

**Southwest Resource Advisory Council
MEETING MINUTES
Friday, May 19, 2006
Gunnison Community Center
Multipurpose Rm., 200 E. Spencer
Gunnison, Colorado**

ATTENDEES

Resource Advisory Council Members

Don Bennett, Category 1	Betsy Marston, Category 2
Kenneth Emory, Category 1	Drew MacLeod, Category 1
John Field, Category 1	Andrea Robinsong, Category 2
Anthony Gurzick, Category 3	Alan Staehle, Category 3
Nik Kendziorski, Category 2	Kathy Welt, Category 1
Gerald Koppenhafer, Category 3	Kelly Wilson, Category 3

Not present: Mallory Dimmitt, Category 2; Ellen Stein, Category 3;

BLM Staff

Arden Anderson	Mel Lloyd
David Lazorchak	Karen Nelson
Lynn Lewis	Howard Sargent
Kenny McDaniel	Barb Sharrow

Visitors	Representing	Town/City
Jim Cochran	Gunnison County	Gunnison, CO
Dan Morris	High Country Citizen's Alliance	Crested Butte, CO
Ray Plieness	Dept. of Energy	Grand Junction, CO
Ed Cotter	Stoller, DOE Contractor	Grand Junction, CO
Sue Navy	High Country Citizen's Alliance	Crested Butte, CO
Gail Gnirk	Congressman John Salazar	Grand Junction, CO
Dave Schneck	San Miguel	Telluride, CO
Eric Rechel	Sierra Club	Grand Junction, CO
Barbara Frase	Rocky Mtn. Bio Lab	Crested Butte, CO

Opening Remarks, Designated Federal Officer and RAC Chair Time

Chair Kathy Welt called the meeting to order at 9 a.m. Today's attendance constitutes a quorum. There was a round of introductions. Welt thanked Kenny McDaniel and his wife for their hospitality during last night's cook-out for RAC members.

Barb Sharrow reported that the Southwest Resource Advisory Council (RAC) nomination package, including 11 applicants, is undergoing review at the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) State Office. It will be sent to Washington, DC soon for several levels of review prior to going to the Secretary's office. There will be one Recreation Advisory Board formed to advise the BLM and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) on the new fee program passed by Congress in

December 2004. The new board will be formed from the three existing Colorado RACs. More details will be provided as they become available.

Alan Staehle provided a briefing on yesterday's field tour of the various treatments BLM Gunnison Field Office staff has been implementing to enhance Gunnison sage grouse habitat. The tour was very interesting and informative.

Field Managers Update

Gunnison Field Office (FO): Kenny McDaniel thanked members for making the trip to Gunnison, and those who took the field tour yesterday. A rangeland management specialist has been hired and will start in mid-July. A recent community clean-up day at Hartman Rocks was considered successful. Several loads of garbage were removed from a target-shooting site. The field managers expressed their frustrations as this is a common occurrence on public lands. Ken Emory suggested that a shooting club be approached about adopting the site. The Water Quality Control Commission is holding a hearing June 12 in Cortez at the Holiday Inn Express, if RAC members are interested. Gunnison County is conducting a feasibility study for construction of a biomass heating facility, and a work session is scheduled for June. Both BLM and USFS support the project.

San Juan Public Lands Center: Howard Sargent reported that the combined plan revision for the BLM and USFS is in progress. Alternatives will be evaluated this summer, and open houses have been well attended. Work on the Canyon of the Ancients National Monument (CANM) management plan slowly continues as the search for another qualified planner is completed. The alternatives will be finalized by Manager Lou Ann Jacobs and her staff. A district ranger has been hired to cover the USFS Pagosa Springs Office. The RAC requested a presentation on the draft and alternatives for the CANM plan. Timing will likely be October/November 2006.

Uncompahgre Field Office (UFO): The Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area marked the opening of the multiple-use Peach Valley Recreation Area and its new facility, which features shaded picnic tables and fire grills, a kid's motorized training area, vaulted restrooms, loading ramps, fencing and graveled surfaces. UFO had no parcels in the May oil and gas lease sale, but several parcels will be included in the August sale. A recent community meeting in Paonia addressing a proposed fuels treatment project saw about 50 people in attendance. A field trip to the area is scheduled for June 17. A severe infestation of cheat grass could set the stage for a catastrophic wildfire in this area. The UFO hasn't done any Wild and Scenic River planning and needs to satisfy required NEPA processes and determine suitability/outstanding and remarkable values of the various rivers in the UFO. Several parcels nominated for inclusion in the February oil and gas lease sale, and located near the San Miguel River, required this type of planning.

