



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

Northwest Colorado Resource Advisory Council

Wednesday, August 20, 2025

Virtual Meeting

Meeting Minutes

Attendees:

Northwest CO RAC Designated Federal Officer: Robert Swithers (NW District Manager)

Northwest RAC Members			
Name	Location	Cat.	Interest Represented
Kirk Daehling	Rifle	I	Energy and Mineral Development
Shawn Brennan	Glenwood Springs	I	Energy and Mineral Development
Scott Robertson (absent)	Rangely	I	Federal Grazing
Michael Camblin (Absent)	Maybell	I	Federal Grazing
Hattie Johnson (Absent)	Carbondale	II	Dispersed Recreation
Carl Connor	Grand Junction	II	Archaeological and Historical
Sean Burke	Fraser	II	Dispersed Recreation
Kathy Chandler- Henry	Eagle	III	Public-at-Large
Callie Scritchfield (Absent)	Meeker	II	Elected Official
Merrit Linke (Absent)	Granby	III	Elected Official
Kris Middeldorf (absent)	Steamboat Springs	III	State Natural Resources
Sherry Schreiner	Grand Junction	III	Public-at-Large

Public Attendees	
Name	Title
Riley Scott	United States Congressman Jeff Hurd's Office
Jacob Brey	Colorado Parks & Wildlife
Soren Jespersen	Colorado Wildlands Project - Director

Bureau of Land Management Staff		
Name	Title	Office
Robert Swithers	District Manager	Northwest District Office
James Michels	Deputy District Manager	Northwest District Office
Erin Jones	Deputy District Manager	Upper Colorado River District
Heather Marsh	Public Affairs Specialist	Upper Colorado River District
Doug Vilsack	State Director	Colorado State Office
Stacey Colon	Field Manager	Grand Junction Field Office
William Mills	Field Manager	White River Field Office
Steven Hall	Supervisory Public Affairs Specialist	Colorado State Office
Kymm Gresset	Field Manager	Little Snake Field Office
Stephen Leonard	Field Manager	Kremmling Field Office
Jeremy Spetter	Fuels Program Manager	Upper Colorado River District
Brian St. George	Associate State Director	Colorado State Office
Kirby-Lynn Shedlowski	Public Affairs Specialist	Colorado State Office
Lisa Dawson	Field Manager	Colorado River Valley Field Office
James (Jim) Lovelace	National Conservation Area (NCA) Manager	Grand Junction Field Office
Joseph Freitas	Administrative Officer	Northwest District Office

The meeting was opened by Robert Swithers, who welcomed participants and expressed his regret that the group was unable to meet in person in Craig as originally planned. He explained that, although it was disappointing not to gather face-to-face, he was pleased that the meeting could still proceed virtually and provide an opportunity for dialogue and updates. He reminded members that if they had any concerns or topics for further deliberation, they should raise their hands during the course of the meeting so their voices could be heard.

Without the current chair present for the meeting, Robert asked whether any RAC member was willing to serve as an acting chair for the meeting. At the time, no volunteers came forward. He assured the group that the meeting would still move forward with opportunities for input and discussion. The RAC would need a volunteer to be the chair for the meeting and after further discussion Kathy Chandler-Henry volunteered to act as the RAC Chair for this meeting. No objections from the RAC members present.

Agenda Item: Current Leadership Priorities: What's New and Notable

Doug Vilsack, BLM Colorado State Director, provided an extensive overview of priorities. He began by acknowledging that wildfires remain the most pressing issue across the state. He said the fire season had started aggressively and praised staff and community partners for their diligence in preventing small fires from becoming large, destructive incidents. He specifically mentioned the Lee Fire, which has become one of the largest in Colorado history, and said that attention will now turn toward recovery. He noted that agricultural producers have been directly impacted, as many will be unable to graze livestock this fall. He commended the agricultural community for its swift action in moving livestock and working collaboratively with BLM.

Doug then highlighted oil and gas priorities. He noted that upcoming lease sales include a small September sale in Rio Blanco County (7–8 acres) and a significantly larger December sale of about 50,000 acres. He also previewed the potential for an even larger lease sale in early 2026.

On recreation, Doug explained that BLM is working on staffing solutions and building momentum around statewide recreation efforts, particularly river recreation.

Robert Swithers reinforced Doug's comments, noting that fire management had required most of the agency's bandwidth in recent months.

Kathy Chandler-Henry asked Doug about the future of conservation-focused resource management plans. Doug explained that 4–5 plans were completed in late 2024 and are now being implemented. He emphasized that these plans strike a balance between energy development and resource conservation, such as protections for big game and sage grouse habitat. He said Colorado is in a strong position compared to other states because its plans are complete and broadly supported. He also addressed staffing challenges, reporting a 35% vacancy rate due to retirements and a hiring freeze. While law enforcement and fire hiring are exempt, other positions remain frozen. Headquarters is considering relief for some high-priority positions. Doug stressed that BLM continues to rely on the dedication of its remaining workforce.

