

**Rio Grande NF Forest Plan Revision  
Wilderness and Special Designations #1  
May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015  
Antonito, CO  
Meeting Summary**

**Attendees**

Forest Plan Revision Team

- *US Forest Service*: Mike Blakeman, Dan Dallas, Andrea Jones, Erin Minks, Earl Robins, Gerard Sandoval
- *Peak Facilitation*: Heather Bergman, Katie Waller

Approximately 15 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 meeting to discuss wilderness and other special designations on the RGNF. Information gathered from this and previous discussions will help inform and influence the initial assessment phase of the forest plan revision process.

**Forest Plan Revision and Assessment Process**

Mike Blakeman, Public Affairs Specialist of the Rio Grande National Forest, introduced himself and explained the forest plan guides every activity on the forest and is typically revised every 15 to 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 expected to be completed by 2017: a year-long assessment phase, a two-year National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase, and finally a monitoring phase. USFS is currently seeking public input to help inform the assessment phase, in which current conditions and trends are analyzed to determine which portions of the existing plan should be changed. After determining the need for change, USFS will develop and analyze multiple management options to determine the most beneficial options for inclusion in the final forest plan.

Mr. Blakeman stated that wilderness areas are designated by Congress, and the Rio Grande National Forest has four of these designations. Criteria will be minimal for what is recommended as wilderness during the inventory process of the plan revision and as the process progresses, these areas will be narrowed down. Mr. Blakeman explained that congressional wilderness designations are not the only special designation areas on the RGNF. There are also Wild and Scenic River and Research and Natural Area designations (RNAs), among others.

Mr. Blakeman stressed the importance of public participation and noted that giving input at meetings is not the only way to participate in the plan revision process. Members of the public can also provide input by email at [comments-rocky-mountain-rio-grande@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-rocky-mountain-rio-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 discussed the three main themes related to wilderness and special designations: significant special designations on the RGNF and their contribution to sustainability in the San Luis Valley (SLV), rare or outstanding resources, and the meaning of the word “wilderness.” A summary of key themes from the discussion follows.

**What are the most significant special designation areas on the Rio Grande National Forest and how should they be managed? Do they contribute to social, economic, and ecological sustainability? If so, how?**

<b>Recreation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recreation industry is seeing an increase in impact and usage.</li> <li>• New technology has increased winter recreation (motorized and non-motorized).</li> <li>• Recreation uses have changed.</li> <li>• Front Range users are increasing, mainly at northern access points and fourteeners.</li> <li>• Archery needs increased access.</li> <li>• Wilderness causes increased recreational usage seasonally, in summer and winter.</li> <li>• SLV has fewer recreation areas than Front Range, which concentrates usage.</li> <li>• Wilderness areas are not overcrowded as they are physically demanding to reach.</li> </ul>
<b>Economic Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RGNF has a large impact on SLV lifestyle.</li> <li>• Recreation is an important part of the local economy.</li> <li>• The forest is essential to the SLV and its future.</li> <li>• Wilderness areas are good for the economy.</li> </ul>
<b>Ecological Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grazing impacts need to be addressed in wilderness areas.</li> <li>• Wilderness areas provide intact landscapes for climate change studies.</li> <li>• Development of wilderness areas discourages unchecked expansion of logging.</li> </ul>
<b>Current Conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upper Rio Grande has seen an increase in traffic, but it is not overwhelming.</li> <li>• Willow Lake and other basins are areas of concern.</li> </ul>

**Other than wilderness or areas that are already designated, are there other rare or outstanding resources or places on the forest? What makes them rare or outstanding?**

<b>Management Practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase Forest Service funding to properly protect wilderness resources.</li> <li>• Monetize and quantify human impacts on wilderness using ecosystem services.</li> <li>• Research the impacts of new special designations on USFS resources.</li> <li>• Consider new or upgraded designations only as a last resort.</li> </ul>
<b>Current Conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deadman’s Creek and New Baca Mountain Track should be designated as wilderness since they are surrounded by it and have archaeological significance.</li> <li>• Elk Creek Trail is treated as wilderness due to lack of defined boundaries.</li> </ul>

