

**Rio Grande National Forest Plan Revision
Recreation Meeting #2
April 6, 2015
Monte Vista, CO
Meeting Summary**

Attendees

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *US Forest Service*: Mike Blakeman, Adam Mendonca, Erin Minks, Crystal Powell
- *Peak Facilitation*: Kristin Barker, Heather Bergman

Approximately 30 members of the public were 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 second of four recreation meetings held in the San Luis Valley to discuss recreation 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 under the guidance of the updated 2012 planning rule. 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 water and soil resources. In addition to sharing input at this meeting, members of the public are strongly encouraged to stay involved throughout the four-year plan revision process in order to help structure the best possible forest plan.

Mike Blakeman, Public Affairs Officer of the Rio Grande National Forest, noted that since the last forest plan was created, changes to factors like forest health, technology, forest uses, economics, and wildfire regimes have impacted the forest and could potentially affect recreational opportunities and management. Mr. Blakeman stressed the importance of participating in the plan revision and noted that giving input at meetings is not the only way to participate in the plan revision process. Members of the public also can provide input by email at comments-rocky-mountain-río-grande@fs.fed.us, on the interactive plan revision web site at <http://riograndeplanning.mindmixer.com>, or by sending mail to or stopping by the office at 1803 W. Highway 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144.

Community Discussion

Participants broke into small groups to discuss three topics: recreation assessment questions; forest plan standards and guidelines; and recreation in specific areas of the forest. A summary of key themes from the discussions follows.

RECREATION ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

How are different types of recreation compatible or conflicting?

Types of Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Hiking and ATV riding ○ Horse riding and mountain biking (horses cannot hear bikes coming) ○ Hybrid skiing/snowboarding/snowmobiling and traditional snowmobiling (need three use areas: non-motorized for backcountry skiing/snowboarding, motorized for traditional snowmobiling, and hybrid for hybrid approach) • Compatible <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Hiking and ATV riding on some less steep trails ○ Horse riding and motorized uses, when motorized users turn off engines as horses pass ○ Multiple-use areas – encourage compatibility of all uses (enhance tolerance; use signage to explain appropriate uses and considerations of other users)
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What draws people to the RGNF from distant places? Are there recreational opportunities unique to the RGNF?

Recreational Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial snowmobiling on the Continental Divide • Hunting • Fishing • Mushroom gathering • Camping • Exploring • Photography • Wildlife viewing • Traditional activities (RGNF is well developed for these)
Maintenance Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not make more trails (concerns with maintenance capability and fragmentation) • Outside groups like Creede OHV, VOC, and Backcountry Horsemen help maintain the trails they use • Horses damage trails as much as ATVs do • Allow chainsaws in wilderness on certain dates to maintain wilderness trails more efficiently/effectively
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage more use at lower elevations to preserve delicate high country • Drawing more people to the RGNF changes forest experience (do not attract more) • USFS has trouble monitoring and enforcing motorized use regulations • Study impacts of ATVs on wildlife; use results in ATV trail planning • Consider importance of summer range to elk body conditions when planning recreation management

What trends may affect future demands for recreation, including emerging new or unique recreational interests?

Trend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing ATV use – need enough infrastructure or riders will go off trail • Increasing hybrid snowmobiling/skiing/snowboarding use • Need to adapt forest plan as changes are needed (do not wait for a full revision in 20 years)
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What is the potential of the RGNF to expand or enhance existing recreational opportunities, or to offer new recreational opportunities?

Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create ATV trail closer to Lost Trail Creek Trail and allow access via Clear Creek • Remove motorized buffer zone around wilderness areas • Do not remove any snowmobile access • Close some areas to motorized use • Improve maps and signage • Increase trail maintenance • Open roadside and campground restrooms all year • Create more loop and connector trails (ATV loops around Creede; more snowmobile loops everywhere; connector trails for trail running and mountain biking – especially near Freemont Camp)
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase commercial snowmobile and UTV opportunities in Upper Rio Grande area • Increase skiing on Continental Divide; decrease snowmobiling (need separation) • Designate more hybrid use areas, especially around Elwood and Tucker Ponds • Increase ATV outfitting numbers • Increase wilderness use via additional recreational opportunities • Maintain recreation at existing levels (budget issues; deadfall on many trails) • Limit commercial capacity for outfitting • Increase commercial service capacity (currently maxing out commercial services) • Streamline permitting process for races (positive impacts to tourism and revenue) • Increase designated dispersed camping areas

How does recreation on the RGNF contribute to social, economic, and ecological sustainability?

