



Need to Change Public Workshop Summary

March 11, 2026

4 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. MST Otero Community College, Student Center Meeting Room, 2001 San Juan Ave., La Junta, CO 81050

5 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. CST Elkhart City Hall, 433 Morton St., Elkhart, KS 67950

Workshop Purpose

Continue to identify and gain shared understanding of how the public values the grasslands and understand the areas that need to change or remain the same from the 1984 plan.

Attendees:

Forest Service

- La Junta: Kurt Staton, James Pitts, Lochen Well, Raul Alonzo, Kelsey Price, Mike Kirkpatrick, Jason Herbert, Aaron Lamp, Norman Clippinger, Steve M, Keri Chartrand
- Elkhart: Nancy Brewer, Ryan Nehl, Beth Davis, Jennifer DeWoody, Stephanie Shively, Chris Suwyn, Cullen LaPointe, Chelsea Porter, Tim Higgins, Sean Owens

Virtual facilitation team: Heather Stokes (University of Montana), Alexis Gibson (University of Montana), Dessa Dale (Forest Service Planning Service Organization)

In-person attendees:

La Junta participants	Elkhart participants
18 members of the public	35 members of the public

What We Value About the Grasslands

Participants were asked to share something they value about the Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands (CCNGs) when they arrived at the workshop. Common themes in answers reflected appreciation for the area being public land; offering undeveloped opportunities for recreation, hunting, and fishing; and providing areas for grazing and solitude.

- Public lands focused on grassland conservation
- Fishing
- Recreation
- Public land for grazing, hunting, fishing, etc.
- All hunting
- Beef

- Freedom to roam in peace!
- The wildlife
- Hunting, fishing, recreation, wildlife, trapping
- Public land for grazing
- Public lands
- Public area to take family hunting, fishing, grazing
- Unobstructed views
- Birding, wildflowers, natural habitats, tourism, opportunities, archeological sites
- Recreation/campgrounds
- Revenue from payments in lieu of taxes (P.I.L.T.) payment

Conversation and Worksheet Themes

Participants were asked to use worksheets in advance of the workshop to help them brainstorm ideas on (1) what was working well and why and (2) problems and what would need to be changed to address that problem across four themes – human use and heritage resources, active management, habitat management, and water resources. Worksheets were collected at the workshop, and people who didn't attend the workshop were also invited to submit their worksheets to share their perspectives. The summary below captures key themes from both the in-person workshop conversations (which are built on the worksheets) and the individual worksheets received by the Forest Service.

This summary captures a range of common themes from responses; it is not organized to reflect frequency of opinions or to represent formal "Need to Change" statements. Full notes from workshop conversations are part of the planning record.

Partnerships and Agreements

What Is Working

1. **Forest Service and county government partnerships:** Cooperative agreements between the Forest Service and county governments for road maintenance, law enforcement patrols, and wildfire response are working.
 - a. Participants value these arrangements and see them as a model for how federal land management can work with local government. Participants appreciated functional coordination with county officials.
2. **Forest Service and grazing association/permittee partnerships:** The long-standing partnership between the Forest Service and grazing associations is an effective management arrangement on the CCNGs.
 - a. The Forest Service and grazing association/permittee partnerships and agreements ensures the persistence of livestock as both an economic resource and important ecological disturbance process for grassland wildlife.
 - b. Federal grazing permits and flexibility in grazing schedules work well for most, and cost-share agreements for fences, water wells, pipelines, and livestock tanks are also seen as working well for both parties.

- c. Ranchers and permittees have invested significantly in water infrastructure that benefits both livestock and wildlife. This investment in earthen dams, pipelines, wells, and stock tanks across areas that wouldn't have water was recognized by participants as providing ecological and operational benefits beyond the individual. Where water infrastructure is functional and maintained, it prevents soil erosion, supports wildlife, and enables grazing management.

What Is Not Working

1. **Insufficient partnerships for conservation and recreation management:** Current partnerships are not sufficient to address growing pressures from recreation, invasive species, and species conservation.
 - a. Recreation is growing faster than the grasslands' capacity to manage it, and existing law enforcement and agency partnerships are seen as inadequate to keep pace.
 - b. Conservation challenges like invasive species, at-risk species and wildfire management require broader partnerships with Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), state wildlife agencies, conservation organizations, adjacent landowners, and local governments that are not fully in place.