**What does the word “wilderness” mean to you? What criteria should be met for such a designation?**

<b>Wilderness Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Silence and solitude with a lack of noise pollution</li> <li>• Non-motorized usage</li> <li>• Possible mechanized usage with strict guidelines and time limits</li> <li>• Wildlife viewing and biodiversity</li> <li>• Lack of structures and roads</li> <li>• Natural view sheds and scenery</li> <li>• Physically challenging and required use of primitive skills</li> </ul>
-----------------------------------	--

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wild</li> <li>• Limited signage</li> <li>• Lack of human presence, including trash</li> <li>• Spirit of discovery, pioneering, and individualism</li> </ul>
--	--

### How should wilderness be managed?

<b>Monitoring</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor the amount of users in a certain area to understand changes over time.</li> <li>• Utilize monitoring to identify usage thresholds.</li> <li>• Consider the possibility of required permitting once the threshold is reached.</li> </ul>
<b>Access</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prohibit motorized vehicle use.</li> <li>• Create buffers around wildlife areas to protect wildlife and ecological integrity.</li> <li>• Allow mountain bikers to approach wildlife boundaries in buffer zones.</li> <li>• Ensure broad user access to avoid further conflicts.</li> <li>• Accommodate different user needs by retaining multi-use areas and access.</li> <li>• Charge certain users for access to counteract their negative impacts.</li> </ul>
<b>Maintenance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider mechanized trail maintenance.</li> <li>• Do not use large volunteer groups to maintain trails, as their presence is harmful.</li> <li>• Use smaller groups with possible mechanized tools who can work quicker to lessen the impacts on riparian areas, water quality, and ecosystems.</li> </ul>
<b>Management Practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize adaptive management to alter practices when necessary.</li> <li>• Manage user access to wilderness and nearby areas on a case-by-case basis.</li> <li>• Manage for current and future uses and impacts.</li> <li>• Encourage education rather than enforcement for special designation usage.</li> <li>• Increase enforcement in special designation areas.</li> <li>• Better manage current designations before considering the addition of others.</li> <li>• Clearly define boundaries of wilderness to avoid creation of de facto wilderness.</li> <li>• Consider designations other than wilderness to protect natural resources.</li> <li>• Expand research natural areas (RNAs), especially for ecological zones at lower elevations.</li> <li>• Evaluate the biases and perspectives of public input when considering designations.</li> <li>• Weigh an activity's impact level when assessing environmental impacts and access.</li> <li>• Utilize ecosystem services like carbon sequestration to understand human impacts.</li> <li>• Retain high standards to uphold the specialness and timelessness of the forest.</li> </ul>

### Questions

- *How does the Forest Service deal with management differences when multiple agencies manage the same wilderness area?*

Each wilderness area has a lead agency and a specific management plan. The wilderness management plan tiers to each agency's land and resource management plan, known as the "forest plan" for the USFS.

- *Can counters be used now to judge current use and future changes?*

Yes. The Forest Service monitors this and may consider changes in management prescription due to visitation increase or decrease. The RGNF has not instituted permitting with increased visitation or issues with capacity. This is something that USFS staff will continue to monitor and assess. Based on legal precedent, the USFS is not legally allowed to collect fees for visitation to a wilderness area.

- *What recreation types are allowed in RNAs?*  
The types of recreation allowed within RNAs depend based on the area's specific management plan and the ecosystem or resources that are being monitored. Most RNAs allow non-mechanized and equestrian access. Other areas may have a motorized trail mixed with other uses. This is decided on a case-by-case basis.
- *Can the Forest Service regulate the use of ultra lights over the RGNF?*  
No. In most situations, the USFS is not able to regulate the air space above the forest, which is instead controlled by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The USFS can regulate where ultra light users take off and land on National Forest System land.
- *Is there available data that shows wilderness designations attract more visitors?*  
The RGNF has not collected this type of data. That type of data may have been collected elsewhere, but the RGNF has not searched for it at this stage of the revision process.