Social Contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional forest uses • Bonding opportunities for families and friends • Accommodation for all recreational users • Draws people to live in and visit the area
Economic Contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mineral County is 96% public land – depends on forest for economy • Low income San Luis Valley residents can utilize low-cost uses on forest • Hunting contributes to the economy

What opportunities are there to foster greater connection between people and nature through education, experience, recreation, and stewardship?

Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase large group camping areas and opportunities • Involve more youth in using the forest • Open more commercial uses and increase diversity of commercial uses
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What trends are influencing the demand for various types of recreation activities (such as changing population demographics, traditional uses, or income levels)?

Trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motorized use has been penalized since 1996 plan – need to focus on multiple use • Fastest growing trend is OHV use – brings in the most money; does not require many new trails, just connecting trails • Special interest groups have more money and clout in lobbying for their interests
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Are there issues or dynamics that may prevent or preclude minorities and other underrepresented groups from seeking, accessing, or participating in recreational activities on the forest? What opportunities are there to address these issues or dynamics?

Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor valley school use – offer more opportunities for local students • Lack of designated special use areas • Aging population – need motorized use to access forest • Trail closures – negatively impact remaining trails
Opportunities to Address Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer more commercial opportunities for diversity of uses • Improve signage all the way to the river corridor to help visitors find opportunities • Volunteer groups can help maintain trails – provide incentive to keep trails open
General Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wilderness users do not live in the local area • We have enough wilderness – don't designate more • CPW study on motorized use impacts to wildlife was inconclusive • Would like USFS land provided to South Fork for tubing, park, and ice skating

**FOREST PLAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES
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Standards and guidelines are the “rules of the forest” that are documented in a forest plan. Standards are requirements; they are things the Forest Service *must* do. Guidelines are things the Forest Service can or should do. During this meeting, participants reviewed and discussed several standards and guidelines that are in the current forest plan. Forest Service staff identified these standards and guidelines for discussion due to confusion regarding their meaning, difficulty implementing them, and/or changed context on the ground. Participants were invited to provide feedback about whether the standards and guidelines are working, whether they should be changed from standards to guidelines or vice versa, and whether they should be deleted altogether.

Recreation General Guidelines #1 - Use concessionaire operations whenever possible.

Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concessionaires provide local information. • Concessionaire sites are cleaner and more welcoming. • Campground oversight is needed. • Hosted campgrounds are beneficial.
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of consistency – need uniform rule enforcement, management, fee amounts, and maintenance at all campgrounds • Campgrounds can be operated without hosts • Concessionaires should not be part of the national forest experience • Private enterprise and federal government not always compatible • Outfitters bear the brunt of complaints with trashed sites.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some camp hosts provide negative experience for campers • USFS can clean sites itself (maybe use midnight patrol sweeper, charge hiking/biking fees in addition to motorized use fees, or have option to pay yearly fee) • External representative (not USFS or concessionaire) best for regulation enforcement
General Comments About Camping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand shoulder season into spring and fall - provide more hunting and fishing opportunities; improve economy • Only expand shoulder season if no negative impact on resources • Campgrounds should be open year-round with or without concessionaires (even if use concessionaires, leave sites open for dispersed camping after host season) • Need more dispersed sites and primitive camping opportunities

Developing Recreation Guideline #4 - Camping will be limited to 14 days in a 30-day period.

Change Standard/Guideline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase limit (to 21 days or up to 30 days) • Allow campers to move to other location on forest after time limit • Concessionaire-managed sites should manage their own stay limit • Manage with flexibility and adjust rules during peak times – base on demand or on number of people in party
Do Not Change Standard/Guideline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns with staying longer than 14 days <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resource use and waste issues ○ Impaction in camping areas ○ Leaving messes ○ Needing to empty RVs • Improve signage to inform public • Standard rule for camping limit is important
Enforcement Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of rule enforcement in concessionaire-managed camps • Lack of enforcement in general – e.g., Alamosa River corridor

Record of Decision Guideline #6 - Game retrieval using ATVs is authorized between 12:00 pm and 5:00 pm each day, unless soil and water damage will occur.