Recreation, Public Use, and Socioeconomics

What Is Working

1. **Recreation as an economic and community asset:** Recreational opportunities on the CCNGs support local tourism, enhance community identity, and provide broad public benefit. The grasslands were described as a “huge positive” for everyone because of their recreational opportunities and economic impacts.
 - a. Abundant recreational opportunities – hunting, fishing, hiking, birding, and camping – attract regional and out-of-state visitors, generating economic activity in the surrounding communities. These same opportunities are enjoyed and valued by local residents as well.
 - b. Participants referenced specifics like stocked fishing ponds, affordable campgrounds, and open hunting access with good success rates as examples of what makes for high quality recreation.
2. **Guided tours and managed visitation:** Guided tours of heritage and natural features are an effective model for managed public visitation.
 - a. Participants see guided tours as an example of recreational opportunities that keep visitors within defined areas, ensure resource protection, and provide important interpretive context that builds appreciation and stewardship. One example offered by several participants are guided dinosaur track tours.
 - b. This model is seen as preferable to unstructured access where people are “turned loose” because it produces a better visitor experience with fewer resource impacts.

3. **Heritage and scenic values:** The CCNGs' heritage resources and scenic character are valued assets that current management has helped preserve.
 - a. Historical and cultural sites like the Santa Fe Trail, canyon landscapes, and ranching heritage are important to the identity of the surrounding communities and attract tourism.
 - b. Dark skies, open vistas, and the absence of industrial development were frequently cited as valued by participants.
 - c. Participants expressed that they see current Forest Service management has maintaining these qualities and want to see them protected going forward.

4. **Ranching as an economic and community foundation:** Livestock grazing is the backbone of local economies and rural communities surrounding the CCNGs.
 - a. Multigenerational ranching families are deeply invested in the landscape's long-term health and the social fabric of nearby towns. Ranching supports local businesses, schools, and community institutions in ways that go beyond direct economic activity.

What Is Not Working

1. **Law enforcement and unmanaged recreation:** The large geographic area means that law enforcement's capacity is stretched resulting in unmanaged recreation that is causing measurable resource damage and operational conflict.
 - a. Law enforcement agencies are spread thin across multiple counties, leaving the grasslands largely without enforcement capacity. As a result, off-road vehicle damage, dispersed camping, campfires, trespass on private land, and wildlife and livestock harassment go largely unaddressed.

2. **Public education and awareness:** Visitors – especially from outside the region – lack basic awareness of rules, land boundaries, and the impacts of their activities.
 - a. Many recreational users are unaware of the difference between public and private land in the CCNGs checkerboard and are unaware of how their activities impact ranching operations, wildlife, or the grassland.
 - b. Participants pointed to events like the La Junta Tarantula Festival as an example event that brings large numbers of visitors to the region with limited preparation or awareness of rules, land boundaries, or appropriate behavior.
 - c. Educational infrastructure on the grasslands like signage, orientation materials, and ranger presence is seen by participants as insufficient relative to the volume of use.

3. **Recreation facilities and infrastructure:** Recreation infrastructure is deteriorating and impacting visitor behavior.

- a. Under current budgets and management, some campground facilities are unusable, fishing ponds are silting in, interpretive signs are outdated or poorly located, and visitor facilities or campgrounds have been closed.
- b. Participants are concerned that these conditions influence behavior and stewardship ethic of visitors.

Infrastructure

What Is Working

1. **Road access and travel management:** The road network and travel management plan provide the foundation for safe access and recreational vehicle enforcement.
 - a. Well-defined county roads allow ranchers, recreationists, and emergency services to travel safely and efficiently.
 - b. In Colorado, the designated road system is seen by participants as enabling state and local law enforcement to enforce off-road violations.
 - c. Road decommissioning where roads are not needed is reducing unnecessary resource damage.

What Is Not Working

1. **Aging water infrastructure:** Water infrastructure is failing across the CCNGs, and funding for replacement is critically insufficient.
 - a. Aquifers are dropping, wells are aging out, and funding for replacements is insufficient. Participants were also concerned about fishing ponds silting up and going dry.
 - b. The burden of water development falls largely on permittees, with inadequate cost-share support and regulatory barriers. When infrastructure fails and cannot be quickly updated, wildlife loses water resources, and grazing management is disrupted.
 - c. Solar-powered wells and windmill replacement programs are an affordable and effective way to modernize aging water infrastructure. These systems are more reliable and lower maintenance than aging windmills, and they can be maintained year-round for wildlife benefits. The Conservation Improvements Program provides a mechanism for funding updates.
2. **Road network condition and ecological impact:** The road network is extensive, deteriorating in places, and its ecological footprint has not been formally assessed.
 - a. The CCNGs have an extensive road network. Deteriorating conditions cause users to deviate and create informal routes, further fragmenting habitat and damaging sensitive areas.
 - b. A minimum road system has not been identified, and the current network has not been evaluated against ecological capacity.

