



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

Field Manager Report

October 2023

Uncompahgre Field Office (UFO) including Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (GGNCA) and the UFO portion of Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area (D-ENCA)

Note: Topics below are all Status Updates, unless noted otherwise.

Planning

UFO Resource Management Plan (RMP) Amendment/Environmental Impact Assessment

EMPSi was awarded the UFO RMP Amendment contract in August. The Settlement Agreements to the 2020 Approved RMP require a Notice of Intent (NOI) formally initiating the project to be published within 60 days of publication of the Notice of Availability for the Draft RMP Amendment for Gunnison sage-grouse, or big game, in the Federal Register, whichever comes later. We anticipate the NOI for the UFO RMP Amendment would be published as early as January 2024. The EIS will include an alternative that has more acres subject to No Leasing for oil and gas compared to the most conservative alternative (Alt. B.1) in the 2019 Proposed RMP. The RMP Amendment must also carry forward Areas of Critical Environmental Concern previously considered under Alternative B.1, and management of lands with wilderness characteristics previously analyzed, for further consideration. Outreach to cooperating agencies and the tribes will occur in October.

Grazing and Natural Resources

Grazing Permit Renewals

In August, UFO extended an offer to a candidate for our senior grazing specialist position, one of two positions vacant since December. Meanwhile, we continue to chip away at the following complex and high visibility permits:

Crawford Area Allotments

The UFO is continuing to refine the proposed actions for grazing permit renewals on the Green Mountain, Grizzly Gulch, Iron Springs, Poison Spring, and Gould Reservoir allotments within the Crawford area, which overlaps the Crawford satellite population of Gunnison sage-grouse.

Mailbox Park Allotment

The UFO sought public comment last fall on a draft EA to authorize sheep grazing on the Mailbox Park Allotment near Norwood. Primary concerns identified land health, forage competition with wildlife, and proximity of confirmed sitings of foraging big horn sheep. The UFO has modified the proposed action and analysis accordingly, and plans to post the final EA

to ePlanning in early October for a 30-day comment period.

Cactus Park & Lower Escalante Allotment

UFO is working with new permittees on the sheep to cattle conversion overlapping bighorn habitat in the Cactus Park and Lower Escalante allotments in the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area. National Wildlife Federation is spearheading the installation of water catchments in support of the livestock conversion.

Texas A&M Corvid Surveying Project (New)

The BLM is partnering with Texas A&M University and Cal-Poly Humboldt State University to determine raven presence, habitat selection, and density in occupied Gunnison sage-grouse habitat in the Crawford population. Colorado BLM natural resource managers need comprehensive information about the impacts of predators in general, and ravens in particular on Gunnison sage-grouse populations. A 36-month project was recently funded to include a fully-funded MS graduate student hire that will begin work in fall 2024.

BLM/CPW Bighorn Sheep Population Estimation (New)

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) periodically conducts research to better understand the nature of bighorn sheep populations including, but not limited to interactions with domestic livestock, habitat selection and use, general population information, and population dynamics. This information is critical to CPW achieving its mandate of managing and conserving bighorn sheep populations. The information is also necessary for BLM to work with CPW to manage and maintain a bighorn sheep herd (the S-80 Herd) within the Gunnison Gorge NCA. Information collected during this effort will estimate and refine maps of seasonal habitats, including core herd home range (CHHR), and refine density estimates for the S-80 herd utilizing Mark-Resight Density estimation. To this end, the BLM and CPW have been conducting resight surveys on marked bighorn sheep in the GGNCA during summer and fall 2023.

Dolores River Restoration Partnership (New)

In FY22-23, the Dolores River Restoration Partnership (DRRP) completed 22 acres of initial tamarisk removal, 18 acres of revegetation with native plants (mostly grasses and forbs in no longer connected flood plains), and 230 acres of tamarisk resprouts treated in UFO, Tres Rios FO, and Grand Junction FO. An additional 250 acres of secondary weeds were treated in TRFO and UFO. Forty-five conservation crew members were employed, contributing 588 hours, and we hosted 33 volunteers conducting cottonwood planting near the confluence with the San Miguel River.

