

Rio Grande National Forest – Assessments 6, 7, and 8 Social, Cultural, and Economic Resources – Executive Summary



Introduction

This document is a brief summary of the first step in the forest planning process; our assessment, and public input we solicited; regarding the Rio Grande National Forest’s contribution to the social and economic sustainability of conditions relevant to the area influenced by the plan. Many of the elements we describe in this summary represent centuries of tradition and cultural continuity up to the present day. Because of this, there are activities and resources that cross over from cultural resources (Assessment 13) as we move from the past to the present.

Planning rule objectives state that the forest plan will guide management to:

- maintain ecological sustainability;
- contribute to socioeconomic sustainability; and
- provide people and communities with ecosystem services and multiple uses that provide a range of social, economic, and ecological benefits for the present and into the future.

These include sustainable recreation and scenic resources; multiple uses including timber harvest, livestock grazing, hunting and fishing, water use, and energy development; cultural and historic resources and uses (see also assessment 13 – cultural resources); and opportunities to connect people with nature.

We are required to manage for scenic resources and values on scenic corridors and state scenic byways. Examples of scenic resources on the forest include the Old Spanish National Historic Trail, Continental Divide National Scenic Trail, and the Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad. Uses, products, services, and visitor opportunities supported by forest service lands produce a steady flow of benefits which contribute to the robustness and sustainability of local communities.

The focus of the assessment for social, cultural, and economic conditions is to identify and evaluate available information regarding:

- the social, cultural, and economic conditions in the area(s) of influence,
- the important social, cultural, and economic influences affecting the forest plan area, and
- how the plan area influences social, economic, and cultural conditions on the forest and the broader landscape.

What We Asked

We held 18 meetings to engage with the public on social, cultural, economic, and ecosystem services issues. These meetings were facilitated by the National Forest Foundation and Peak Facilitation between March and July 2015 in Alamosa, Antonito/ La Jara, Creede, Monte Vista, South Fork, Crestone, and Saguache. Approximately 380 members of the public attended these meetings. In addition, the National Forest Foundation provided a web-based tool that allowed us to ask the same set of questions to those who could not be at the meetings.

We also participated in meetings with individual organizations from February of 2015 through July 2015. Each of these meetings focused on different topics that were all related to social, cultural, economic use, and ecosystems services. These meetings, listed in the table below, included over 200 attendees.

Co-hosted meetings for Rio Grande National Forest Plan revision

Date	Time	Location	Group
2/05/2015	3:00-5:00	Alamosa Railroad Depot	SLV GO
2/11/2015	5:00-6:30	Saguache Rd and Bridge	ScSeed
3/2/2015	1:30-2:30	Mineral County Courthouse	Mineral County BOCC
3/4/2015	1:30-4:00	Monte Vista Coop Community Room	Rio Grande Water Users
3/11/2015	10:00-12:00	Monte Vista Visitor Center	SLV Ecosystem Council, Wilderness Society, Rocky Mtn Wild
3/11/2015	7:00-9:00pm	Rio Grande County Annex Building	Rio Grande Senior Water Users
3/23/2015	10:00-10:30	Alamosa BOCC Building	SLV County Commissioners
3/31/2015	7:00-8:30	SLV Health Education and Conference Center	SLV Trout Unlimited
4/08/2015	1:00-2:00	Guadalupe Parish Hall	Conejos Water Conservation District
4/13/2015	6:00-8:00	Windsor Hotel	RWEACT
4/14/2015	9:00-10:00am	Monte Vista Visitor Center	San Luis Valley Weed Management District
4/14/2015	2:00-5:00	San Luis Valley Conservancy District	Rio Grande Roundtable
4/21/2015	11:30-12:00	Alamosa Bureau of Rec office	Rio Grande Water Conservation District

