevent them from becoming 4-wheel trails • Require license plates for 4-wheelers (to discourage misuse) • Pass Creek would benefit from non-motorized use - it’s surrounded by snowmobilers

Impacts to Ecological Integrity and Species Diversity

Geographical Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess low elevation areas to be protected (wilderness protects high elevation) • Build new trails to replace unsustainable ones • Inform the public when closures are due to wildlife or environmental concerns • Consider burn impacts to water • Hunting pressure moves animals; wilderness doesn't get visited as much • Use surveys to see what areas people are using and update uses accordingly
Species Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lynx-related comments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Decrease impacts to lynx from everyone ○ Inform the public about lynx studies and impacts ○ Don't use lynx to leverage other agendas • Fly a drone above bighorn sheep • Recognize that species are thriving
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have too many people in too small an area • Different users have different impacts (motorized impact studies are inconclusive) • USFS should get ahead of the drone situation

Impacts to the Local Economy

Positive Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special use permit funds • Tourism dollars in local communities • South Fork reliance on motorized uses
Negative Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire (South Fork, Creede, Lake City lost 80% of their business - press was a problem) • Pressure on counties to maintain roads on USFS land (drains local budgets)
Future Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The forest plan should assess recreational impacts to tourism and local communities • Capture value from beetle-killed trees
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor shops and local communities are impacted by what happens on the forest • More timber harvesting is a good thing (hug a logger!) • Examine the relationship between winter range and grazing • Create Computer Science jobs (through USFS or Chamber of Commerce) to provide better maps for the public • Reduce restrictions on firewood permits (e.g., allow 8-10' logs rather than 6')

-LAND OWNERSHIP AND CONNECTIONS-

Uses on Private Lands or Inholdings that Impact the RGNF

Landowner Uses or Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New development (houses, wells) - fragments wildlife habitat and impacts water quality • Private landowners not allowing wildlife viewing on their land
RGNF Impacts To Landowners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of communication/collaboration with adjacent & inholding property owners • Lack of communication about grazing rotation information with local residents • New USFS wells taking groundwater from local landowners • Inadequate allowances for defensible space needs - let landowners cut trees on USFS land around their homes • Unmaintained boundary fences on the forest

Public Access

Access Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More road access for wildlife viewing • More easy access for afternoon recreation • More parking at Home Lake (can only park on one side of the road) • More access in general, with fewer designated entrance points • More access based on abilities for all forest users • Segregated access points to reduce conflict
Places With Good Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alamosa area • Developed river access at Del Norte • Generic access into Wilderness Areas • General road system into the forest • General access (can walk into most areas)
Map & Signage Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate signage and maps overall (for roads and uses) • Inaccurate/nonexistent roads and access sites on maps • No map of paved trails for easy access • No grazing area signage to provide the public with more information • Insufficient signage about closures (tell why areas are closed to reduce complaints)
USFS Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive bureaucracy • Won't allow logging despite all the dead trees • Should inform public that abiding by regulations reduces need for law enforcement • Denver USFS office interferes with local management • Trying to regulate OHV use and closures for environmental degradation - good
Road & Area Closures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Road closures need to be justified • USFS is always closing access, never opening access • Road closures for Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout help protect fish populations to prevent a Threatened or Endangered listing • Small area closures to protect critical habitat for potential threatened/endangered species are beneficial • Closures concentrate use and lead to overuse • Too many developed recreation sites are being closed • Closures prevent nonlocal visitors from returning • Seasonal closures of campgrounds prohibit/prevent nonlocal visitor usage
Maintenance & Restoration Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't access river at County Line Road (need better boardwalks/river walks) • Should reopen areas after restoration/rehabilitation (e.g., Park Creek) • Need more creative ways to generate money and manpower for trail maintenance • Road access for horse trailers at Cooper Creek and Fern Creek restricted because of maintenance and road conditions • Safety issues (e.g., OHV accidents) due to inadequate trail maintenance
Private Land Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public trying to access forest via private roads • Residents want to protect resources but need more information about management • Need increased access on private/unauthorized trails
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are cutting trees and leaving the "bad" part of the tree on roads • Leashed dogs don't damage trails • Wildlife adapts to people and forest uses • In the Conejos District, trees are cut in campgrounds • Address conflicts between grazers and Soldier Stone Memorial site visitors • Protect remoteness of the area around Wolf Creek

Impacts to Wildlife

Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent further habitat fragmentation by preventing development until the Wolf Creek decision is finalized • Boundary fences keep wildlife on the forest • Hunting on other public lands and refuges stresses wildlife
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Impacts to the Local Economy

Logging & Timber	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logging dead trees will reduce likelihood of fires and stimulate the timber industry • USFS needs to protect/provide defensible space in the wildland-urban interface
USFS Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USFS does not have enough staff to be effective • A joint board of USFS and locals would help disseminate information to the public regularly (on a county level) • Continue communication and joint planning with the Bureau of Land Management
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access is tied to local livelihoods - improving visitor access improves the economy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide updated information on access points for visitors • Restricting motorized use may or may not have an adverse impact on local economy • Promoting greater access to those in wheelchairs and with other disabilities would benefit the local economy
Additional Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism is an economic driver in the valley • Mineral County is 96% public land; USFS should lease land for commercial development/manufacturing there • Mineral development, biomass, logging, and communication towers should be encouraged • Non-market values of forest resources are just as important as monetary contributions to local economy • If the Wolf Creek expansion goes poorly, the local economy will likely crash

