



Southwest District Resource Advisory Council Minutes

September 7, 2022

Members Present

Category 1:

Mark Roeber (Grazing), Kathy Welt (Energy and Minerals), Grady Ham (Outdoor Recreation/OHV)

Category 2:

Jim Haugsness (Dispersed Recreation), Latifa “Tif” Rodriguez (Wild Horse and Burro, RAC Chair), Jon Holst (Environmental Organization)

Category 3:

Starr Jamison (Public-at-Large), Steve Garchar (Elected Official), Matt Thorpe (Government Agency)

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Employees Present:

Doug Vilsack, State Director; Lisa Dawson, acting Southwest District (SWD) District Manager; Jon Kaminsky, Gunnison Field Office (GFO) Field Manager; Suzanne Copping, Uncompahgre Field Office (UFO) Field Manager; Connie Clementson, Tres Rios Field Office (TRFO) Field Manager; Stacey Colón, acting SWD Deputy District Manager; Rusty Stark, acting Fire Management Officer; Edd Franz, Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (GGNCA) Manager; Shawn Reinhardt, SWD Public Affairs Officer; Candis Fischer, Administrative Support Assistant; Allan Bittner, Associate State Director for Resources; Caroline Kilbane, Outdoor Recreation Planner; Brittany Sprout, Public Affairs Officer.

Public Present:

Adam Ortega, Colorado Department of Agriculture; Terry Meyers, Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society; Bonnie Brown, Colorado Wool Growers Association; John Whitney, Senator Bennet’s Regional Office; Helen Katich, Senator Hickenlooper’s Regional Office; Jonathan Houck, Gunnison County Commissioner.

Welcome, Introductions & Housekeeping

Acting District Manager Lisa Dawson, in partnership with Chair Tif Rodriguez, called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m. and began with an introduction to the new State Director Doug Vilsack and overview of meeting expectations.

Vote on Approval of Agenda

Chairperson Tif Rodriguez moved that we approve the meeting agenda.

RAC members Steve Garchar also moved, and Mark Roeber seconded.

Vote on Approval of Previous Minutes

Chairperson Tif Rodriguez moved that we approve the previous meeting Minutes.

RAC members Steve Garchar also moved, and Mark Roeber seconded.

Big Game Resource Management Plan Amendment

Project Overview with Alan Bittner

The BLM will propose and analyze, with the best available scientific methods and information, a statewide amendment to existing BLM Colorado land use plans to evaluate alternatives for planning-scale oil and gas management prescriptions for the conservation of important big game habitat. The BLM will consider whether to incorporate new or changed oil and gas management decisions in existing land use plans, such as limits on high-density development, including facility and route density limitations, and other lease stipulations that would incorporate conservation measures for important big game habitat areas in Colorado.

The planning area encompasses approximately 8.3 million acres of BLM-managed surface land and approximately 27 million acres of Federal mineral estate. This acreage includes Federal minerals on Federal lands and “split estate” where Federal minerals are located under surface lands with non-Federal ownership. The decision area includes all BLM public lands and approximately 4.6 million acres of split-estate private, local government, and state lands. It does not include National Forest System land and other Federal land where BLM does not make planning decisions about oil and gas management or other uses.

Big Game Questions and Discussion

Question: Jim Haugsness asked if there has been movement toward bringing on more cooperators. Allan Bittner responded yes, and that the BLM is already working on MOUs.

Comment: Steve Garchar said Dolores County has been struggling with a one-size-fits all approach to oil and gas exploration/regulation in the state and expressed concern that the Colorado Oil and Gas Commission (COGCC) rules have “devastated” Dolores County, geological formations exclude the county from being able to extract their own resources, while companies can go to Utah and extract them from the same formations. Alan Bittner and Connie Clementson responded that clarification is needed to work on split estate, consistency with state rules, and density rules for big game and how that defines certain kinds of habitat and how that will affect oil and gas development. Steve Garchar further expressed that cluster development does not work in Dolores County, so vertical holes are needed for the extraction equipment. Alan Bittner said that will be part of the discussion with the cooperator.