Species and Ecological Conditions

What Is Working

1. **Grazing as an ecological tool:** Well-managed grazing is seen as positively impacting the environment through maintaining vegetation structure, reducing fire fuels, and supporting wildlife habitat.
 - a. Participants see cattle and wildlife as able to coexist well across the grasslands.
 - b. The checkerboard of public and private land has helped preserve the large-scale integrity of the shortgrass prairie ecosystem.
2. **Forest Service commitment to species conservation:** The Forest Service commitment to targeted habitat management for Species of Conservation Concern (SCC) in this plan update is recognized as a positive starting point to update the 1984 plan. Participants view existing partnerships with county and federal agencies on wildlife conflict as working.

What Is Not Working

1. **Prairie dog management:** There is no adequate management framework for prairie dogs on the CCNGs, resulting in unresolved conflicts between ranching operations, species recovery goals, and ecological function.
 - a. Prairie dogs pose a cross-boundary management challenge: Participants highlighted concerns about prairie dog population expansion on to private lands, noting that they destroy vegetation, degrade soil, damage infrastructure, and need to be actively controlled – especially given the potential for their colonies to carry plague.
 - i. When prairie dogs expand outside CCNGs boundaries, landowners are responsible for repairs, control measures, and impacts to grazing areas.
 - b. Prairie dog populations are declining across their historic range: At the same time, other participants were concerned by significant declines in prairie dog populations in their historic range, where they are a keystone species essential for black-footed ferret recovery and broader ecosystem integrity. Participants point to recreational shooting on the grasslands as causing severe and lasting population impacts.
2. **Lesser prairie chicken decline:** Lesser prairie chicken populations continue to decline, approaching extirpation in the plan area.
 - a. Lesser prairie chicken populations have declined dramatically in the plan area, with only one active lek detected in 2024. Research indicates that the grasslands on the CCNG are not providing the vegetation cover and plant communities the species needs.
3. **Invasive species and woody encroachment:** Invasive plant species and cedar and juniper encroachment are growing stressors that current plan direction does not adequately address.

- a. A variety of invasive species in both upland and riparian areas are outcompeting native vegetation, degrading habitat, and reducing available grazing. Cedar and juniper are expanding into grassland areas.
 - b. Participants felt the current plan direction is inadequate to address these challenges at the needed scale and that there is no systematic prevention or early detection capacity.
 - c. Some participants questioned whether there is sufficient data record to characterize “encroachment” of cedar and juniper expansion.
 - d. Compounding this, there were concerns that the Dust Bowl legacy means much of the CCNGs consists of replanted grasslands that may not respond to management the same way as intact native grassland, but this is not accounted for in current planning.
4. **Monitoring and data gaps:** Insufficient monitoring data, poorly established reference conditions, and a lack of functioning research natural areas limit adaptive management.
- a. Grazing monitoring data isn’t publicly available, ungrazed reference areas haven’t been established, and soil health indicators are not linked to management triggers, which makes it difficult to evaluate whether management is achieving desired outcomes or to detect problems early enough to respond adaptively.
 - b. The only RNA in the plan is degraded, and its designation is under reconsideration. No suitable formal replacement has been identified. Without reference sites, it is difficult to evaluate management effectiveness or set restoration baselines.
5. **Riparian condition and aquatic resources:** Water resources are being degraded by multiple stressors, and the current plan direction doesn’t provide adequate management guidance for riparian restoration, native fish recovery, or groundwater dependent ecosystems.
- a. Participants noted that riparian areas are being significantly degraded by invasive species, livestock impacts, and the lack of large woody debris.
 - b. Native cottonwoods and willows have been largely displaced by tamarisk and other invasive species, and native fish species have been extirpated from parts of the CCNG.
 - c. Aquatic connectivity has also been compromised by road crossings and the absence of permanent floodplain wetlands.

Planning, Management, and Regulatory Processes

What Is Working

1. **Adaptive management practices:** Where adaptive management approaches are being applied, they have produced positive outcomes.
 - a. Cost share agreements, rotational grazing, and flexible responses to on-the-ground conditions demonstrate that adaptive, locally informed management can work.