UFO received BIL funding in FY22 for 26 acres of heavy dense tamarisk mastication on Bureau of Reclamation and BLM lands in the Dolores River Canyon WSA. The NEPA for BOR was completed in August 2023 and we are now working to procure a contractor to implement work about a quarter mile upriver from the Bedrock boat launch. We anticipate work to begin in November or early December. In early October, an 8-person hand crew (Southwest Conservation Corps) will begin a 5-acre initial tamarisk removal project a half-mile above the confluence with Mesa Creek.

Recreation

Rim Rocker/Electric Hills Trailhead

UFO and Montrose County collaborated on the installation of two multi-panel kiosks at the trailhead along 90 Road. The BLM supplied the kiosks and the county installed them. One of the kiosks is maintained by the county and has information about the trailhead site, the Rim Rocker Trail (an OHV trail that runs from there to Moab), and ordinances regulating the use of the trailhead. The county holds a Recreation and Public Purposes (R&PP) lease on 40 acres there, including the trailhead and some surrounding lands. The other kiosk is maintained by the BLM and has information on Leave No Trace® and the Electric Hills trail system. Both kiosks have good information and look great.

Ridgway Area Trails (RAT) (New)

The RAT chapter of COPMOBA (Colorado Plateau Mountain Biking Trail Association) has proposed a few trail additions to the system. The BLM is currently assessing that proposal through a Determination of NEPA Adequacy (DNA) to make sure any changes fall within the scope of the original NEPA analysis on the trail system.

Dumping and Trash on Public Lands

In 2023, staff have investigated and logged (through an application called Survey 1-2-3) 110 dumpsites. Of those, 33 dumpsites have been cleaned up by UFO staff. There are 77 more dumpsites that need to be cleaned up as time allows. Last year, the Southwest District hired a part-time position to develop an anti-dumping campaign strategy. One of our early implementation pilot projects is a tire collection event on October 7 in collaboration with Montrose County. We are discussing additional events, anti-dumping education, and signage with county commissioners and staff.

Jumbo Mountain Travel Management Planning

Following extensive collaboration with user groups, community partners, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the UFO finalized the Jumbo Mountain Travel Management Plan. The Decision Record and Finding of No Significant Impact was signed by Field Manager Suzanne Copping on September 5.

Prior to completion of this plan, the user-created trails in this area had not gone through necessary environmental review. Located near Paonia in Delta County, Colorado, Jumbo Mountain is a 1,900-acre piñon and juniper woodland area rising to the east from the edge of town. The BLM now manages Jumbo Mountain as a Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) with singletrack trails open to foot, equestrian, and mechanized use, including bicycles and Class 1 e-bikes.

The appeal period for the plan will end on October 6. On October 7 and 8, UFO and Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado are celebrating the completion of the plan by putting on a trail work event.

UFO Business Plan

The UFO Draft Business Plan was reviewed by the RAC at the December 2022 meeting. It has since been routed to the BLM Colorado State Office for review by the state recreation leads and will next go to BLM Headquarters for a final review, after which BLM will publish it in the Federal Register

with a 180-day public review and comment period. After the review period, BLM will incorporate or make any necessary changes based on comments. At that point we will sign the plan, share it with the RAC, post it to our website, and begin implementing fees.

Lands and Minerals

Northwinds Abandoned Mine Lands Project (New)

Six mine features (i.e. adits, shafts) that pose a physical safety hazard to the public have been identified around UFO and the NCAs. Three have been recorded in Dominguez-Escalante NCA, two on BLM lands north of Ouray, and one in the Gunnison Gorge NCA planning area. They will be safeguarded through a variety of techniques, including backfilling, culvert installation, wire netting, and steel bars, to ensure the public can recreate safely. The contract is underway, with work expected to be performed in fall 2023.