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Date	Time	Location	Group
4/29/2015	1:30-3:00	Rural Electric	Rural Electric
5/01/2015	11:00-1:00	CCW Office, Antonito	Conejos Clean Water Board
5/04/2015	7:30-9:00	San Luis Valley Conservancy District	SLV Cattleman's Assoc.
5/5/2015	10:00-11:00	RGNF Supervisors Office	Colorado Timber Industry Association
5/20/2015	6:00-8:00	Monte Vista Coop.	SLV Cattleman's Assoc.
5/26/2015	5:00-7:00	Monte Vista Coop	RWEACT
6/24/2015	4:30-6:00	Creede Community Center	Mineral County
6/29/2015	6:00-7:30	SLV Pizza	High Valley Cyclists
7/07/2015	1:00-4:00	Shumei Center	Crestone Spiritual Alliance - Baca
7/09/2015	9:30-11:00	San Juan Ranch	Hinsdale County

Youth/teacher meetings for Rio Grande National Forest Plan revision

Date	Time	Location	Group
5/14/2015	5:00-5:30	Alamosa Recreation Building	Envirothon students
6/10/2015	3:00-4:00	South Fork Guard Station	Teachers
6/24/2015	3:00-3:30	Beaver Creek Youth Camp	Camp Participants

We asked the same questions at meetings and on-line to give us consistent input for the assessment process, covering topics such as social, cultural, economic conditions, ecosystem services, and multiple uses. What cultural or historic resources or uses are important in and around the Rio Grande National Forest?

- What opportunities are there to foster a greater connection between people and cultural and historic resources and landscapes in and around the Rio Grande National Forest?
- How are the use and enjoyment of cultural and historic resources or uses contributing to social, economic, or ecological sustainability?
- How do wildlife and plants in the Rio Grande National Forest contribute to the socio-economic sustainability of the San Luis Valley? What species and/or habitat qualities most contribute to these values?
- How does recreation on the Rio Grande National Forest contribute to social, economic, and ecological sustainability? What trends are influencing the demand for various types of recreation activities (such as changing population demographics, traditional uses, or income levels)?
- 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?
- What are the most significant renewable and/or non-renewable energy and mineral resources on the Rio Grande National Forest? Do these resources contribute to the social and economic sustainability of the region? How so?
- How do water and soil resources on the Rio Grande National Forest contribute to social, cultural, and economic sustainability?

- How are the use and enjoyment of cultural and historic resources or uses contributing to social, economic, or ecological sustainability?

What We Heard

Social, cultural, and economic conditions; ecosystem services, and multiple uses are critical uses of the Rio Grande National Forest. The forest provides opportunities for tourism, recreation, agriculture (including grazing), environmental health, logging, and using renewable resources. The public sees the San Luis Valley economy as inextricably connected to the forest. However, the forest needs to quantitatively define long-term sustainable use and develop a plan to meet that use.

Ranching and Cattle

Cattle grazing and ranching are important to the community, economy, and cultural heritage. The cattle have a value to the community and stimulate the economy. The cattle operations provide job opportunities but also are important as a cultural heritage. The private land and adjacent forest service land help each other to maintain a heritage important to southwest Colorado (see also the cultural resource assessment 13).

Energy Production and Mineral Wealth

Renewable resources on the forest include geothermal, solar power, hydropower, wind, and biomass. Non-renewable resources include mining including gold, silver, lead, zinc, and tellurium as well as oil and gas leasing. Mining has declined in Mineral County and the price of minerals has decreased, while the price of production has increased. Industry wages are higher for oil and gas than mining but mining still supports community development. If the industry is lost then people will move from the area and it will become more economically depressed. Mining supports the local economy year round as opposed to the seasonality of tourism. Economic and social sustainability are tied together in the rural communities.