Question: Tif Rodriguez asked if BLM is monitoring fluctuations in big game population. Alan Bittner responded that the BLM will be looking at cycle of how the data changes. Refining understanding of regulations, understanding the goals of oil, gas, and other disciplines. The cycle of the data is important, and it will be articulated through this effort. Matt Thorpe said Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) is monitoring populations annually, monitoring trends, public interest, biological carrying capacity, range. Primary way of managing populations is through hunting, adjusting permits granted. Data gathering is part of a larger effort, includes collaring. Challenging in taking the data and compiling it in a useable product. Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping exercise annually informed by collar data and professional judgment of biologists and managers who are in the field. Changes are made incrementally as supported by the data. CPW and the Colorado Department of Natural Resources (DNR) are advocating for looking at impacts beyond oil and gas exploration. Alan Bittner said BLM is looking at the existing analysis of travel, renewables on density and habitat, recreation. This effort will help form the decision space and inform future National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review, create sideboards based on density.

Question: Tif Rodriguez asked if big game numbers have decreased in the four corners area. Matt Thorpe said CPW has been reducing the permits issued but is still seeing a decrease in population. The only thing CPW can control is the number of permits that are issued. They have reduced licenses for archery season now they have to draw a license instead of buying outright. CPW is doing what it can to grow the population.

Jon Kaminsky said permit reduction is affecting the hunting community, however big game populations are doing better in the northern part of the state.

Question: Jim Haugsness asked if this effort can be used as a decision template elsewhere in the state and with other resources. Alan Bittner responded that there are some techniques to address density that overlaps, but each discipline needs to be looked at separately. Doug Vilsack added that the science concerning wildlife is consistent, and the focus/cross cutting issue is big game. He also added that information can be used across all disciplines. Jon Kaminsky added that more cross cutting is looking at it in terms of disturbance. For example, mountain bikers in the winter may have a commensurate effect as a misplaced pump jack.

Open Discussion

With discussion of big game ending, acting District Manager Lisa Dawson requested Alan Bittner discuss Gunnison sage-grouse and Resource Management Plan Amendments (RMPAs) (including GFO's 1993 plan) as they relate to larger planning efforts.

The BLM is working on several efforts that include GFO and Southwest District. Because of the recent planning efforts, GFO's RMPAs are in the chute for work after Gunnison sage-grouse (GUSG), and big game have been addressed. On the Gunnison sage-grouse, the BLM is reinitiating a land use planning effort for the preparation of a RMPA to incorporate management decisions and actions to preserve and enhance GUSG habitat in all BLM land use plans with occupied and unoccupied habitat across the current eight populations in southwest Colorado and southeast Utah. This process would involve evaluating existing resource management plans that intersect with GUSG habitat and address management actions including, but not limited to, mineral leasing and development, recreation, livestock grazing management, realty actions, fire management, and restoration actions. The conservation measures could include restrictions on resource uses and programs that affect GUSG, as well as measures to reduce the impacts resulting from BLM programs and authorized uses.

Question: Tif Rodriguez asked how the existing effort to assist the species going. Alan Bittner said population is still decreasing with a lot of factors involved, but it is hard to pin down the causes. Jon Kaminsky said at the local level, the BLM is doing a lot of work in climate change adaptation, including wet meadow restoration, old trails, mining, grazing disturbances, small water courses that have been disconnected from sources caused dry gullies and they are being reconnected. Being two years in,

quantifiable improvement of population in areas that were not being used when dry. There are a lot of partners working on these projects.

Comment: Tif Rodriguez suggested discussing RAC procedural issues with the extra time before the public comment period. Jim Haugsness said he wants to know ahead what the topics will be so he can go out and discuss with the constituents to be able to provide better feedback. For example, he was talking to Connie about the tribal trust responsibilities, gathering information from constituents and being a cheerleader for the BLM with the public is important. Would like to see more in the field manager report on what is coming up for the office. Jon Holst agreed that it would help to have time and information to talk to constituent groups.