Doug explained that a significant portion of the North Sand Hills area consists of state trust land, which is in some cases managed under lease by the BLM. He noted that there is also a substantial state presence in the area, which creates both challenges and opportunities for collaboration. Robert Swithers raised concerns about the increasing recreational use of the North Sand Hills and the need to preserve recreation opportunities while also addressing resource management.

He emphasized the difficulty of managing such a high-use area without a dedicated BLM office nearby and suggested that increasing the presence of Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) staff could provide a long-term solution. As a state agency, CPW has greater capacity to manage day-to-day operations, and BLM could benefit from collaborating more closely with them. Doug reminded the group that in August of the previous year, the RAC had strongly directed BLM to bring forward a solution to this issue and that the CPW and BLM worked on an agreement for the management of North Sand Hills to be discussed later.

Discussion: Fuels Projects

Jeremy Spetter of the Upper Colorado River District provided a comprehensive presentation on fuels management. He began by describing the jurisdiction of the Upper Colorado River Interagency Fire unit, which encompasses 1.8 million acres of BLM land, 20,461 acres of National Park Service land, and 2.2 million acres of the White River National Forest. He discussed the organizational structure of the fuels program, noting current vacancies in heavy equipment and prescribed fire positions.

Jeremy highlighted 2024 accomplishments, which totaled 37,818 acres treated.

He explained the importance of mastication, which involves using specialized equipment to break down woody material into smaller pieces, altering fuel continuity.

Community assistance was another focus. Since 2017, 34 mitigation projects have been completed, protecting approximately 1,600 homes. For 2024, thirteen community assistance agreements are in place across the Upper Colorado River district. Jeremy also described education and prevention initiatives, with more than 130 events held since 2017, reaching over 12,000 people. Cooperators include seven county sheriffs, 22 fire departments, and local organizations.

Agreements under the Good Neighbor Authority were also discussed.

Jeremy also reported on fire trespass trends. Since 2020, 179 human-caused fires have occurred on federal lands in the unit, with 124 investigations and 30 prosecutions.

During discussion, Carl Conner commended the effectiveness of piling and burning efforts but asked about mastication's impact during the Lee Fire. Jim Michels responded with an example from the Elk Fire, noting that mastication changed vegetation structure and fire behavior, enabling suppression crews to gain control. Erin Jones added that similar benefits were observed during the Turner Gulch Fire, where previous Forest Service treatments moderated fire intensity. Jeremy reinforced that fuels treatments disrupt fuel continuity, giving firefighters a tactical advantage. Jim Michels emphasized that the fuels

program is equally as important as suppression, as it allows for planning and creating safer conditions for firefighters during extreme fire years.

Jeremy concluded by describing the Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) process.

Discussion: North Sand Hills

The RAC revisited the North Sand Hills Special Recreation Area, where heavy use and limited staffing have raised safety and management concerns. BLM acknowledged that with current staffing levels, the agency could not adequately support the level of use.

To address this, a management agreement with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) was signed on August 1, 2025, giving CPW day-to-day management responsibilities, while BLM will continue to oversee natural resource protection and land authorizations. While additional processes remain to be worked through, this is a positive step that brings all parties together and moves forward with a federal–state partnership to manage recreation at the North Sand Hills.

Next steps include development of a resource area management plan in partnership with CPW and preparation of a business plan with RAC input to enable fee collection. Fees are expected to mirror those used in the Colorado State Parks system.

CPW has already invested in the area, including the purchase of a property at the entrance to establish a visitor center and OHV permit station, which will reduce barriers for visitors. Surveys, cultural reviews, and stakeholder engagement are underway, with CPW planning to hire full-time staff within the next year.

RAC members emphasized the importance of community engagement, fee structure clarity, and ongoing updates. Both agencies highlighted the agreement as a significant step forward in ensuring safe recreation, improved infrastructure, and stronger local partnerships at NSHRA.

Field Manager Updates

Field managers provided detailed updates on projects and priorities in their respective areas:

- Jim Michels (NWD) reported on recreation summits scheduled for October 29 (WRFO) and December 3 (LSFO). He highlighted progress on the Gateway South and TransWest Express transmission projects, which are in reclamation and construction phases. Mitigation funds are being directed to sage grouse and wilderness projects.
- Steve Leonard (KFO) discussed the Blue Valley Ranch land exchange, noting successful completion of parking lots and river access features, with a larger confluence project

scheduled for spring. He also discussed challenges maintaining access during construction and noted ongoing Gore Fest planning despite insurance hurdles.

