



Field Manager Report

September 2022

Gunnison Field Office (GFO)

Natural and Cultural Resources

Grazing Permit Renewals

The GFO is implementing a zone approach for renewing grazing permits. This will approach allows us to efficiently complete the grazing permit renewals by focusing on a group of allotments in a specific geographical area. One land health document is completed for the entire zone prior to completing NEPA analysis and decision documents for issuing new fully processed grazing permits. Zones 4 and 6 are in process now.

Domestic Sheep Grazing EIS Proposed Decisions

On August 27, 2021, The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Southwest District Office released two proposed decisions for the final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Domestic Sheep Grazing Permit Renewals. There is one decision for each permit. Each proposed grazing decision will be subject to a 15-day protest period before becoming a final decision. The final decision will have a 30-day appeal period. The project area is located in Gunnison, Hinsdale, and Ouray counties and includes nine grazing allotments on 65,710 acres of public land.

BLM has received numerous protests, communications expressing concerns with the proposed decisions, in addition to communications expressing support for the proposed decisions. BLM is currently working through the feedback received, conducted discussions with stakeholders, and is carefully considering the issues raised within the context of the decision space analyzed in the EIS. BLM's goal is reaching a decision that more closely balances the needs of the permittees with protections for the bighorn sheep. A final decision is expected mid-to-late Summer 2022.

North Powderhorn Fuels Reduction Project

The GFO is currently evaluating a programmatic hazardous fuels reduction project on public lands managed by the BLM near Powderhorn, CO. The total project area consists of 90,725 acres and includes 53,877 acres within the Powderhorn Wilderness and Wilderness Study Area (WSA). The GFO would implement the project over 15 years with a total treatment target of 20,000 acres, targeting bark beetle outbreaks, including numerous portions of the project area suffering 100% spruce mortality. Site-specific NEPA would follow for individual projects within the project area.

BLM received a new contract modification to extend the contract for one year to complete necessary documentation for the project. The GFO had earlier completed a draft EA and the revised version for the project will soon be completed and then submitted for Solicitor review. The GFO plans to introduce the revised EA in one or more public presentations sometime during Spring 2022.

BLM then plans to publish the EA and FONSI in Fall of 2022. Per the process outlined in the Minimum Requirements Decision Guide,” a strategy to conduct “minimum requirements analyses” is being developed. These analyses are prepared to illustrate the expected decisions at the implementation level when burn plans have been formalized.

The GFO is preparing an environmental assessment (EA) to consider using integrated noxious and invasive plant management within the Gunnison Resource Area to reduce adverse impacts associated with increases in noxious and invasive plants. The EA will tier to the “Biological Assessment for Vegetation Treatments Using Aminopyralid, Fluroxypr, Rimsulfuron on BLM Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement” (PEIS)(BLM 2015), which analyzed the impacts of using Aminopyralid, Fluroxypr, Rimsulfuron herbicides (chemical control methods) to treat terrestrial noxious and invasive plants on public lands.

Recreation

Alpine Loop

The GFO saw significant increases in visitor use on the Alpine Loop in the last year, particularly in July and August. Between 2018 and 2020 there was about a 23% increase in visitation, which equates to an estimated 385,000 people visiting the Alpine Loop in 2020. This led to parking congestion at popular trailheads and stress on existing campsites and facilities. The GFO is working closely with Hinsdale and San Juan counties to address these issues. We have financial agreements in place with both counties to provide law enforcement support and we piloted a wag-bag station at American Basin.

Plans for 2022 include improving and designating dispersed campsites, modernizing the Mill Creek Campground, adding additional toilets, working with partner groups on outreach and education, and working with the counties to supplement and define parking areas. BLM will install signage and metal fire rings at approximately 250 dispersed campsites along the Alpine Loop as described in the 2010 RAMP. Campsite inventory was completed in FY20 using rapid assessment protocols. All implementation activities will occur in previously disturbed sites used for camping; no new sites will be created in this action. No sites on private lands will be designated. In the future, dispersed camping will be limited to designated sites only.

