



Minutes of the D-E NCA Advisory Council (Revised)
October 24, 2013, 3:00--6:00 p.m.
Whitman Educational Center
Grand Junction, CO

Council members attending: Katie Steele (until 5:30 p.m.) , Joe Neuhoof, Oscar Massey, Mike Wilson, Tamera Minnick, Steven Boyle, Doug Atchley, Steve Acquafresca (until 5:30 p.m.).

Council members absent: Bill Harris, Terry Kimber.

BLM staff attending: Katie Stevens (until 5:30 p.m.), Andy Windsor, Collin Ewing, Samantha Staley, and Marie Lawrence.

Members of the public attending: Tracey Rohde, Jan Potterveld, Emily Hornback, Janice Shepherd, Eric Rechel, Kaye Simonson, Kate Graham, Christian Reece, Joyce D. Olson, and others.

Call to order and introductory remarks

3:02 p.m. : Chair Katie Steele called the meeting to order and began introductions.

Steele: This and next meeting are two of the most important. The Preferred Alternative [Alternative E] is close to the Council recommendations, so we know the BLM was listening. The Preferred Alternative incorporates Council recommendations and public comments. Council will now make formal recommendations to the BLM. The public comment period is closed. BLM has had a chance to review public comments. Today, the Council will touch upon these subjects (went over agenda). I'll be leaving a little bit early. Steve Boyle will take over when he arrives.

Collin Ewing: I apologize in advance, but I'll have to leave at six to make parent teacher conferences, so won't be able to stay after the meeting to visit. Omnibus Act directed BLM to develop resource management plan and form the Advisory Council. This is the thirtieth meeting of the Council. The draft RMP was put out in May, and the public comment period was extended until September. The Council met to talk about differences between the Council's recommendations and the BLM's Preferred Alternative. The BLM's work was delayed about two weeks [due to government shutdown]. We've been analyzing the public comments; they are about 75% to 80% coded. Today and November 5th we will talk about these comments and the

Council's recommendations. November 18th is the last day of the present Council's term. Four folks are leaving the Council: Steve Acquafresca, Joe Neuhof, Mike Wilson, and Terry Kimber. We thank them for their service.

Steele: We will [organize our discussion] by topic. We'll discuss recreation as a whole, and by region.

Council discussion: recreational use

Staley: I want to make sure Council members have handout "BLM Responses to Council Questions and Public Comment Summaries" [see attachments]. The handout is divided by the way things were lumped together in comment summaries. The more global rationale is summarized. We haven't gotten through all comments, but feel this summary is representative. The top three areas that the public made comments about are Ninemile Hill, Cactus Park, and the Gunnison River.

Ninemile Hill was singled out as an important area for motorized use, and folks commented that the current road conditions are not suitable for horse trailers. Folks felt the RMP didn't reflect the increasing use of this area. We have also read comments, since concluding this preliminary summary, indicating public support for the Preferred Alternative to manage the area for quiet use recreation, while maintaining main motorized access routes.

Cactus Park: Folks wanted more trails for their specific use. Comments expressed concerns over conflicts with wildlife (because it overlaps with Gunnison sage-grouse habitat and desert bighorn sheep habitat).

Gunnison River: There were comments on permitting and river access to Big Dominguez Canyon. Folks thought recreational target shooting is at odds with quiet use.

Steele: The Council should make recommendations on Ninemile Hill.

Steve Acquafresca. The Tabeguache Trail in Ninemile Hill is a county road. It should remain open for motorized use.

Ewing: It does under all alternatives.

Oscar Massey: Motorized activities in Ninemile Hill should be on designated routes. Any spur routes could be designated for horse travel, etc. I recommend closing to all use during winter because of desert bighorn sheep. The area should be closed to all activity. If not, the sheep will be forced back into their summer areas. Should be open to all livestock grazing, elk grazing, and desert bighorn sheep.

Acquafresca: The road needs pullouts and camping areas. Maybe we can use the spurs for that.

Ewing: The Preferred Alternative calls for that.

Mike Wilson: Will the spur road be open to motorized use also?

(Steele opened map [see attachments], and she and Ewing looked at the loop in question). It will still be open to motorized use.

