



U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Field Manager Report

October 2023

Gunnison Field Office (GFO)

Note: Topics below are labeled either “**Status Update**” or “**New Update**” to help identify items that have changed from the previous report.

Gunnison’s New Field Office Location

On March 17, 2023, The Gunnison Field Office completed its move into new quarters located just east of the City of Gunnison in the new “Gunnison Rising” development. The new facility is over nine years in the making after the previous office was consumed in an arson-caused fire in 2013.

The Gunnison Field Office is fortunate to be housed in this new building, which will allow for more efficient service to the public. The location includes on-site parking for staff and the public, warehouse space for materials and supplies, and conference space so staff can once again meet



together in the same room. The new building is located just off Highway 50 one mile east of town; the address is 2500 East New York Avenue Gunnison, CO 81230. The field office held an open house in late spring to introduce the new facility to the public.

The Gunnison Field Office will host the Southwest District Resource Advisory Council Fall meeting, consisting of a field trip to tour recreation-related initiatives in Silverton, Colorado on October 10, followed by a meeting at the Gunnison Field Office on October 11.

Natural and Cultural Resources

Domestic Sheep Grazing EIS Proposed Decisions - Status Update

On August 27, 2021, the BLM Southwest District Office released two proposed decisions for the final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Domestic Sheep Grazing Permit Renewals. Both decisions were protested by multiple groups and individuals for a variety of reasons. The project area is located in Gunnison, Hinsdale, and Ouray counties and includes nine grazing allotments on 65,710 acres of public land.

In accordance with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 and the Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972, the Southwest Resource Advisory Council (RAC) voted on September 8, 2022 to create a subcommittee to analyze domestic sheep grazing in bighorn sheep habitat on BLM-managed high alpine allotments outside of Silverton, Colorado. The Sheep Grazing Subcommittee held six public meetings at the Uncompahgre Field Office from March through August 2023.

The meetings were typically well attended, with representatives from Colorado Wool Growers Association, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado Department of Agriculture, Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society, and sheep permittees often in attendance. The subcommittee is preparing to present their recommendations at the fall RAC meeting scheduled for October 11, 2023. Members of the public will have an opportunity to speak during the public comment period. The meeting will be held from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m, with virtual participation options also available.

North Powderhorn Fuels Reduction Project - Status Update

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). 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.

The North Powderhorn project planning effort is nearing completion. The GFO wildlife biologist has started formal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for lynx in the project area. On September 8, the project was presented to USFWS. The expected timeline for completing the Biological Assessment and receiving the Biological Order from USFWS is spring 2024.

Gunnison Weeds Treatment Project - Status Update

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.

GFO Weeds EA is nearing completion. The BLM has started consultation with the USFWS on the Biological Assessment (BA) for Gunnison sage grouse. By February 2024, we estimate we will have the letter of concurrence from the USFWS, adding additional herbicides in critical Gunnison sage grouse habitat.

Lake San Cristobal Fuels EA - New Update

The performance period for this contract EA was recently extended to March 2024. The BLM ID Team is currently working with EMPSi to refine treatment areas, alternatives, and issues for analysis. The GFO wildlife biologist, members of the fuels staff, and students from WCU are currently conducting snowshoe hare studies.

This past winter, BLM recreation and fuels staff members spent field-time in the project area to determine the feasibility of incorporating backcountry ski runs as potential fuels treatments. The areas identified for joint fuels-recreation treatments are viable for backcountry skiing. The BLM is currently scheduled to have a draft of chapters 1 and 2 of the Lake San Cristobal EA by October 11, 2023. The GFO is scheduled to have the Lake San Cristobal EA completed by March 2024.

Recreation

Alpine Loop - Status Update

GFO saw significant increases in visitor use on the Alpine Loop in the last year, particularly in July and August. Since 2018, there has been over 20% increase in visitation, with close to 400,000 people visiting the Alpine Loop annually. This has led to parking congestion at popular trailheads and stress on existing campsites and facilities. 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.