Campgrounds

The GFO plans to have all campsites at the Oh-be-Joyful Campground and a percentage of the Mill Creek campsites reservable through Recreation.gov. Reservations will be available up to 14 days in advance. Oh-be-Joyful again experienced increased visitor use and demand in FY2021 bringing in ~\$40,000 in fees, compared to ~\$40,000 in 2020 and ~\$26,000 in 2019. Mill Creek Campground user numbers increased by ~34% between 2019 and 2020. Based on our observations of activity during FY2021, the receipts and visitation are in line with previous years. We are currently reviewing existing campground use fees for consistency with criteria found in the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement. This analysis may result in an adjustment of fees.

e-Bike EA

The GFO plans to initiate an environmental analysis to consider allowing electric bicycles, or e-bikes, on non-motorized single-track trails managed by the GFO. All classes of e-bikes are currently allowed in the popular Hartman Rocks Recreation Area and were considered in the Silverton area. The focus of the EA would be the Signal Peak trail system near Western Colorado University.

Lands and Minerals

Bonita Peak Mining District

The Bonita Peak Mining District (BPMD) consists of historic mines and mining-related sources where ongoing releases of metal-laden water and sediments are occurring within the Mineral Creek, Cement Creek, and Upper Animas River drainages in San Juan County, Colorado. Many of these historic mines within BPMD are located on public lands managed by the BLM, and 80% of the watershed is managed by the BLM.

In August 2015, discharge from the Gold King Mine spilled into Cement Creek. This event led to the BPMD being added to the National Priorities List of Superfund sites in September 2016. Forty-six specific sites and two study areas were named in the listing. Four of the listed sites are on public lands managed by the BLM, and an additional seven sites are of mixed ownership.

Agencies recently participated in the annual management meeting held in February 2022. Discussions include the future of the draft revised memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the BLM, the Forest Service, and the EPA to clarify roles and responsibilities of each agency. Improved cooperation between the agencies with respect to obligations of the EPA under CERCLA and obligations of BLM under NEPA. The EPA is the lead agency for response actions on the private sites and the BLM is the lead for response actions on BLM-managed public lands.

Cleanup actions are ongoing within the mining district by multiple agencies. BLM priority actions for 2022 continue to focus on remediation, characterization of sites for remedy development, and operations and maintenance throughout BPMD. The majority of these sites are in the Cement Creek drainage and the upper Animas near its headwaters.

The Justice Department, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Interior (DOI), the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the State of Colorado announced a settlement with Sunnyside Gold Corporation and its Canadian parent company Kinross Gold Corporation resolving federal and state liability related to the Bonita Peak Mining District Superfund site, which includes the Gold King Mine and many other abandoned mines near Silverton, Colorado. If entered by the court, this agreement provides for the continued cleanup of mining-related contamination within the Upper Animas Watershed and will protect public health and the environment by improving water quality, stabilizing mine source areas, and minimizing unplanned releases.

Under the agreement, Sunnyside Gold Corporation and Kinross Gold Corporation will together pay \$45 million to the United States and State of Colorado, and the United States will dismiss its claims against Sunnyside Gold Corporation and Kinross Gold Corporation. The United States will also contribute \$45 million to the continuing cleanup at the Bonita Peak Mining District Superfund site and Sunnyside Gold Corporation and Kinross Gold Corporation will dismiss its claims against the United States.

Proposed Recreation and Public Purposes (R&PP) Conveyance for Kendall Mountain Recreation Area

The Town of Silverton applied to the BLM to acquire the public lands managed as part of the Kendall Mountain Recreation Area, under the authority of the Recreation and Public Purposes Act of June 14, 1926 (44 Stat. 741), as amended and supplemented (43 U.S.C. 869 et seq) (R&PP Act). The purpose of the R&PP Act is to authorize acquisition or use of public lands by States, counties, municipalities, or nonprofit organizations for recreational or other public purposes.

In March 2001, the BLM classified and withdrew the subject public lands for lease and conveyance under the R&PP Act. The purpose of the classification and application for R&PP lease and potential conveyance was to allow construction and operation of the Kendall Mountain Recreation Area.

The BLM portion of the Kendall Mountain Recreation Area, located on public lands just east of Silverton, has been operated as a community ski area and recreation area under a BLM R&PP lease since 2001. The Kendall

Mountain Recreation Area (KMRA) includes the BLM land and the adjacent Town-owned Kendall Mountain Placer and adjacent Town-owned Lackawanna Placer.

The Gunnison Field Office accepted and approved a Plan of Development from the Town of Silverton in the Summer of 2020. The proposed action is to convey approximately 93 acres of public lands to the Town of Silverton. BLM expected to complete an environmental assessment (EA) in fiscal year 2021, but progress has been hampered by the environmental remediation issues at the Mighty Monarch and Lackawanna sites that need to be addressed before land transfer. After completion of the EA, it will take approximately one year to complete the conveyance.