Defense Related Uranium Mines (DRUM) Program

The Department of Energy's (DOE) Defense Related Uranium Mines (DRUM) program is a collaborative effort between the Colorado Division of Reclamation Mining and Safety (DRMS) and the BLM to physically close abandoned mine features on BLM-managed lands. DRUM program goals are to reconcile and improve abandoned mine lands (AML) data, conduct and assess condition inventories, and determine physical safety hazards to both human health and environment. Currently, the program's focus is on abandoned uranium mines within UFO, Tres Rios FO, and Grand Junction FO located on Colorado's Western Slope. The proposed closures will obstruct and block access into adits, shafts, stopes, breakdown portals, subsidence portals, and unstable historical mining structures related to the uranium mining production era between 1930s-1970s. This work is needed to protect public safety by eliminating or reducing risks posed by abandoned mines while conserving wildlife habitat and preserving cultural resources.

North Fork Mancos Master Development Plan Supplemental Environmental Assessment (New)

The Colorado River Valley Field Office (CRVFO), with the Colorado State Office (CSO) Air Program, UFO, and the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests (GMUG), have finalized a supplemental Environmental Assessment in response to a remand of the North Fork Mancos Master Development Plan (MPD) by the U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado. The supplemental EA addresses the deficiencies cited by the Court, including an updated analysis of greenhouse emissions from construction, production, compression, transportation, and end-use (primarily combustion) of federal oil and gas produced by the project and the potential effects on air quality and climate change. The updated proposed action provides new estimates of air emissions, conforms with 2021 State of Colorado air quality regulations for oil and gas activities, and includes operator-committed measures to reduce air emissions further and ensure compliance with regulatory standards. The supplemental EA also discusses social costs and describes other alternatives considered.

Public comments were sought on the draft supplemental EA from May 10 through June 16, 2023. Over 250 comments were received via ePlanning from six individuals, the operator, and five organizations falling into the broad categories of policy and process; air quality/GHG/climate

change; and socioeconomics/environmental justice. The final supplemental EA incorporates changes and clarifications in response to substantive comments. A FONSI and Decision Record was signed in late September. The supplemental EA and FONSI support issuance of two drilling permits on the Iron Point Unit, within the MDP planning area, which Gunnison Energy LLC applied for in March and April 2022 and the BLM delayed until updated NEPA analysis could be completed.

Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (GGNCA)

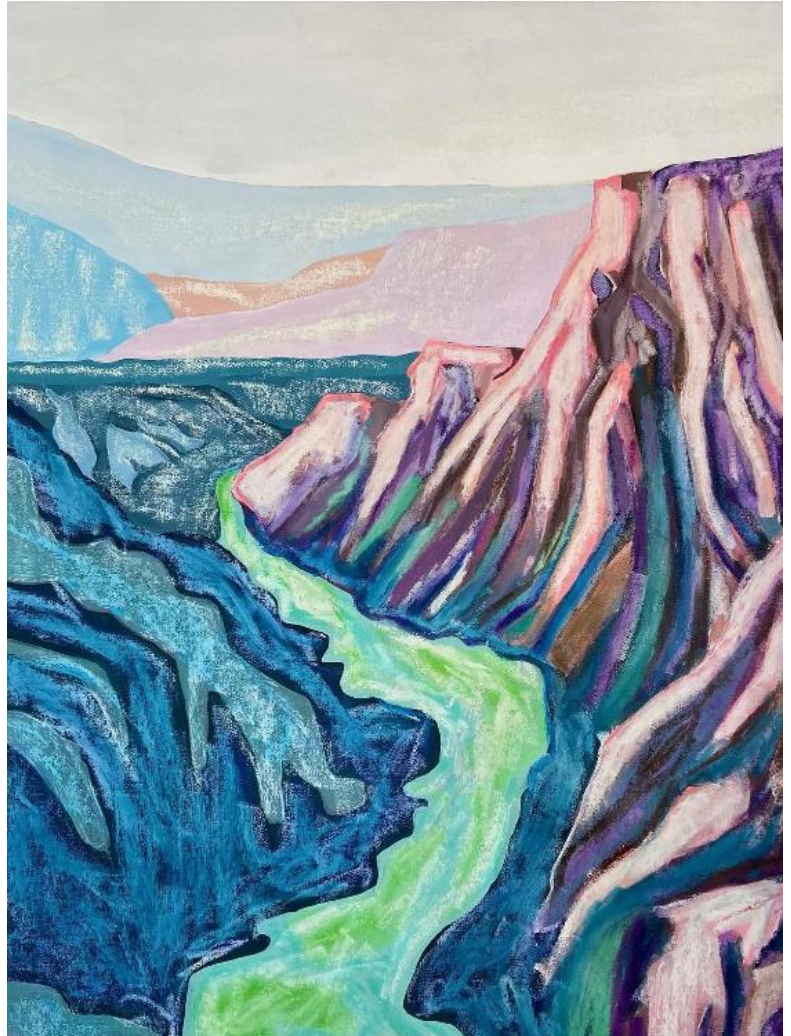
Artist in Residence (New)

