



# Field Manager Report

February 2024

## **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***

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#### **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 required 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. The NOI for the UFO RMP Amendment was published January 5, opening a 45-day public scoping period that runs through February 20, 2024. The BLM will host two virtual meetings on January 23 and 24 and one in-person open house at the Ute Indian Museum in Montrose on February 1.

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 tribes will occur in October.

Information and documents are posted on the ePlanning project website:

<https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2026528/510>

### ***Grazing and Natural Resources***

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#### **Personnel**

Our new Supervisory Rangeland Management Specialist, Ken Vicencio, started at the beginning of November. Our permanent Range Technician accept a different position in December and this position is now vacant. We are actively working through the hiring process to get both our vacant Rangeland Management Specialist and Range Technician positions filled, but do not have a timeline of when this will occur.

#### **Grazing Permit Renewals**

Meanwhile, we continue to chip away at the following complex and high visibility permits:

### ***Crawford Area Allotments***

The UFO is revising its approach to the permit renewals for Green Mountain, Grizzly Gulch, Iron Springs, Poison Spring, and Gould Reservoir Allotments within the Crawford area. The UFO will request all available monitoring data within the allotments from the interested publics and revise the land health assessments and evaluations. Once revisions are completed, the land health assessment and evaluation along with a draft determination document will be sent to the interested publics for comment. These allotments contain habitat for the Crawford satellite population of Gunnison sage-grouse and Desert Bighorn Sheep.

### ***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. The UFO is working on initiating NEPA analysis on the water catchments; as well as, reaching out the CDOT to explore installing fencing along Highway 50 to prevent livestock and vehicle conflicts on the highway.

## **Completed Projects**

### ***Mailbox Park Allotment***

The UFO issued a proposed decision in November after responding to comments received on the draft EA. Two interested parties protest the proposed decision based on concerns of interactions between domestic and bighorn sheep. Those protests were addressed, and a final decision was issued in early December. No Appeals were received on the final decision and a new permit was executed in early January.

## **Texas A&M Corvid Surveying Project**

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 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**

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**

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***

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#### **Rim Rocker/Electric Hills Trailhead**

UFO staff fabricated and installed a new gate along the Shavano Loop Road to help with compliance with the wintering big game seasonal closure for the Electric Hills Trail system. The singletrack trail system is very close to being fully built.

Montrose County continues work on construction and improvements to the shared trailhead. The county holds a Recreation and Public Purposes (R&PP) lease on 40 acres there, including the trailhead and some surrounding lands.

#### **Regional Partnership Initiatives**

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) and Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) have collaborated to fund new and existing coalitions to join a statewide initiative working to ensure that Colorado's land, water, and wildlife thrive while also providing for equitable and quality outdoor recreation experiences. UFO participates in two southwest Colorado initiative groups. Link to the Story Map: [storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/393237b131b2455e9ff2fc3692c4226f](https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/393237b131b2455e9ff2fc3692c4226f)

The Ouray Regional Recreation and Conservation Alliance (ORRCA) is generally focused in the Ouray County area. Most of the federally managed lands in that area are with the USFS, so most of the group's focus so far has been on those lands.

The Western Slope Outdoors Alliance (WSOA) is focused generally on Montrose, Delta, and Mesa counties within the watersheds of the Uncompahgre, Gunnison, and Colorado Rivers. The group is relatively new. UFO staff are on the steering committee for the alliance, and actively involved in the group's work on its focus and goals. The three counties, various user groups, and members of the public are actively engaged.

#### **Jumbo Mountain Travel Management Planning**

Shortly after The Jumbo Mountain Travel Management Plan went into effect last fall, BLM, the town

of Paonia, and Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado (VOC) held a trail work event on the trail system. Volunteers completed over a mile of maintenance on system trails, including the construction of lots of water bars. Trail enthusiasts are looking forward to doing more work when the trails open in the spring.

### **West End Trails (New)**

The West End Trails Alliance (WETA) along with the towns of Nucla and Naturita in Montrose County's "West End" have been developing proposals for trail systems on BLM-managed lands in that area. Feeling the pain of a local economic downturn in the area following the closure of the New Horizon coal mine and Nucla Station power plant, the communities have been looking at ways to bolster the local economy and improve recreational amenities at the same time. While we are in the early stages of the process, UFO is planning to take this on as our next travel management planning project.

### **UFO Business Plan**

The UFO Draft Business Plan was reviewed by state recreation leads, and comments have been incorporated. UFO is preparing to submit the plan to BLM Headquarters for a final review/approval before publishing in the Federal Register and implementing the plan.

## ***Lands and Minerals***

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### **Northwinds Abandoned Mine Lands Project**

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**

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)***

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### **Dark Sky Park Certification**

In acknowledgement of the outstanding dark, starry skies of GGNCA, the BLM, CCA, and community partners including the Western Slope Conservation Center collaborated 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 submitted the application and are working with DarkSky International to make final tweaks. A final submission is anticipated this spring.

### **Cottonwood Days Education Program**

Last fall BLM and CCA successfully delivered our 15<sup>th</sup> annual Cottonwood Days Education event. 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 attended learning sessions along the scenic Gunnison River within Gunnison Gorge NCA. Learning focused 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: Jenna Moore is the acting NCA Manager for D-E NCA and McInnis Canyons NCA.

#### **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 sites like Mountain Buzz and American Whitewater. An environmental assessment was completed for the campsite designation project. The project will be implemented in 2024.

#### **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.

#### **Escalante Ranch Acquisition Project (new)**

The BLM is proposing to acquire the 4,060-acre Escalante Ranch, an inholding of non-Federal parcels of private land and interests in land that lies within the designated boundaries of D-E NCA along Escalante Creek and the Gunnison River. It is still early in the process, with the public scoping period ending in mid-January. Details on the environmental assessment are available on the BLM ePlanning project website: [eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2030404/510](https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2030404/510)