- b. When the Forest Service and permittees work together to adjust management in real time – responding to weather, infrastructure problems, and changing conditions – the system functions well.
2. **Fire as a management tool:** The use of prescribed fire as a management tool is recognized as positive, especially given its role as a natural disturbance process that supports the health and biodiversity of the system
 - a. Where prescribed fire and targeted conifer removal have been applied, habitat conditions have improved.
 - b. Participants broadly recognized the potential value of fire as a tool for vegetation management, fuels reduction, and habitat maintenance. The challenge is not whether fire is effective but whether it is being applied at the right frequency and scale.

What Is Not Working:

1. **Grazing plan rigidity:** While grazing is broadly seen as working, the 1984 plan’s direction is seen as dated.
 - a. Rotational grazing schedules can be too rigid to accommodate drought variability, and head count allotments are not being reevaluated frequently enough as conditions change.
2. **Climate change integration:** Climate change is absent from the 1984 plan, yet the 2012 Planning Rule requires climate change to be treated as a major stressor with a framework to respond to it.
3. **Prescribed fire and addressing fire risk:** Despite broad agreement that fire is a valuable tool, participants did not see it being used with enough frequency or scale to adequately address expanding woody plant cover, changing vegetative conditions, and reducing fire risk around roads and structures.
 - a. Time and funding constraints limit prescribed burn programs.
 - b. Some participants also expressed concerns about prescribed fires burning for too long or whether managed fire is an appropriate tool for arid grasslands.
 - c. Interagency coordination fire response is inconsistent, and a collaborative wildfire prevention plan between the Forest Service, counties, and local fire departments doesn’t currently exist, even as visitation and recreation-related fire risk is growing.

Other Information Provided

Participants shared a number of insights and concerns that were not part of the purpose of the workshops but are still very important to the CCNGs. We are including them here to reflect the range of discussion and input that was provided. This information will not be lost and will be reviewed and used where relevant for plan development.

1. **Forest Service relationships with local communities:** Forest Service staff are building strong relationships by being accessible, responsive, and collaborative, as well as having valuable local knowledge.
 - a. Participants valued the accessibility, responsiveness, and local knowledge of Forest Service CCNGs staff, who they described as being hospitable, personable, and willing to answer the phone.
 - b. Staff were praised for having ranching backgrounds, understanding grassland and rangeland ecology, and being able to solve problems on the ground.

2. **Inconsistency in Forest Service–public relationships:** The quality of Forest Service and permittee relationships is seen as too dependent on individual staff rather than consistent institutional systems.
 - a. When staff have local ranching knowledge and collaborative working styles, the relationships function well. Participants expressed concerns about the quality of their management experience based on who holds the position at any given time, and that can lead to uncertainty.

3. **Archeological clearance as a barrier to infrastructure maintenance:** Archeological clearance requirements are slowing routine infrastructure and maintenance work.
 - a. Participants expressed frustration that archeological clearance processes can take years even for straightforward projects. During this time, infrastructure continues to deteriorate and can fail entirely.
 - b. Specifically, participants pointed to the lack of qualified archeologists and the backlog of pending studies as bottlenecks.

4. **Declining revenues:** The decline in oil and gas revenues has significantly reduced county resources and created fiscal challenges in surrounding communities.
 - a. Oil and gas revenues to counties surrounding the CCNGs has declined, and participants connect this to straining the budgets for roads, schools, and local services. With a large nontaxable land area in the grasslands, the tax base to surrounding counties is limited.

5. **Water rights and interstate conflicts:** Water right constraints and interstate water management are creating frustration and limit flexibility.
 - a. Participants noted significant disparities between pumping water rights across the Colorado–Kansas state lines, out of basin water transfers, and downstream priority water right agreements.

6. **Gaps in the SCC list:** Participants shared multiple at-risk species – including pollinators, plant species tracked by heritage program, and others – that they do not see as adequately addressed in the draft assessment or SCC list. Other participants would like to see

revisions to the SCC list to remove species based on climate conditions or historic occurrence or to add species with documented presence in the planning area.

7. **Staffing, capacity, and local hiring:** Participants expressed concerns about the impacts budget and staffing reductions have on the Forest Service's ability to manage the CCNGs effectively. There was also an expressed interest in ensuring local people are hired into seasonal or contract positions.
8. **Habitat connectivity:** The draft assessment did not adequately characterize connectivity conditions, making it challenging to plan effectively for species that require landscape-scale movement.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to participate in the need to change workshop, share their perspectives, and contribute meaningful insight throughout this process.