Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre & Gunnison National Forests Issues Update April 2011

Secure Rural Schools Act – All counties on the GMUG chose to receive monies under the modified Act. Five counties (Delta, Garfield, Gunnison, Mesa and Montrose) receive funds under Title II. This required the establishment of a Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) to review and recommend projects that improve the maintenance of existing infrastructure, meet stewardship objectives and/or restore and enhance forest ecosystems, land health and water quality. The Secretary of Agriculture appointed GMUG RAC members in April 2010. The RAC has met twice and has recommended the implementation and funding of 8 projects totaling about $500,000. Another round of projects has been solicited and the RAC will meet to review and recommend additional projects on April 12, 2011.

Travel Management– The GMUG has completed travel management planning for all three Forests. The Forest will begin implementing the Gunnison Plan in FY11 including educating users with a new MVUM map, signing open routes and closing or repairing others. Implementation of the Grand Mesa Travel Plan is substantially complete and implementation of the Uncompahgre Travel Plan was a priority for FY10. The Grand Mesa mechanized travel plan (e.g. mountain bikes) was completed in FY10 and implementation of it is likewise underway. The Forest has developed many supportive partners who are assisting us with education and maintenance.

Uncompahgre Plateau CFLRP – The Secretary of Agriculture selected the Uncompahgre Plateau project as one of 10 nation-wide, under the Collaborative Forest Land Restoration Project (CFLRP) in FY10. The project on the GMUG is projected receive about $10 million over 10 years to restore healthy forests and habitat conditions on 166,000 acres. Work is underway on restoration projects: a stewardship contract has been awarded and began over the winter, prescribed burning occurred this past fall, and planning for other project completion is underway. Many partners are working with the Forest and Colorado Forest Restoration Institute to continue and further develop multi-party monitoring. The success of this project is dependent upon continued and timely annual funding over the next 10 years.

Wilderness Legislation — In the 111th Congress, Congressman John Salazar with the support of both Senators introduced legislation to designate portions of the GMUG in San Miguel County as Wilderness. Representative Diane Degette also proposed a variety of scenarios to designate Wilderness throughout Colorado including national forest lands on the GMUG. The legislation was not enacted in the last Congress; however, local interests, particularly in San Miguel and Ouray Counties continue to pursue designation of the areas through current members of Congress.

American Recovery and Re-investment Act (ARRA) Projects

The GMUG received funding for 4 projects under ARRA to: complete improvements at the Mesa Top Trailhead ($550,000); refurbish and reconstruct Lost Lake Campground ($400,000), and restoration funds for the historic Alpine Ranger Station and the Alpine Tunnel ($350,000).

Historic Alpine Ranger Station -Was constructed in 1907 and is the second oldest USFS ranger station still in existence. The cabin and likely the barn were constructed by Ranger Spencer on the Alpine Plateau in order to manage the sheep and lumberman that were inundating this part of the forest. Up to 90,000 sheep with lambs crossed over the Ridge Stock Driveway twice a year. In 2009 the site was awarded an ARRA grant to restore and rehabilitate the structures in order to provide recreation opportunities for the public. The restoration work was completed by Historicorps in partnership with the Forest Service, Colorado Preservation Inc., and Volunteer Outdoor Colorado.

Historic Alpine Tunnel - 2010 marked the 100th anniversary of the closing and abandonment of the Denver, South Park, and Pacific Railroad's narrow gauge line through the Continental Divide at the Alpine Tunnel. Over 5000 people a year visit the site. The Forest Service, in partnership with the Western Colorado Interpretive Assn., received ARRA funding to provide restoration work on the site, including re-pointing mortar and stabilizing the massive rock walls of the 1880s engine house and the stone boarding house ruins and stabilizing the two standing railroad water tank towers.

Lost Lake Campground— Rising out of the West Elk Wilderness, East Beckwith and West Beckwith mountains form twin sentinels over Lost Lake Slough, the body of water beside Lost Lake Campground. Against this backdrop lies a much-loved and used campground. This site is so heavily used and popular, the Forest struggled all season to keep campers out to accommodate reconstruction activities! An ARRA-funded project, the campground was reconstructed to accommodate modern vehicles and camper-needed changes, a new water system, camp spurs, new campsite furniture and restroom facilities. The Forest plans to re-open this site in summer 2011.

Mesa Top Parking and Trailhead - This popular recreation trailhead on the Grand Mesa was initially a capital investment project to create a larger, safer trailhead for winter recreationists with restroom facilities and to accommodate vehicles and snowmobile trailers. ARRA funding was added to the project to provide a smooth, asphalt surface to reduce runoff, rutting and erosion (enhance water quality) and allow for plowing during the winter months. Snowmobilers, skiers, snowshoers, dog sled teams and other winter recreationists have been actively enjoying the new facilities this winter.