Public Comment Period

Chairperson Tif Rodriguez welcomed everyone to the public comment period allotted members of the public who wished to speak three minutes each.

Bonnie Brown, Colorado Wool Growers Association

- She is concerned about herders being driven off their allotments by “agenda-driven science.” Would like the BLM to stop using the risk of contact model.
- She is a hunter and not against hunting.
- Bighorns are a huntable species in the Colorado, and some are being conserved so they can be shot.
- There are many factors affecting the bighorn sheep, not just domestic sheep.

Terry Meyers, Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society

- We had a thin layer of the info during the field trip, but there is a lot of additional information and references, there is a lot of information on the risk of interaction.
- There is also a policy manual BLM-1730 on how to manage sheep and bighorns.
- Potential solution are compensated permit waivers, among others, that can be incorporated into RMPAs

John Whitney, Office of Senator Michael Bennet

- Provided an overview of Senator Michael Bennet’s work which includes the Dolores Conservation Area being worked on, good middle-ground solution that has been signed off on across the political spectrum, will be requesting a formal hearing on the bill in the next couple of days.

- The office of Representative Boebert will be introducing an identical bill in the House of Representatives.

Jonathan Houck, Gunnison County Commissioner

- Provided an overview of his work as Gunnison County Commissioner which includes working on bill to protect public lands for ranching, recreation, other interests in Gunnison County.
- County is engaged in GUSG RMPA, wildlife corridors, very interested in addressing climate change, cheatgrass. From the county's perspective, all the issues tie into vegetation and climate change, more than just a long-term drought.
- There's urgency to address changes to the landscape, recreation, grazing, agriculture, all are directly impacted, and it is a guiding point in county policy decisions. He appreciates the BLM's continued partnership and communication.

Adam Ortega, Colorado Department of Agriculture

- Adam Ortega stressed the importance of addressing grazing permits on an individual basis.
- Landscape analysis is useful, but need to address each operation individually, operators need to be informed as to why changes are being made.

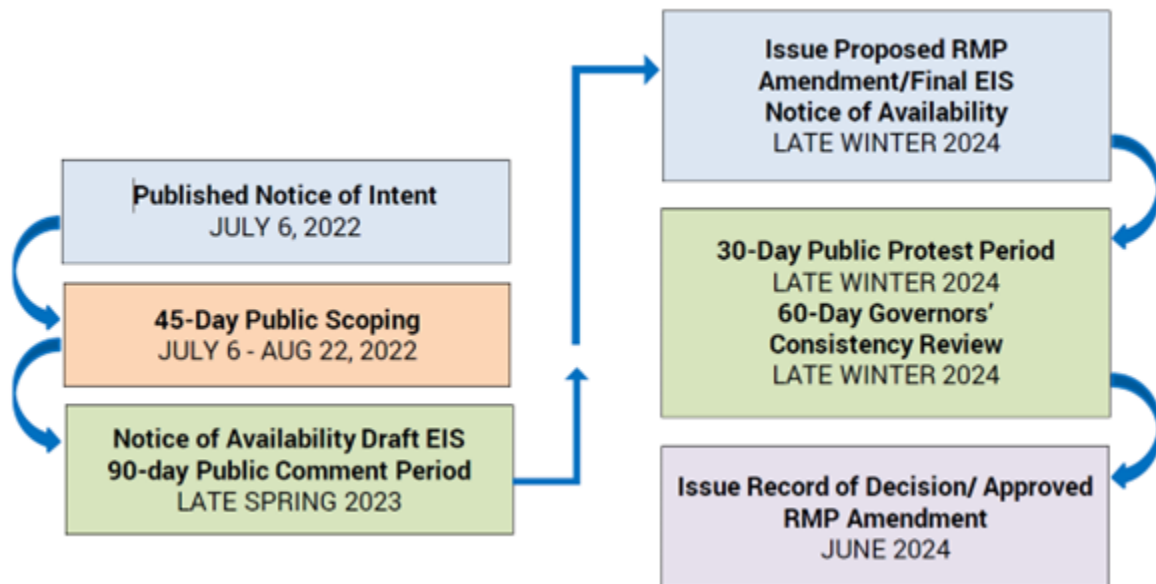
Sheep Grazing in the Gunnison Field Office

Project Overview with Jon Kaminsky

The BLM Southwest District Office released two proposed decisions for the final Environmental Impact Statement 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 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 Environmental Impact Statement. BLM's goal is reaching a decision that more closely balances the needs of the permittees with protections for the bighorn sheep.