Andrea Stolarczyk served as Artist in Residence for all three of Colorado's NCAs for a full year. During that time she created many beautiful works of art inspired by Gunnison Gorge, Dominguez-Escalante, and McInnis Canyons NCAs. You can view some of her work here:

www.facebook.com/ayearinthecanyons

Dark Sky Park Application

In acknowledgement of the outstanding dark, starry skies of GGNCA, the BLM, CCA, and community partners including the Western Slope Conservation Center are collaborating on an application with DarkSky International to certify GGNCA as a "Dark Sky Park." If successful, the certification would make GGNCA the third federal unit in our local area with that status, along with Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Curecanti National Recreation Area. GGNCA staff are currently incorporating State Office comments to finalize the application.



Cottonwood Days Education Program

By the time of the October RAC meeting, Colorado Canyons Association (CCA) and the BLM will have delivered our 15th annual Cottonwood Days event from September 28 through October 4. We are glad to be back on-site and in person with the students. Other critical partners contributing to the success of the program include CPW, Gunnison Gorge Anglers (TU), and the Ute Indian Museum. About 400 sixth grade students from Delta County and Olathe schools attend learning sessions along the scenic Gunnison River within Gunnison Gorge NCA. Learning focuses on the cultural importance of the river corridor, water use and conservation, fish of the Gunnison River, aquatic invertebrates and the importance of water quality, and how artificial flies imitate the various aquatic species.



UFO (southern) portion of Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area

Note: NCA Manager Amber Koski is away on detail September through January.

Gunnison River Campsite Designation and Permit System

The BLM implemented a decision from the 2017 Dominguez-Escalante NCA RMP to require overnight boaters on the Lower Gunnison River, from Delta to Whitewater, to obtain a permit. BLM staff updated signage and conducted outreach regarding the change at places like Mountain Buzz and American Whitewater. For now, the BLM has implemented a free self-issued permit that is filled out on-site. We estimate 50-70% compliance and expect increased compliance with additional education and outreach. The BLM will refine the permit system, implement a reservation system, designate river campsites, and develop an allocation for permitted outfitters.

Staff spent over 50 days in the field conducting outreach to the public and soliciting input on the planning process. Staff also contacted river outfitters and collaborated with partners like CCA for outreach. The BLM drafted a proposed action for campsites along the Gunnison River and conducted public scoping on the proposal during winter 2021. We received over 100 comments; several substantive comments have shaped the proposed action and alternatives in the environmental assessment. A final EA is anticipated this fall, with implementation beginning in the spring.

D-E NCA Business Plan

The BLM is working through the internal review process for the draft Dominguez-Escalante NCA business plan. We expect to be ready to brief the RAC(s) in FY2024. We are interested in seeking solutions to incorporate RAC input into this process efficiently given that Dominguez-Escalante NCA is split between the Southwest RAC and Northwest RAC.