Managing the Aquifer

The forest supports the aquifer and the residents in the valley are dependent upon the aquifer for water. Water is inadequate for current demand and future growth. Many ranchers' wells have dried and too many are reliant on ground water. Decreasing ground water has an impact on riparian areas and the ability to capture and store more water. Decrease snowpack negatively impacts the local economy and ski area. The ramifications of decrease in snowpack occur throughout the year. Land use management is critical to help sustain water. Agriculture practices and grazing management can help sustain snowpack. Grass stubbles help maintain snowpack longer in ponderosa pine and pinon juniper. Forest Service allotments should consider stubble height and the ability to hold water or snow in the utilization.

Large fires could devastate the aquifer. Vegetation treatments and prescribed fire could help restore the forest and minimize large-scale wildfires and subsequent destruction. Some members of the public felt the forest should let wildfires burn while others felt the fires should be suppressed immediately. The public agreed that prescribed fires help maintain the forest and minimize large-scale wildfires. Prescribed fire should be used as a tool to manage the forest.

Spruce Beetle and Vegetation Management

Spruce beetle outbreaks have the potential to cause many issues related to social and economic sustainability. Logging and vegetation treatments to remove diseased or bug infested trees helps support the economy and provide firewood to local residents. Treatments also improve health and safety risks such as camping beneath standing dead trees.

Traditional Use

There are traditional cultural, prehistoric and historic resources throughout the forest. The importance of the resources and the way they are used depends on the location and the group using them. The forest is used for tree products such as firewood, timber, cottonwood, roots, pitch, and piñon nuts; plant products such as pigments, medicine, oshá, tobacco, yucca, chamiso; additional products such as mushrooms, earthen pigments, plaster, clay, minerals, and material to make tools. Ongoing traditional cultural activities include recreation, fishing, ranching, livestock grazing, irrigation, tourism, hunting, and labor. These activities occur throughout the forest but are often located on traditional use, or historic sites; including traditional recreation areas, spiritual use areas, historic mines, and old fisheries. The value of the land to those with cultural connections is more similar to a home landscape where there is a need for harmony among all resources. There seems to be a fine balance between reliance on tourism and local use of the forest. The local public feels too much growth and could change the current cultural use and dependency on the forest products.

Tourism

Tourism seasonally defines much of the economy on the Rio Grande National Forest. In the winter skiing attracts visitors and summer recreation activities are very diverse. Hunting, fishing, wilderness opportunities, and visiting fourteeners are some of the ways tourism drives the economy. Local businesses have collapsed following a large-scale fire and decrease in tourism. Similarly there is fear that hunting is declining among younger generations.

Shifts in user groups include an aging population, increasing family use, vacationers staying for longer periods of time, increasing use of popular wilderness areas, increasing use of technology. Other trends include increasing enjoyment of viewing natural features, relaxing, viewing wildlife, skiing, driving for pleasure, extreme recreation in backcountry or sidecountry areas, increasing interest in mountain biking, increasing motorized use, more dogs on trails, increased use of 14ers, and continued creation of unauthorized trails. Reduce restrictions on firewood permits.

Public Education

The Forest Service should take this opportunity to foster a deeper connection between the public and cultural and historic resources. The public suggested the forest enhance public education, engage more youth, increase outreach efforts, improve the permitting process, decrease staff turnover, reduce negative impacts of connection to the land and resources, and make it easier for people to continue cultural traditions such as harvesting resources.

Where We're Headed

The most resounding statement coming from the public meetings is that the local economy and social fabric are inextricably connected to the Rio Grande National Forest. From timber to mining, grazing, tourism, and social and cultural uses, the forest is ingrained in the livelihood of these communities. The importance of ecosystem services and the benefits of forest resources expand beyond the immediate effects from counties with forest land. The forest needs to develop and maintain sustainable enterprises that contribute to the general economic and social vitality of the area.

Census data show an overall population growth and development trend based at least in part on recreation opportunities and scenic integrity, which will place greater demand on forest resources and may affect the perceived aesthetics and uses associated with Rio Grande National Forest lands. We, as managers of the forest, will need to maintain the quality of visitors' experiences while providing forest products and cultural and recreational experiences to a greater number of people.