Massey: You may want a staging area for the Tabeguache Trail.

Steele: It looks like the Council's recommendation falls in line with Alternative E.

Acquafresca: Should we recommend that it be closed during winter?

Joe Neuhof: In the Preferred Alternative, there's no way to get a trailer up there for horses. Were folks commenting that the lack of horse trailer access means there should be improved access, or that the area is inappropriate for horse/foot only trails?

Ewing: We got comments both ways: Some folks thought the area was not appropriate for a foot/horse recreation emphasis because there is not good access for low clearance vehicles, while others commented that we should improve the access for low clearance vehicles to accommodate that type of use.

Acquafresca: The County would have to make the improvements.

Massey: That road needs improvements.

Tamera Minnick: Maybe we should refrain from recommendations until [the public comment session of the meeting] is over.

Andy Windsor: The seasonal closure in the Preferred Alternative does not extend to this area, so it would remain open.

Neuhof: A staging area is less important for foot travel than for other types of use.

[There was further discussion of access to Wilderness and Cactus Park, and of various staging areas]

Massey: [We should say that] by Cactus Park we mean the 646 acres at the bottom. The upper part is known as Farmer's Canyon. (Talked about creating a long-distance loop trail out of the Tabeguache Trail and other existing routes in this area). We should leave the designated routes. People need rest areas every 10 or 15 miles. This could be a comfortable trip for families. We don't need any new routes, but maybe we need some designated camping areas.

Ewing: It sounds as if those would be implemented as a result of making Cactus park an SRMA [Special Recreation Management Area].

Katie Stevens: The Tabeguache Trail was always visualized as a long-distance trail.

Massey: There is also the problem of wintering deer and elk. I saw some elk coming across the Gunnison river toward the Grand Mesa in August.

Stevens: There are different types of motorized travel: Oscar has told me in the past that big loop rides are okay with his livestock operation, but if people stay and play there, that's not good for his operation.

Steele: We need to consider fragmentation of sagebrush habitat also.

Wilson: As far as Wilderness access is concerned, we need to keep motorized routes to the Wilderness open so as not to concentrate use.

[More discussion of access to the Wilderness]

Windsor: The decision has been made to put a foot trail in there from the new trailhead in Cactus Park.

Stevens: One of the big concerns for the public is seasonal closures in Cactus Park. I want the Advisory Council to be aware of that.

Massey: Up in Cactus Park near the national forest is a favorite spot for deer and elk hunters. The top of Cactus Park is critical for deer and elk overwintering. If they don't have that, they will go into my alfalfa fields or into the national forest where there is snow.

Windsor: December 1 to May 1 are the closure dates for Cactus Park.

Ewing: Seasonal closure is one of big questions we have for the Advisory Council and our team: Does the seasonal closure fit in with the objectives for that area?

Steele: I think we should table our discussion of seasonal closures until Steve Boyle gets here.

[There was further discussion about the process of deciding which way to go in proposed RMP]

Ewing: [Regarding Gunnison river] We've heard from public that they want us to manage it as a river SRMA and still protect the mouth of Big Dominguez Canyon.

Steele: I want to see camping elsewhere than in mouth of Big Dominguez . It's an eyesore. It's a heck of a way to introduce a wilderness. Use the mouth of Big Dominguez as a launch site or tie up site, but not as a camping area.

[There was additional discussion about camping at mouth of Big Dominguez and along Gunnison River.]

Massey: I consider that to be a grazing area for desert bighorn sheep and livestock. It should be left a pristine area, with not a lot of trails, which mess up the desert bighorn sheep when they need water. It is in center of their habitat for that river. You will find turkeys, chukars, and quail there; it's their natural habitat.

Collin: We need to decide whether to limit even foot and horse travel in that zone.

Staley: If I can recommend a driving question that we have for you regarding recreation, again, our overriding question is are we specific enough with our recreation objectives.

Steele: Everything we've discussed is in Alternative E except making a big long-distance trail with rest areas, etc.

[There was more discussion of process.]

