



Forest Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# Partnership Peaks

San Juan National Forest Partner Stories, Opportunities, and Updates

Winter 2024



*San Juan Scenic Byway from Molas Pass - Rachelle Fish*

*By Mark Winkworth - Acting VIS Lead*



Welcome to winter on the San Juan National Forest!

As the temperatures drop, the days get shorter and the snow starts to stick. On the San Juan, fieldwork moves inside and we start wrapping up last year's details and planning for next year's projects.

Contrary to common out of state public belief, the Forest doesn't close for the winter. Roads close to driving and access becomes more specialized, but the Forest remains open to those who are willing to work with the challenges of the snow and cold.

So dig out your backcountry skis, cross country skis, skate skis, snow shoes, snow mobile, snowcat or timber sled. The snow has fallen and the Forest isn't open only in the summer.

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# Safeguarding Abandoned Mines

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By Jamie Blair and Abe Proffitt

Colorado's mining history has a rich and vivid legacy. However, this legacy includes thousands of inactive and abandoned mine land features. While some mine sites and structures can appear safe, they often contain unstable soils, unsafe roofs and ladders, deadly odorless gasses, and dangerous explosives. Many mine sites on the San Juan National Forest were related to extracting and processing precious metals as well as Uranium deposits, such as the sites along US 550 toward Red Mountain Pass.



To safeguard these sites from public access, the U.S. Department of Energy office of Legacy Management (LM) initiated the Defense Related Uranium Mine (DRUM) Program in 2017. The program is a partnership between the LM, federal land management agencies, and state and Tribal abandoned mine lands (AML) programs to verify and validate the conditions of mines sites across the United States.

These DRUM sites provided uranium ore to the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) for defense-related programs between 1947 and 1970. Most of the DRUM closures across the western United States are in desert areas, such as along the Colorado-Utah border between Cortez and Grand Junction; however, a few are located high up in alpine and subalpine environments on San Juan National Forest.



*Kirsten Brown (CDRMS) and Emma Reinemann (SJNF) walk south past a boxcar containing equipment for the mine closures.*

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# Safeguarding Abandoned Mines

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On August 29, 2024, James Blair (San Juan NF Geologist), Emma Reinemann (NEPA Coordinator), and Kirsten Brown (Colorado Division of Reclamation, Mining and Safety, Inactive Mines Reclamation Program) visited one of these sites in the Weminuche Wilderness. Rather than hiking in supplies and gear, researchers and contractors partnered with the Durango Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad to transport them to the site. High Country Solutions was hired through the DRUM program to close three openings near the railroad while the equipment was hauled in a box car by the railroad, including ATVs, structural steel, welders, saws, and polyurethane foam (PUF).



*Workers from High Country Solutions loads steel and other equipment onto an ATV to transport it up hill to the mine openings.*



*James Blair, SJNF Geologist discusses the mine closure with employees from High Country Solutions who were contracted to perform the closure. The lower opening is an attempt at restricting access installed by a miner some decades ago and was replaced by a secure entry with locking gate.*

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# Safeguarding Abandoned Mines

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*Emma Reinemann stands at one of the mine openings slated to be closed.*



*Adits post closure. The closures are designed to keep unauthorized people out, while providing access to the adit for bats.*

“Getting that equipment up to the site without the train could have been very expensive and time consuming”, said Blair. “The train was originally built in the 1880s and was promoted as a passenger service rail, but the line was constructed to haul gold and silver ore from the San Juan Mountains to Durango. This project was a great example of using 19th century technology to solve 20th century problems in the 21st century!”

As of 2023, the DRUM program has facilitated the closure of 1108 hazardous mine sites and features, predominantly those areas most accessible to the public – and the agency plans to continue safeguarding projects across Colorado. In April 2024, Colorado was awarded \$2.8 million through the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) to address the hazards and environmental degradation of LM sites, eliminating dangerous conditions and pollution caused by past mining.