Change Standard/Guideline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End time limit earlier to avoid interference with evening hunting hours • Remove rule if USFS cannot enforce it • User-created trails can cause issues • Negatively impacts retrieval business
Do Not Change Standard/Guideline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows hunters to go farther; increases hunter dispersal • Provides unique opportunity – RGNF is one of few forests that permits this • Helps promote hunting • Decreases likelihood of wasted game meat (by individuals who have trouble carrying it out) • Improve education about rule – use temporary signs; disperse information via state OHV registration

RECREATION IN SPECIFIC AREAS OF THE FOREST

Attendees participated in a map-based discussion to denote areas where recreation is going well, areas of emerging or potential concern, and areas of current concern.

-GREEN - Areas with good conditions that should be maintained	
Cat Creek/ Alamosa Canyon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hot Creek Trail south of Terrace Reservoir State Wildlife Area (cleared by Boot Hill Motorcycle Club) • Motorized loops – protect and keep open, especially for summer use
Additional Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intersection of Lost Trail and trail to Heart Lake • Cathedral Campground area (Boot Hill Motorcycle Club maintained trails) • Area just north of Little Ruby Lake (Fern Creek Trail) • Trail just NW of Oso Creek/Miners Creek confluence • Motorized trail to Ruby Lake/Lost Trail (Creede OHV Club success story)
-ORANGE- Areas of emerging/possible future concerns, or areas with potential for expansion/enhancement	
Pass Creek/ Wolf Creek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shinzel Flats/Ellwood Cabin/FR380 – keep open to over-snow travel • Lobo Overlook – trade or share motorized and non-motorized use • Lobo – close to motorized use • Wolf Creek Pass – spread out commercial use beyond the pass • Pass Creek/Tucker Ponds – allow permitting to clarify backcountry use • Glades SW of Wolf Creek Ski Area – opportunity for expansion into this area
Grayback/ Summitville	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summitville to Grayback – open for more commercial snowmobiling use • Grayback Mountain – need motorized loop in area south of mountain • West of Bennett Peak/south of Cow Camp Cabin – need motorized access • Poage Lake <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Keep mixed motorized/cross-country use around lake ○ Connect Poage Lake dead end road with FS 380 to north
Additional Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cat Creek Park – need summer motorized loop west of here • Intersection of motorized Lost Trail Road and nonmotorized Lost Trail • Road near Lower Beaver Creek Campground – connect to Cross Creek Trail east of Cross Creek Campground; also extend north to Model T Park • Creede area – need more motorized routes
-RED - Areas with current concerns	
Pass Creek/ Wolf Creek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FS 390 (Pass Creek Road) – connect dead end FS 381 to this road north of Tucker Ponds campground to provide needed access • Backcountry yurts in area – protect from motorized uses – Pass Creek Yurt, Tucker Ponds Rd/Basin, FR 390
Cat Creek/ Alamosa Canyon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area north of California Gulch • Soldier Gulch – create trail here • Terrace Reservoir – open connection at southeast end of reservoir
Additional Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big Meadows/Trout Creek – connect these areas • Conejos Peak Trail Systems – improve signage; numbers aren't helpful

Additional Comments

- Determine where over-snow travel is acceptable for winter use and access.
- Spread out recreational user impacts via loop trail systems
- Consider opportunity for local fee or special license plate to support forest efforts
- Work to maintain existing trail systems for differing uses in light of population growth
- Support more Adopt-a-Trail programs
- Enhance education to clarify management boundaries
- Improve trail maintenance
- Do not divide uses – current mixed use is good
- Provide winter guidance for high-altitude range allotments
- Create more motorized loops
- Accommodate new technology (e.g., side-by-sides)
- Consider over-snow backcountry use challenges
- Increase priority of Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout restoration, especially when exotic populations are wiped out or drastically reduced by events like wildfire or other flood events
- Pay more rigorous attention to grazing impacts in riparian areas – e.g., North Clear Creek and Buck Creek above Continental Reservoir, Rito Hondo, Rio Grande, and especially below Continental
- Improve advertising for public meetings – use more radio advertisements, flyers, and emails
- Water diversion water compacts are historic actions