Staley: Regarding target shooting, was our process in the Preferred Alternative for selecting restricted areas adequate? I.e., should we consider – as we did – safety and protection of cultural resources, or should we also consider the recreational setting? Should we have areas set aside for quiet use? (Went over comment summary for recreational shooting) [see attachments.]

Acquafresca: Should we come to a consensus on target shooting?

Steele: We couldn't before.

Neuhof: There is more nuance now in our consideration of target shooting. We now know it doesn't refer to hunting, which is allowed throughout the NCA. Besides target shooting, what other recreational activity does the BLM *not* take impacts to wildlife and recreational experience into consideration? I would like the BLM to take impacts to wildlife and recreational experience into consideration when considering target shooting, as the BLM does for other types of recreation.

Ewing: We are looking for guidance from the Council: What should we manage target shooting for? Experiences? Impacts to wildlife (although I'm not sure what those are)? Safety and visual and cultural, as in Alternative E?

Acquafresca: Shooting ranges aren't practical for the BLM, which has a hard time managing the shooting ranges it already has, and we don't need new regulations. Colorado Parks and Wildlife has regulations for shooting. Closures for safety and cultural resources are legitimate. When the

NCA was first considered, the agreement was not to have a lot of new regulations. If the BLM reneges on that agreement, it won't get another NCA in western Colorado.

Steele: What are the triggers for closing an area to target shooting?

Collin: That's a good question. The BLM can go through the NEPA process and print a *Federal Register* notice when needed if a conflict between target shooting and some other activity arises.

Stevens: Escalante Canyon and Gunnison River are confined areas where conflicts between recreationists and shooting are more likely.

Steve Boyle: Colorado Parks and Wildlife shooting regulations address safety concerns.

Neuhof: Do seasonal closures identified in the draft apply to target shooting also?

Windsor: They apply to travel.

[There was further discussion of areas and triggers for regulating target shooting]

Neuhof: We regulate other activities depending on their impacts to recreational experience and wildlife, so why not also target shooting?

Public comments

Jan Potterveld: I am disappointed with what I heard at beginning of discussion. It seems like the BLM is using tallies, despite them saying they wouldn't. Ninemile Hill is the only thing that's left for quiet users; a coalition of recreationists support this area for quiet use opportunities..

Steele: We made a point of emphasizing at the start of this meeting that we aren't talking about tallies. We wanted to hear the rationale and any new ideas.

Janice Shepherd: The BLM has only processed 75% to 80% of comments, so not appropriate for Council to make recommendations yet. I am also disappointed. It seems that the Council hasn't looked at the maps. There is a lot of desire for quiet use trails. You haven't discussed north Dominguez area for access. (Went over some comments sent to BLM during comment period, and related some personal anecdotes.)

Eric Rechel: What percentage of Colorado Canyons NCA is closed to target shooting? The recreational shooting question is political. Maybe we should wait [for all the comments to be analyzed]. I don't think there should be recreational target shooting in the NCA.

Kate Graham: Target shooting can spook horses. I encourage the BLM to take Joe's comment to heart and treat target shooting like other forms of recreation and consider its impacts to wildlife and the recreational experience.

Steele: There isn't much time left. Let's make some succinct recommendations.

(The Council made the following recommendations:)

Recommendation 1: Ninemile Hill – the BLM should place emphasis on creating a long-distance corridor and supporting facilities along this corridor. Leave Ninemile Hill for quiet use except for county roads and pullouts.

Recommendation 2: Look for additional access points into the Wilderness and to the NCA in general, especially along Bean Ranch Road in the Hunting Grounds.

Recommendation 3: No campsites at mouth of Big Dominguez (vote was five Council members to close, three to open, and one "maybe").

[Neuhof asked the council to vote on whether to recommend to the BLM that they consider target shooting closures for reasons including protecting recreational values, while not altering the numbers of acres open or closed overall.

Council voted seven to one (Acquafresca dissenting) to do that. The discussion resumed to result in further clarification of that motion, and the Council came to a different recommendation.]

Recommendation 4: The Council recommends Alternative E's proposals for target shooting and does not recommend more closures.

5:05 – 5:15 p.m. : Break

Steele: For the record, I want to say how much I appreciate Steve's [Acquafresca's] work with the Council. His expertise on water issues and agriculture was excellent input for the Council. He represented the Mesa County residents very well.