Update on the Northern San Juan Basin EIS

Sargent thanked the RAC and the working group for their past efforts in providing excellent and focused input on this Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Existing historic leases, which in essence are legal property rights, had to be considered in developing this EIS. A total of 68,000 comments, mostly emails, were received. About 4,500 were unique comments, which were then synthesized into 412 public concerns. As a result, two new alternatives have been analyzed in

final EIS. Alternative 6 responds to local government resolutions and public comments, and Alternative 7, which may be chosen as the new preferred alternative, seeks to balance competing interests and concerns. Sargent provided responses to RAC concerns developed during a meeting in November 2004. The final EIS is due out next month with the Record of Decision anticipated in mid-summer 2006.

Gunnison Basin Interagency Travel Management Plan

Arden Anderson briefed the RAC on a travel management plan that would use an EIS to address a large amount of trails and roads on both BLM and USFS lands in the Gunnison Basin. The USFS will move forward in the near future focusing on route-to-route designations, and BLM Gunnison will likely join in the planning effort. In the 1980s, most routes were designated as “open to cross-country” travel. In 2001, BLM worked with USFS to amend the plan, changing open areas to a “limited to existing” designation and considering mountain bike use as well. Additional uses, changing technology, and an increase in the volume of use necessitate updates now. Meetings with stakeholder groups would likely start this summer. Anderson asked for the RAC’s help in obtaining good public input and the best ways to capture that input. Once completed, implementation and compliance will require the public’s cooperation. Anderson fielded several questions from the RAC.

Gunnison County Program/Objectives for Gunnison Sage Grouse

Jim Cochran, the Gunnison County sage grouse coordinator, presented an overview of county efforts in conserving the Gunnison sage grouse (GSG) and its habitat. Efforts began back in the mid-1990s when BLM asked multiple agencies to begin working together toward sage grouse conservation. The GSG was then listed as a Category 5 (warranted but precluded) but was upgraded to a Category 2 in 2005. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) issued a “not warranted” status for the GSG in April 2006 and delisted the bird. Competing uses continue to threaten habitat. The Gunnison Valley Sage Grouse Strategic Committee was formed to provide guidance to the Gunnison County Board of Commissioners. Working closely with others, Gunnison County is being proactive and has implemented a landfill mitigation fund, seasonal road closures, and a memorandum of understanding, and is considering temporary regulations to protect habitat. Funding for conservation easements/land trades and a strategic conservation plan are in the works.

McDaniel reported that BLM has proposed to Gunnison County Commissioners that antler-shed hunting season be pushed back in order to protect habitat from overzealous collectors. This activity causes resource damage and stresses wildlife when it occurs in late winter/early spring. Regulating the collection of antler sheds is a complex issue involving Colorado Division of Wildlife, BLM, USFS and private lands. Anderson encouraged everyone to consider regulating not just motorized access, but non-motorized access as well. McDaniel requested the RAC consider a resolution on the issue.

The Wildlife Commission follows a 3-step process to control antler-shed hunting activities: 1) define the issue, 2) draft proposal considering public comment, and 3) final vote and decision.

The RAC developed a resolution during the meeting: “The SWRAC finds that the enterprise of collecting shed antlers, or “shed hunting,” is at conflict with recovery of the Gunnison sage

grouse (GSG) population, and is an important consideration. It is also noted that Gunnison County has formed a task force with local knowledge and expertise to address the GSG issues.

Therefore the SWRAC recommends that all regulatory entities consider the recommendations of the GSG Task Force, Gunnison County, and the BLM in addressing this GSG issue.”

Alan Staehle made a motion for the RAC to support the above proposed draft resolution with amendments noted. Kelly Wilson seconded the motion. Tony Gurzick abstained; all others in attendance voted in favor of the motion. Welt will distribute the draft by email for review and finalizing.

In response to the decision issued by the FWS, McDaniel specified that the GSG remains a sensitive species under BLM policy, and will continue to work closely with other agencies toward that end. The BLM is intent on implementing the Rangeland Conservation Plan to protect the bird and its habitat, and nothing changes in that regard.