- Bill Mills (WRFO) provided a detailed update on the Elk Fire (14,000 acres) and the Lee Fire (137,000 acres), the fifth largest in Colorado history. Containment has reached 68%. BAER actions are underway, and stabilization work is ongoing. Eight homes and 20–25 outbuildings were lost. Grazing permittees and recreation permittees are being supported. Staffing challenges remain following the departure of two employees in recent months.
- Kymm Gresset (LSFO) reported strong initial attack success on twelve fires totaling less than 2,000 acres. She highlighted Crosho Fire planning, fuels treatments on Emerald Mountain, and reopening of the Bell Trail. She also described recent horse gather operations (42 animals removed) and ongoing forage studies. Construction on TransWest Express continues, and TMP planning is underway.
- Erin Jones (UCRD) had no further updates.
- Stacey Colon (GJ) reported on the Turner Gulch Fire (31,000 acres) and the Derby Fire. She highlighted watershed assessments, a master recreation plan, and a parcel conveyance to Mesa County. She also discussed efforts to address impacts along the Redlands Water and Power diversion dam.
- Jim Lovelace (NCA Manager) discussed the 25th anniversary of McInnis Canyons NCA, which will be marked with trail projects. He also outlined Dominguez-Escalante NCA's upcoming public lands day cleanup and community engagement with Escalante Ranch.
- Lisa Dawson (CRV) described coordination with Bill Mills on the Lee Fire, progress on NEPA-approved fuels projects, and planning for the King Mountain fuels treatment under Good Neighbor Authority. She acknowledged challenges with timber quality but expressed optimism that it can be salvaged for nearby mills.

Jim Michels asked if anyone would be willing to volunteer for the RAC chair for today's meeting and Kathy Chandler-Henry agreed to volunteer for the duty.

Public Comment Period

Riley Scott, representing Congressman Hurd's office, provided comments during the public comment period. She began by acknowledging the intensity of the ongoing fire season across the district. Riley noted that Congressman Hurd had personally visited three separate fires — including the Turner Gulch and Lee Fires — and was deeply impressed by the professionalism, dedication, and coordination displayed by BLM staff, cooperating agencies, and community partners. She emphasized that if any RAC members or

stakeholders were aware of needs related to recovery efforts, they should reach out directly to the Congressman's office for support.

Riley then turned to legislative updates from Washington, described progress on several pieces of legislation and referenced a recent Natural Resources Committee hearing where Secretary Burgum raised several issues of importance to Colorado. These included the release of funds for the Shoshone energy project, the impacts of wolf reintroduction on ranchers and farmers, and the ongoing delay in confirming a BLM Director. Riley emphasized that Congressman Hurd shares the concern that BLM leadership vacancies hinder progress and hopes to see a director confirmed soon.

In closing, Riley reiterated the Congressman's appreciation for the work being done on the ground in Northwest Colorado. She reassured the RAC that Congressman Hurd remains committed to supporting both conservation and responsible development and encouraged continued communication with his office as recovery and resource management challenges evolve.

Open Discussion, Closing Remarks

As the meeting ended, Robert Swithers thanked the RAC members, agency staff, and partners for their active participation throughout the day. He emphasized that the value of the RAC lies in its ability to provide candid, diverse perspectives that inform BLM's decision-making. He reminded members that their feedback and concerns do not have to wait until the next formal meeting — input is welcome at any time, and members should feel encouraged to reach out directly to BLM leadership or staff between sessions.

Erin Jones echoed Robert's remarks and expressed appreciation for the thoughtful questions and discussions that had taken place. She acknowledged the challenges of meeting virtually instead of in person but highlighted the productivity of the meeting and the strong collaboration among RAC members.

Jim Michels noted that while the RAC typically aims for quarterly meetings, no specific date had yet been set for the next session. He explained that scheduling would depend on key developments in ongoing projects — including recreation planning, fire recovery, and grazing management — to ensure that the next agenda is both timely and substantive. He said members could expect a tentative date to be circulated in the coming weeks and encouraged them to remain flexible as BLM assesses the best time to reconvene.

Doug Vilsack took a moment to reflect on the progress made in recent months, particularly with respect to fire management, fuels treatments, and the new partnership with CPW at the North Sand Hills. He commended RAC members for their persistence in pressing BLM

to identify solutions for complex challenges and stressed that the RAC's role is vital to ensuring accountability and public trust.

Several members voiced support for scheduling the next meeting before the end of the calendar year, noting that follow-up on issues such as fee structures, recreation summits, and post-fire recovery would benefit from timely discussion. Robert agreed, stating that the RAC should reconvene later in the year, if possible, even if only virtually, to maintain momentum on key priorities.

In closing, Robert reiterated that recreation remains a top priority for the districts, alongside fire recovery, grazing, and energy. He thanked everyone once again for their dedication and service and encouraged the RAC to continue acting as a bridge between the agency and the public it serves.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned by Kathy Chandler-Henry at 11:49am.

Certified by the Chair: Sept 18, 2025