Regarding geocaching and physical versus virtual, my recommendation is to allow traditional [physical] geocaching, but not microcaches, throughout NCA, except in the Wilderness (earth caches only there), to avoid off-trail travel [in the Wilderness].

Ewing: We have a wide range of alternatives [when it comes to geocaching].

Windsor/Ewing: Physical geocaching is prohibited in the Wilderness anyway.

(There was further discussion of geocaches).

Neuhof: I support this, except I think the BLM should be consulted and the BLM's approval required to avoid overuse of a particular area or resources.

Steele: Do we have consensus on this?

(There was more discussion of geocaches).

Steele: OK. Consent is unanimous; note that for the record.

(Recommendation 5: Physical geocaches should be allowed in the NCA, except in the Wilderness, where only virtual geocaches should be allowed. The BLM should be consulted and the BLM's permission should be obtained before geocaches are placed. Also, agreements regarding the present geocaches should be grandfathered.

There was discussion about the next meeting).

5:30 p.m.: Steele, Stevens, and Acquafresca left. Steve Boyle took over as meeting chair.

Council discussion: biological systems

Boyle : [We now turn to a discussion of] biological systems. We recommend no new routes in unfragmented sagebrush parks.

Minnick/Boyle: Alternative E says new routes can be implemented if there's mitigation by route closure in other areas. We prefer no fragmentation of sagebrush areas of 60 acres or more. The Council vote was unanimous in agreement with this recommendation.

(Ewing asked the Council to clarify their recommendations in terms of the alternatives, and there was further discussion of this.)

Recommendation 6: [When it comes to sagebrush management] the Council recommends Alternative B or C -- no fragmentation of unfragmented sagebrush areas that are 60 acres or more. NOTE: The Council did not have a quorum.

Windsor: Ok to route around already fragmented sagebrush and close interior routes [to rehabilitate the area]?

Minnick/Boyle: Yes. This is a net gain.

Boyle: Regarding the mountain shrub community (oak brush, mountain mahogany, and serviceberry), Alternative E says leave it alone. Sometimes this vegetation can benefit from manipulation to provide winter forage for big game. Can we do this with Alternative E?

Ewing: (Read from RMP). The language does tie our hands a bit.

Boyle: Can we change language?

Minnick: Use Alternative C. Why treat mountain shrublands any different from other shrublands?

(There was further discussion of different alternatives regarding management of mountain shrublands.)

Wilson: [I'd like to point out that] we don't have a quorum, which is seven [members].

Boyle: Thanks for pointing that out. We'll vote [on these recommendations] next time.

(There was some discussion regarding managing river flow on the Gunnison -- page 61 of RMP -
- and on other river systems.)

Boyle: I don't want to see boatable flow implemented on the Gunnison to the detriment of natural hydrology, ecology, or wildlife needs.

Public comment

Potterveld: I now understand that comments haven't been completely analyzed yet; ask that Council wait until it gets all comments [before making recommendations], because some comments from organizations may not yet be looked at.

Council discussion: meeting held with Colorado Parks and Wildlife

Boyle: Regarding seasonal closures in Sawmill Mesa and upper elevations of Cactus Park South. I met with Collin and CPW. Brad Banulis, biologist at CPW, told us that CPW supports route closures in areas where big game is concentrating, up until about April. I'm fine with RMP giving BLM the ability to administratively close or open areas based on whether big game are still concentrated in those areas (but not based on weather), in consultation with CPW.

Ewing: We could write the Proposed RMP in a way that gives us that ability. I suggest that discussion of this be tabled until next meeting.

Boyle: Ok. Next meeting is on November 5th in Delta at the Bill Heddles Recreation Center.

6:03 p.m.: Meeting was adjourned.

Attachments

1. *BLM Responses to Council Questions and Public Comment Summaries*

PLEASE NOTE: This document is a preliminary summary created for this meeting only. A complete and comprehensive summary of all comments to the RMP and the BLM's corresponding responses will be provided with the Proposed RMP, scheduled for public release in 2014.