-WATER INFRASTRUCTURE AND UTILITIES-

Current Conditions

Utilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to accommodate fiber optic line (right of way issues) • Not enough communication sites <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No current forest plan direction ○ Tedious permitting process ○ NEPA-cleared designated sites should be proportionate to facility size ○ Lack of communication with industry about strategic locations ○ Form a telecommunications subcommittee for planning effort • Contemplate future power lines • Increase flexibility to accommodate changing technology and remove obsolete ones
Other Infrastructure & Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict between USFS direction and State DWR engineer requirement to maintain conservation pools and ditches • Dams – need clear process that maintains public benefit • Sites closed for maintenance/hazard reduction should be reopened ASAP • Deadfall impacts infrastructure (need to accelerate tree harvest) • Operation and Maintenance plan and Strategic Urban Planning process drawn out and get dropped with changes in USFS personnel • Need more forecasting infrastructure

Impacts to Ecological Integrity and Species Diversity

Maintenance Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Properly functioning infrastructure has minimal impacts • Deferred/delayed maintenance causes negative ecological impacts • Large groups needed to do work in wilderness have higher impact than smaller number of people with mechanized equipment
Infrastructure Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication sites have visual and auditory impacts • We need more education about water infrastructure • Creede and other areas want alternate energy sources (e.g., solar farms, turbines)
Comments & Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An interactive web-based map of critical wildlife habitat and proposed infrastructure projects is needed for effective public input • Search engines need to be better to facilitate public involvement and transparency

Impacts to the Local Economy

Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LTE/4G technology desired by tourists (local economy impact) • Updated communications systems, i.e. cell service improvement (positive impacts to safety, small businesses, fire-related communications, and length of tourist season)
Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear rules on water conveyance infrastructure maintenance (essential to economy in San Luis Valley) • Tedious Operations & Management requirements (cost impacts to valley irrigators and stakeholders) • Water for fishing (local economy impact) • Any delay in water delivery (major economic impacts)
Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tedious permitting process (cost impact)

-RANGELAND IMPROVEMENTS-

Impacts to Ecological Integrity and Species Diversity

Grazing Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved forage for wildlife • Enhanced soil health • Increased water infiltration and retention <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Overgrazing is detrimental to water retention • Better seed retention • Altered fire regimes (reduced fire danger in some areas, high severity fire in others)
Water Improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased water availability for wildlife via water developments • Improved spring health via fencing and general maintenance • Removal of livestock from riparian areas via off-channel water improvements
Other Improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved species diversity via prescribed burns • Benefits to wildlife via use of laydown fencing
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide protection for rare species within allotments • Grazing in riparian areas causes wider channels, shallower water, increased water temperature, increased sedimentation, and reduced shade • Overforestation reduces biodiversity and available grazing resources

Impacts to the Local Economy

Positive Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of local materials • Use of local contractors • Increased grazing opportunities (improve local economy and job market) • Increased wildlife and plant viewing, tourism, and recreational opportunities • It's all positive
Negative Impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost/benefit of fencing should be considered in certain areas • Negative impacts of grazing to fishing, tourism, and outfitting/guiding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Incentivize partnerships to limit grazing in popular fishing areas - make them beneficial for all parties involved • Use of outside permittees, laborers, or supplies do not benefit local economy • Difficulty of using local contractors due to bidding process/bureaucracy

Current Conditions

Grazing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow more grazing (rangeland is underutilized) • Address livestock issues in campgrounds (need fencing or manure cleanup in some high-use places)
Fencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use more laydown fences • Replace fences in different areas where appropriate • Log along fence lines to protect fences • Inspect fences prior to the grazing season
Burned Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repair fences impacted by fallen dead trees • Be careful with grazing in burn area until it recovers • Seed appropriate areas of burn (only where seeds will succeed) • Address road and trail access issues due to fallen trees
USFS Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Log beetle kill area to improve rangeland • Give key emergency personnel access to closed gates • Decrease bureaucracy and increase leniency for ranchers • Respond to issues more quickly (address lack of resources) • Investigate rangeland suitability for impacts to critical big game winter habitat
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure range conservationists manage for the general public, not just their permittees (hard for non-permittees to get time with range cons) • Post information online about actively grazed areas (numbers and animals) • Don't keep the grazing rotation schedule secret from the public • Protect sensitive information about grazing • Improve and increase grazing education

Additional Questions and Comments

- *Where is the money from motorized registration being spent?* Answer from USFS: Motorized Registration is a state requirement that we enforce on federal lands. As such, all the money paid for motorized registration goes to the state of Colorado. Each national forest in the state can apply for grant money for trail maintenance and improvement, which is awarded from the money generated from the registration. Money received by a forest is tracked closely due to state reporting requirements. In recent years, RGNF has used the money received to hire trail crews to clear and maintain trails.