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# Animas River Trail reopened

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*When mudslides closed the Animas River Trail, solid partnerships made a quick cleanup possible*

*By Lorena Williams*

In June 2024, heavy rains caused landslides along the Animas River, obstructing the Animas River Trail (#675) in three places and covering approximately 1/3 of a mile of the trail with mud, rockfall, and debris. The Animas River Trail is the main access trail for the Chicago Basin, a popular destination in the Weminuche Wilderness, and is managed for both stock and people on foot. "The Animas River canyon is such a unique place on our forest – it's steep, deep, remote, beloved, and complex to manage," said Columbine Wilderness Manager Kristina Schenck. "Because of all those factors, we relied heavily on support from our partners to help us implement this unforeseen project."



Mud and rock slides on Animas River Trail

To clear the debris, the San Juan NF would need to transport equipment to the remote area and carve out extra time for trails crews to tackle this obstacle amidst their busy summer trail schedule. So, in mid-October, they partnered with the [Durango and Silverton Narrow-gauge Railroad](#) to haul a mini-excavator to the trail. The long-standing partnership between Columbine District trail crews and the Durango Train proved critical to reopen the trail.

"Train access was an absolute game changer and having that support from the D&SNG for transporting the mini-ex, personnel, and equipment was critical to our success," said Schenk. Special train equipment was made available for the transport, and crews were shuttled by train car to the job site. Without the crew shuttle, an eight-mile hike from Purgatory Flats Trailhead would have been required, and without the equipment shuttle, crews would have needed to clear the landslides by hand--a feat that would take several weeks.

Once the Columbine District Trail Crew and Wilderness Crew unloaded the mini-excavator trainside, they donned waders to cross the river and reach the trail and mudslides. For six days, crews camped alongside the railroad tracks, crossing the river each day to the job site.

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# Animas River Trail reopened

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The mini-excavator goes for a ride on the Durango Silverton Narrow-Gauge Railroad



The mini-excavator accomplished in a handful of days what would have taken hand crews weeks

Following the machine stage of debris removal, another set of critical San Juan NF partners were sought to help finish the job. A Southwest Conservation Corps Crew (SCC) was brought out for eight days to complete finish work on the landslides by hand. The SCC crew time was funded through a long-standing agreement with [National Forest Foundation](#) (NFF). According to Nick Olson, Southwest Colorado Project Coordinator for NFF, "The San Juan Stewardship Fund, a partnership between [Purgatory Resort](#), the National Forest Foundation and the San Juan National Forest, provides consistent financial support that allows us to complete unexpected, but necessary maintenance like the Animas River Trail and leverage for larger new projects like the [Cutthroat Trail](#). Those small donations on ski pass purchases and room reservations add up to make a big impact!"

Against all odds, the San Juan NF and its partners successfully reopened the Animas River Trail just five months after the slides. It was a heavy lift: coordinating the equipment rental and transportation, securing Southwest Conservation Corps and Columbine trail and wilderness crew time, finding funding--all while timing the work during low water in order to shuttle crews and equipments safely across the water. Thanks for all of your hard work!

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# Animas River Trail reopened

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Southwest Conservation Corps crews spent eight days finishing the Animas River Trail

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## Partnership Opportunities

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*This summer, a San Juan NF hydrologist and two wilderness rangers assisted a University of Colorado Boulder research team performing high lakes sampling. The Pagosa Ranger District pack string hauled in some of the team's gear and hauled out heavy samples. The team took soil core and water samples from Turkey Creek Lake before heading over the nearly 12,000-foot mountain pass (with paddles and an Alpacka Raft) to sample Upper and Lower Fourmile Lakes.*



An important element we want to highlight in this newsletter is our commitment to our partners. The San Juan National Forest works to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of this region's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations - and we're able to achieve that through partner connections. Our partners include land management agencies across all levels of government, nonprofit and for-profit entities, tribes, and community groups. By working with partners with diverse backgrounds and knowledge, we are increasing the resiliency of our natural resources and strengthening the community that enjoys and works in these lands. For information about partnering with the USFS, follow this link:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/working-with-us/partnerships>

To become a partner with the San Juan NF or for questions, contact Abe Proffitt (SJNF Partnership Coordinator) by email at [abraham.proffitt@usda.gov](mailto:abraham.proffitt@usda.gov) or by phone at (970) 501-0261.

For general questions about the San Juan NF, call (970) 247-4874, visit the forest website, or follow us on social media.

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