2. Link to map: Alternative E: Comprehensive Travel and Transportation Management (N-1e).

BLM Responses to Council Questions & Public Comment Summaries

Prepared for 10.24 meeting

Recreation & Travel

Recreation Areas

9 mile Hill SRMA

- Preferred alternative doesn't reflect existing and future importance of the area for motorized recreation trail development
- Main crosscutting road is a county road and part of Tabeguache Trail; connector between Bangs Canyon and 9 mile Hill across 141 in works--> unique opportunity for all forms of motorized travel; quiet use designation would conflict with existing and planned opportunities.
- Access to the area is difficult for horse trailers and anything other than high clearance, so foot/horse travel doesn't make sense.

Cactus Park SRMA

- Generally, support for the preferred alternative for Cactus Park. Specific user groups desire more opportunities – i.e., single track motorcycle trails, nonmotorized trails, etc.
- Concerns with conflicts with wildlife – see wildlife section.

Gunnison River SRMA

- The Gunnison River SRMA for quiet recreation experiences is inconsistent with existing closure area. Setbacks along the Gunnison River should be much larger, i.e., 1/2 mile.

Recreation Activities

Geocaching

- preferred alternative provision for virtual only caches limits the user experience – no challenge or education
- seems contradictory to permit rockclimbing but not permit physical geo-caching
- economic benefits from geo-caching tourism
- Boy Scouts use Dominguez NCA to earn geo-caching badges
- Geo-caching.com doesn't allow any new virtual caches to be published on the website – therefore, ban on physical caches would result in limited promotion of geo-caching within the NCA. (Earth caches are permitted on both the website and in the preferred alternative; planned language should be modified as such).

Rockclimbing

- negative impacts to climbing recreation from Dominguez Canyon Wilderness management – as proposed, ban on all "permanent rockclimbing equipment" limits opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. Consider permitting system in use in places like Joshua tree, etc. to carefully permit semipermanent anchors, hand drills, etc. Requiring hand drilling method will self limit proliferation of new bolts yet still allow for unrestrained climbing within the Wilderness.

Recreational Prospecting

- Seems contradictory to exclusively prohibit recreational mining while other recreation activities may continue
- support for reopening Rattlesnake area to mechanized mining with markers around hookless cactus areas
- alternative A, which permits collection of gold via prospecting, is inconsistent with earlier alternative for geological /Paleontological resources, which prohibited mineral collection

Motorized Single Track Recreation

- limited opportunities for motorcycle trail riding in the Plan

Target Shooting

1. Council question: Can target shooting be allowed/closed seasonally?

Yes, we can develop a variety of options with area restrictions that can be either spatial or temporal or both.

COMMENT SUMMARIES

- Alternative E closure area is too extensive – entire length of Escalante Canyon is a favorite traditional hunting area for chuckar
 - alternative proposal: close areas around public campgrounds and put-ins
- Reduction in areas for shooting concentrates users, and therefore increases the likelihood of an accident
- lack of current safety problems with recreational target shooting indicates no need for change in management
- Recreational shooting should occur in designated locations, as surveyed, managed, and analyzed via NEPA
- recreational shooting is not consistent with the values for a National Conservation Area; see Gunnison Gorge NCA for example
- Many recreationists find it difficult to enjoy time in the wilderness/NCA with the sound of gunfire
- The sound of gunfire is inconsistent with the naturalness and opportunities for solitude in both the Wilderness and in Lands with Wilderness Characteristics.

- The Gunnison River SRMA for quiet recreation experiences is inconsistent with existing closure area. Setbacks along the Gunnison River should be much larger, i.e., 1/2 mile.

Restrictions - Group size, Permits

Group size limits

- Visitor survey results indicate visitors don't want to see many groups – why not more group size limits outside the Wilderness and the Gunnison River?
- Beware the conflict between the commercial group size limits for the Gunnison River and the group size limits for the various Wilderness zones -- how to implement?

Permitting on Gunnison River/Dominguez Canyon

- Sense of solitude already exists along the River between Escalante and Whitewater; no need for permits
- Gunnison River experience is not as primitive and quiet as it once was – permitting, especially at the mouth of Dominguez, could help.