Alpine Triangle Recreation Area Management Plan

Arden Anderson presented a slide show and explained why it's time to update the Alpine Triangle Recreation Area Management Plan (RAMP). The San Juan Public Lands Center and BLM Gunnison Field Office jointly manage the Alpine Triangle. This plan will define priorities and actions for managing recreation on BLM lands. It will not provide guidance on other resources. A Cultural Resource Management Plan and the umbrella Resource Management Plan serve that purpose. A contractor will be hired by mid-to-late June to develop the plan. BLM will oversee the planning process, and the RAC and public will be heavily involved. December 2007 is the anticipated completion date.

Public Comment Period

Dave Schneck, environmental coordinator for San Miguel County, advised the RAC about the situation with U29 Road in San Miguel County, which is slated for closure by commissioners. Commissioners are seeking to keep oil and gas activity away from an important sage grouse lek and are working with industry to find ways to do this. A pipeline may be proposed on BLM public lands where an existing utility ROW is already located. Recreationists and hunters could be displaced with the road closure, but it's important to protect the sage grouse and their lek.

Uranium Mining in Southwestern Colorado

Ray Plieness, with Department of Energy, and Ed Cotter, a DOE contractor with S.M. Stoller, briefed the RAC on the history of its Uranium Leasing Programs. The current programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) is underway and evaluates whether historic uranium lease tracts should be renewed in 2007. There are 38 lease tracts in Colorado with 13 active leases. Public meetings will be held in Montrose, Norwood and Blanding. BLM is a cooperating agency with the DOE on this environmental assessment as BLM manages most of the surface issues while DOE manages the mining. Royalties collected from DOE mining activities are deposited in the federal general fund.

The rock (ore) containing uranium and vanadium would be trucked from the mine to either the Cañon City or Blanding mill, and while the ore has some radioactivity, it has not yet been refined and presents a minimal public hazard. The ore is processed at the mill to refine the uranium and vanadium products from the ore and leaving residual rock called tailings. Because tailings are a residual of the refinement process they do contain some concentrated radioactive particles and present more of a hazard than the original ore mined and trucked over the road to the mill. Mining techniques have not changed through the years. The drill-blast-muck technique is still used in the Uravan area. Better blasting and drilling techniques, as well as improved personal protective equipment, have been developed.

BLM UFO Geologist Lynn Lewis explained that DOE lands were withdrawn from mineral exploration, but BLM lands remain open to mining claims under the 1872 mining law. Close to 150 abandoned mines have been plugged and will be reclaimed as funding allows. Sensitive species, such as bats, and cultural resources must be considered in doing this. BLM is joining the Division of Minerals and Geology in a large project involving adit sealing and some site reclamation this summer. Currently, there are seven exploration permits (drilling) pending and three active plans of operations (only one is uranium). Two proposals have been received for new uranium mines involving small acreage. Lewis offered to notify the RAC when the comment period is initiated on these. Several new mining claims are being staked. Currently, there are 2,100 claims in San Miguel County, 250 in Mesa County, and 1,200 in Montrose County, up from 26 total in 2003. The state's hard rock mining regulations are up-to-date and are enforced just as stringently as coal mining regulations.

Robinsong asked to reintroduce her motion from the March 17 meeting to form a subgroup to work on the uranium issue. There was discussion on what the issues pertain to and what the focus of a uranium mining subcommittee would be. The RAC can only look at cumulative issues identified in a NEPA process impacting BLM public lands and plans of operation. The RAC discussed the potential for a BLM programmatic EA addressing uranium mining activities. Robinsong withdrew her motion and motioned to accept Tony Gurzick's motion that once a programmatic EA is initiated, a uranium mining subcommittee would be formed at that time. Nik Kendziorski seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.

Review of the Front Range RAC Resolution on Special Recreation Permit Application Fees

Very few responses were received by Welt when attempting to finalize a similar SWRAC resolution through email. Robinsong moved that the SWRAC adopt the same resolution as the Front Range RAC. Gerald Koppenhafer seconded, and it passed unanimously.

Next Meeting and Closing Comments

The RAC agreed to continue with its current schedule and have the July 21 meeting. Sharrow will explore what field trips might be available. Robinsong urged Sharrow to reschedule the field trip focusing on rock crawling in Dry Creek.

The meeting adjourned at 3:55 p.m.