Gas Exploration & Production – The GMUG manages natural gas development which includes 21 natural gas wells, operated by seven natural gas companies. Additionally, another 48 wells have been approved, but not developed. Petrox Resources recently submitted a Master Development Plan proposal for approximately 72 gas wells, about 48 miles of pipeline and 8 miles of road. The Forest is also reviewing proposals from SG Interests to drill 4 new gas wells. In 2011, the Forest plans to begin environmental analysis to amend the 1993 GMUG Oil and Gas Leasing Availability decision. The GMUG participates in a Natural Gas Collaborative Group hosted by Delta County, that includes representatives from local counties, environmental interests, industry, private landowners and the BLM.

Geothermal Production – In January 2011, the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison Forests (GMUG) issued its first-ever decision for geothermal leasing. The decision to "consent to lease" certain National Forest System (NFS) lands for geothermal resource development was the result of an environmental analysis of effects for the potential to lease approximately 3, 800 acres of NFS surface-managed lands within Gunnison County. This decision did not authorize surface disturbing activities. Should the land be leased by the BLM and subsequent development be proposed, additional environmental analysis would be required before any development could occur.

Coal Mining and Administration – Three underground coal mines occur within the national forest in the North Fork Valley. These mines produce high-quality, super-compliant coal, which helps electricity generators meet Clean Air Act standards in Colorado and elsewhere. The Forest has the responsibility to evaluate surface impacts on federal coal leases that are on National Forest System lands. To date, the GMUG has approximately 16,000 acres of federal coal leases and approximately 1,800 additional acres have been proposed by Oxbow Mining and Mountain Coal Company and are under analysis. The Forest continues to participate in the North Fork Coal Working Group, a 10-year-old community collaborative group which addresses coal issues in the North Fork Valley.

Locatable Minerals – In FY 2010, the GMUG began processing a locatable minerals plan of operation submitted by U.S. Energy Corp. for geotechnical baseline investigations and water sampling within the Carbon Creek, Splains Gulch and Mt. Emmons areas to assess the feasibility of situating a possible molybdenum mine. Scoping for the proposal began in December 2010 and concluded January 31, 2011. On January 25-26, two public informational sessions were held in Gunnison and Crested Butte with over 60 and 220 persons attending, respectively, to learn more and comment about the proposal.

The Forest performed compliance inspections on 10 existing locatable minerals operations. Three other proposals are pending on the Ouray District in 2011. The GMUG also administers about 30 mineral material sites which provide sources of rock, sand and gravel for in-service use, local counties, Bureau of Reclamation, Colorado Department of Transportation, and provides sources of landscaping rock for the public.

Ophir Land Acquisition – Phase III of the Ophir Loop Land acquisition project on the GMUG closed the week of May 17, 2010. To date, the Forest has acquired 747 acres of land within the Town of Ophir's watershed above the valley floor. Land and Water Conservation Funds are being used to purchase parcels at the Town's request in order to prevent further land development and protect its water supply.

Reservoir Expansion – The GMUG hosts many high elevation reservoirs, primarily on the Grand Mesa. Many of these structures were built in glacial remnant pits on the Mesa and resulted in inundation of natural fens (peat-forming wetlands) in the early to mid 1900s. The age of these sites and changes in the demand for water and irrigation have resulted in the need for heavy maintenance on these reservoirs. Many of the owners are also looking to expand the amount of water that can be retained in existing or new sites. The Forest has been working with the Army Corps of Engineers and the EPA to allow the maintenance and expansions to occur within the terms of the easements, while addressing concerns about impacts and restoration. The EPA considers fens aquatic resources of national importance (ARNIs), and uses this threshold to request a higher level of review by the Corps and requiring EPA concurrence.

Fen Inventory – In 2008, a multi-disciplinary team composed of specialists in soil science, geology, hydrology, botany and range was assembled to collect information to better understand the abundance and distribution of fens on the Forest. The team completed its second season of field evaluations last summer. Preliminary results suggest that more than 1,700 fens occur on the Forest, covering less than 1% of the landscape. Most of these exist on the Grand Mesa and in the Sawatch, San Juan and Elk mountains. The final report and information generated will be used to inform future management and develop best practices to protect and conserve fen resources.

Rocky Mountain Biological Lab (RMBL) – This non-profit organization has made a request of the GMUG and Rocky Mountain Research Station to increase efforts to effectively protect and sustain research as a priority in the Upper East River Valley. RMBL is authorized to conduct research on 120,721 acres of the GMUG NF, via a special use permit; they also have a permit from the White River NF for 3,900 acres in the upper Crystal River basin. RMBL does not feel these instruments provide the necessary security or legally binding priority to ensure its continued research success in the face of increasing recreation and other uses in the Valley. The Forest and RMRS are working with RMBL to finalize a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among the three entities that will facilitate collaboration on management and research.

New Science – The Forest is working with Agency Research & Development units and other partners to explore issues of climate change, aspen health, biomass utilization, wildlife requirements and watershed condition. This new science is being used as the Forest considers prioritizing project planning and implementation that effectively support sustainable ecosystems and communities.

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