Travel management – seasonal closures

2. **Council question: Seasonal travel closures – more info in general**

Seasonal closures in the Preferred Alternative were developed in cooperation with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. We used CPW winter range data (overall winter range, critical winter range and severe winter range) to develop polygons that made sense for management and protected winter wildlife habitat. We also worked with CPW to develop seasonal closure dates. It is important to note that the seasonal closures are based on whether BLM and CPW determine big game herds are highly stressed during critical winter periods.

Just a reminder, the areas included in the proposed seasonal closures are land use plan level decisions. They will likely not change through the life of the plan. The dates of the seasonal closures are not land use plan decisions and can more easily be changed through the life of the plan. Like the route-by-route decisions, seasonal closure dates are meant to be adaptable as we implement the plan.

SUMMARIES

- Areas slated for seasonal closures are typically dry prior to 4/30.
- Alternative proposal for mud season: closure mid February to April 1.
- Motorized riders specifically use closure areas for early December rides (last riding of the season) and early April for first spring rides. Spring rides occur before the winter snow runoff begins, so soil saturation may not be a concern.

- Five-month closure would functionally eliminate the typical season of use for motorized recreation in the area

Travel Management - General

Council Questions:

3. *Temp closures – reasons and process for categorizing as more urgent*

Temporary route closures (that is, routes that would be managed as open in the travel plan, but initially closed to mitigate a problem) were identified by different resource specialists during the designation process. The different reasons for temporary closures included, special status species, wildlife, cultural resources, riparian, and water resources. Each specialist used their professional judgment to determine whether the conflict between uses on a route with a given resource warranted a temporary closure to mitigate the threat posed by keeping the route open.

The Travel Management Plan (Appendix N) identifies these temporary closures as priorities during implementation. We would expect issues that led to temporary closures to be some of the first things we would address during implementation of the plan.

4. *Status of the survey at the McCarty Trailhead*

Last time NCA rec staff was in Escalante Canyon they did not see any survey markers indicating lands status near the trailhead.

5. *Pro/Con for using route density thresholds in management actions and/or density analysis*

We were reluctant to use hard numbers for route densities because the research literature is generally focused on big game wildlife species. It did not make sense to apply hard numbers for a handful of species to the entire NCA. Instead of using hard route density numbers, we would rely on the indicators and standards outlined in the PPSV model. If we are having problems with the condition of the PPSV indicators, we would look at all the possible factors that could be contributing to the condition of the indicators and adapt our management accordingly. This would include looking at the travel system. If we determine that route density is contributing to an undesirable condition of a PPSV indicator, we could look at closing routes. Under the draft D-E NCA plan, the condition of the PPSV indicators would guide management, including route density.

Nonetheless, route density analysis is one of many tools to analyze impacts of the different travel management alternatives on big game, so BLM may decide to include this in the final impact analysis.

COMMENT SUMMARIES

Closures – general

- support for reduced route densities/route density thresholds due to the benefit to a variety of wildlife species
- some travel closures will help maintain the undeveloped, rural setting of the landscape
- reduction in motorized access unfairly limits those unable to travel by foot into the back country
- closures of routes into the Wilderness will concentrate Wilderness users at Dominguez Canyon.
- Dead-end routes are important to campers, rock hunters, and those seeking solitude
- closure of dead-end routes will funnel all users to a few main roads, leading to more user conflict
- ATV use for game retrieval should be permitted outside of the Wilderness; otherwise, plan has functionally restricted older and less able hunters from traditional use
- cumulative impacts of route closures within the region has resulted in shrinking motorized access insufficient to keep pace with increasing demand
- closure for the reason of “lacking use value” is too subjective; these closures must be carefully justified

Wilderness

- limiting foot and horse travel to designated routes in Zone 1 will lead to more requests for trail development in this area; horses also need access to the Creek water.

Sowbelly Ridge

- area in which a local family has hunted for decades for meat ; prior closures in area have already made it difficult to retrieve game, and further closures would make it more difficult.
 - Hunting season in October is typically during fairly warm temperatures, necessitating prompt retrieval of meat before it spoils. Not discussing “road hunting”, but rather retrieval by motorized means.