Proposed timeline and schedule:



Sheep Grazing Questions and Discussion

Question: Steve Garchar asked how the BLM's plan compares with the Forest Service's plan. Jon Kaminsky answered that they are working on their plan, their approach will emphasize adaptive management. Lisa Dawson said the Forest Service has been able to continue with adaptive management, but BLM may not have fully embraced these options. We do not know what their next plan will look like. The advantage the Forest Service has is it gets an annual operating instruction that has the full weight of a permit, BLM does not have that tool.

Question: Grady Hamm asked if any other techniques have been tried to stop disease transmission. Jon Kaminsky said separation is the preferred by the scientific community. Vaccines, dog detection, other techniques have been tried.

Comment: Tif Rodriguez proposed forming a subcommittee to further research this issue.

Question: Mark Roeber asked if there an agreement between Forest Service and the BLM. Lisa Dawson answered there may have been one, but not one currently one in effect.

Question: Jon Holst asked if there would there be BLM resources available (staff, data) for the subcommittee to work. Jon Kaminsky said we would work to get the subcommittee what they need to be successful.

Comment. Jon Holst made a motion to form a subcommittee. Steve Garchar seconded. The issue was put to vote, and all were in favor. The motion carried.

Uncompahgre Field Office Business Plan

Project Overview with Caroline Kilbane

The Uncompahgre Field Office currently has no fee structure that would generate the revenue necessary to meet increasing usage and improve visitor experience. The proposed fees would be for the Uncompahgre Field Office, not the national Conservation Area or accounts. Proposed fees would apply to eleven existing rec sites and three proposed recreation sites. They would generate revenue to meet current visitor usage and improve the visitor experience by potentially bringing additional law enforcement and maintenance personnel. Recreation Planners are still exploring how to go about collecting fees. Propositions range from annual day use, multi-site use passes, to voluntary donations.

Recreation Site	Existing Fee	Proposed Fee
Standard Amenity Fee at Day-Use Sites		
Lower Beaver, Specie Creek, Caddis Flats, Ridgway Area Trails, Buzzard Gulch, Lower Spring Creek, Rim Road, Upper Beaver	\$0	\$4/vehicle
Site Specific Standard Amenity Pass (Annual Day-Use Pass)		
All Day-Use Sites	\$0	\$20/year
Expanded Amenity Fee at Existing Sites		
Lower Beaver, Caddis Flats, Fall Creek, Ledges Cottonwood, Ledges Rockhouse	\$0	\$12/night
Expanded Amenity Fee at Proposed Sites		
Electric Hills Rim, Nucla, Paradox	\$0	\$12/night

Question: Jim Haugsness asked if the BLM can we offer broader options, like annual day use, multi-site use passes. Caroline Kilbane and Edd Franz responded that there are some examples of success with all those options.

Comment: Jim Haugsness pointed out there is some housing planned to be built in the electric hills area and asked who will be enforcing pass use. Caroline Kilbane said the trails will bring about increased use and fee income, could be used to provide more law enforcement support at developed sites.

Question: Jim Haugsness asked how the BLM will handle parking if use increases. Caroline Kilbane responded that the BLM would build a bigger parking lot with the increased fees.

Closing Remarks and Open Discussion

- Acting District Manager Lisa Dawson thanked the RAC for their participation and noted that the next meeting will be held in Montrose, December 2022. She reminded RAC members that there will be expiring members in February and an opportunity to reapply open soon.
- Steve Garchar motioned to adjourn.
- Jim Haugsness seconded.
- Chairperson Tif Rodriguez adjourned at 3:24pm

Meeting Adjourns