Projects for 2023 included 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. The BLM will install signage and metal fire rings at approximately 250 dispersed campsites along the Alpine Loop as described in the 2010 RAMP. GFO is working with partners to adopt and improve an existing route from the Mill Creek campground to access Sunshine Peak, a 14'er on BLM-managed lands in Hinsdale County. This project would provide more equity in access by having a trailhead accessible by two-wheel drive vehicles and

reduce crowding and other impacts such as off-route parking, non-designated ad hoc (user created) fire rings, etc. 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 through this action. No sites on private lands will be designated. In the future, dispersed camping will be limited to designated sites only.

Fee Campgrounds - Status Update

GFO plans to make all campsites in 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 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. GFO expects visitation at the Mill Creek Campground to continue at the heightened user numbers, which 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. GFO has analyzed existing campground use fees in the Gunnison area for consistency with criteria found in the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement. This analysis led to the preparation of a business plan recommending a fee adjustment. The business plan will be presented at the full RAC meeting in Gunnison on October 11, 2023.

Lands and Minerals

Mineral Point Water Right Purchase - Status Update

The purpose of the acquisition of the Mineral Point Ditch is to return the historically diverted water to Burrows Creek to maintain instream flows on Burrows Creek and the upper Animas River. The BLM's acquisition of the property rights associated with Mineral Point Ditch would benefit Burrows Creek by maintaining water supplies for wetlands adjacent to Burrows Creek, diluting heavy metals in Burrows Creek, and facilitating successful implementation of remediation actions taken by BLM's Abandoned Mine Land (AML) program within the Burrows Creek watershed. The proposed acquisition would also create an opportunity to physically remove the diversion and ditch facilities in a future remediation action.

In addition to facilitating BLM's AML program cleanup actions, the acquisition would provide benefits to multiple BLM programs and downstream uses by restoring natural flow regimes in Burrows Gulch. The benefitting programs would include wetlands and riparian management, botany, fisheries, hydrology, and abandoned mine lands. The appraisal has been completed and offers to the two holders have been accepted. Closing with one seller is scheduled to occur by the end of FY23, and by the end of the calendar year with the other seller.

Bonita Peak Mining District - Status Update

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.

Agencies signed a joint memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the BLM, the Forest Service, and the EPA to clarify roles and responsibilities of each agency in July 2022. The goal of the MOU is 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 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 BLM completed work on the Wynona and the Joe and John mine sites this summer. Work on the Lark Mine in Prospect Gulch is ongoing and will likely need to be completed in the 2024 field season.

EPA is working to install three monitoring wells in the Sunnyside Gold mine workings in the Lake Emma area. Each of the three wells will target narrow mine workings approximately 800 to 1,000 feet below the ground surface. This drilling effort is estimated to take all summer and into the fall. As part of the mobilization, EPA will need to temporarily close County Road 25 while the drill rig is driven up to Lake Emma. These characterization activities are important to EPA's understanding of water quality and movement of groundwater within the workings and throughout the BPMD groundwater system. Specifically, they will help determine hydraulic gradient, flow direction, potential surface expression of the groundwater. The EPA is also constructing site-wide repository that is located on top of the large historic tailings piles north of the town of Silverton. They are planning to use the repository to store solid waste material derived from the water treatment plant by the end of the 2024 field season.

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

The Town of Silverton applied to the BLM to acquire public lands managed as part of the Kendall Mountain Recreation Area, under 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.

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 includes the BLM land and the adjacent town-owned Kendall Mountain Placer and Lackawanna Placer. 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 Gunnison Field Office accepted and approved a Plan of Development from the Town of Silverton in summer 2020. The proposed action is to convey approximately 93 acres of public lands to the

Town of Silverton. The BLM expected to complete an environmental assessment (EA) in fiscal year 2021, but progress was hampered by 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.

A work session to discuss progress and next steps was conducted between the BLM and City of Silverton on June 5, 2023. As of that meeting, the environmental remediation issues have been resolved. The EA has been started, but a Phase I Environmental Site Assessment must be completed. Because an Environmental Site Assessment report is only good for six months before an update is required, timing is essential. After meeting with the USFWS in July 2023, the biological assessment is being revised and is targeted for USFWS review in October 2023.