



**DENCA Advisory Council Notes, May 18, 2011
Mesa County Courthouse Annex, Grand Junction, CO**

Six Advisory Council members present. Those attending:

- Chair Katie Steele of Grand Junction
- Joe Neuhoﬀ of Grand Junction
- Oscar Massey of Whitewater
- Tamera Minnick of Grand Junction
- Neil "Mike" Wilson of Eckert
- Steve Acquafresca of Grand Junction

Four members were absent:

Jason Beason of Paonia, Vice-Chair William (Bill) Harris of Montrose, Jan McCracken of Delta and Terry Kimber of Delta.

BLM staff attending: Katie Stevens, Ben Blom, and Brodie Farquhar.

Public attending: Steve Smith, Lee Gelatt, Sherry Schenk, Wilson, Eric Rechel, Jan Potterveld, Keith Fife, Drew Broughton, Mark Ackerman, Joyce Olson, Kent Davis, Travis Baier, Barbara Hill, Dave Upchurch, Marty Generaux, Tracey Rohde

Chairwoman Katie Steele called the meeting to order at 3 p.m.

Public comment (Round 1)

Public comments: Lee Gelatt, of the Quiet Trails Group, presented a summary of comments about travel management issues. The summary recommended that all spur routes that do not lead to scenic areas should be closed. He said the Gunnison River is a prime focus for the NCA and wondered about private property rights of access onto the NCA.

Pre-Meeting Reminders

D-E NCA Manager Katie Stevens, the designated federal official for the council, reminded the Council and audience that the Council is learning about and making recommendations about D-E NCA on a zone-by-zone basis, using recreation as an initial lens. At the last meeting (May 4), the focus was Zone 1 or the Hunting Grounds area between Highway 50 and the Gunnison River. The focus of the May 18 meeting is Zone 2, or the Gunnison River corridor.

Reminders: The Council is now meeting the first and third Wednesdays of each month from 3:00-6:30 PM.

The meeting on the first Wednesday meeting will be in Delta at the Delta Performing Arts Center (822 Grand Ave)

The meeting on the third Wednesday of the month will always be in Grand Junction, at the Mesa County Annex.

Recap of Zone 1

Council focused on:

- A connecting trail between Delta and Grand Junction, which would incorporate the interpretive values associated with the Old Spanish Trail.
- Hunting Ground's other values/resources should be protected.
- Appreciation of dispersed recreation, but make sure routes are sustainable.
- Change should happen only when required.
- Loop trails are more desirable than out and back trails.
- Cultural sites and prairie dog colonies will need protection

Public comments about Zone 1:

- Urged restrictions or bans on glass containers.
- Cited need for dispersed campgrounds.
- Rim trails should be multiple use.

Oscar Massey suggested the use of cattle guards as an alternative to gates, which often cause problems when they are left open by recreationists.

Council business

Council member Jan McCracken is giving up her seat on the Council, based on time constraints since she left the Commissioner's office, and an interest in providing an opportunity for a current commissioner to serve in her seat. Current Delta County Commissioner Doug Atchley has expressed interest in attending future meetings to provide a Delta County perspective during the public comment portion of the meeting. BLM will prepare a Council vacancy notice for the *Federal Register*.

The Council also discussed meeting frequency, noting that the twice monthly schedule is most important during alternatives development (e.g., through fall 2011).

Zone 2 PowerPoint

Using a PowerPoint presentation, Blom walked the Council through Zone 2 (Gunnison River corridor) topics, including:

Water and Vegetation:

- Length of Gunnison River through D-E NCA is 33 miles.
- Entire NCA watershed falls into Gunnison River watershed.
- Selenium impairment of the river is NOT a result of BLM management actions.
- Flow of river highly altered – NOT due to BLM management.
 - Dams have impact on vegetation, fish, wildlife, recreation.

- Invasives like Tamarisk, cheat grass, Russian knapweed and Russian Olive dominate many areas of the river corridor. These are largely a result of the following water-related issues
 - No spring flushing effect because of upstream dams and diversions.
 - Channelization and riprap has affected river flow.
 - As a result, the flood plain has shrunk and native, wetland plants have difficulty regenerating
- Invasive species are important because:
 - Lead to increased risk of fire with tamarisk & cheatgrass, which can lead to loss of entire cottonwood galleries.
 - Harms habitat for birds and fish
 - Less desirable for recreation
- The following can be done by BLM:
 - Cottonwood plantings.
 - Also use herbicides, chainsaws on invasive species.
- The following actions by other entities should impact vegetation in the NCA
 - Tamarisk beetle is being used to kill tamarisk. This insect eats leaves of Tamarisk and defoliates the plant. It often takes four or five cycles before plant actually dies.
 - Black Canyon National Park was awarded a water right that will be used to imitate natural peak flows in the spring. Limited impact on NCA because of concerns regarding flooding in the City of Delta.

Endangered fish

- Colorado pikeminnow and Razorback sucker have critical habitat on the Gunnison River.
- The following are causes of fish declines in the Gunnison River:
 - Dams and diversions have blocked spawning streams.
 - Lack of spring floods has reduced habitat quality
 - Competition from non-native fish species.
 - Selenium pollution could lead to more declines.

Wildlife species

BLM has identified the following sensitive species in zone 2:

- Canyon tree frog
- Northern leopard frog
- Desert bighorn sheep
- Peregrine falcon
- Bald eagle
- Neotropical migratory birds
- Yellow-billed cuckoo
- Longnose leopard lizard

Cultural resources

- High density of cultural sites along the Gunnison River
- Pre-historic sites include petroglyphs, lithic sites (where stone tools were made) and ancient campgrounds
- Historic sites:
 - Capt. Gunnison's expedition came along the Gunnison River
 - The railroad line along the Gunnison River facilitated western expansion

- Agriculture along the river had economic impacts and brought tourists out to western Colorado for agriculture-related tourism

Recreation

- 4,000 user days annually on the river
- 75 percent camp overnight along the river, most of whom camp at the mouth of Dominguez Canyon
- 60/40 split commercial/private river runners
- 15 outfitters
- Most popular activities:
 - Canoeing (Centennial Canoe is biggest outfitter)
 - Rafting
 - Kayaking
 - Jet boating (mostly fowl hunting season)

Public Comment:

Eric Rechel for Sierra Club:

- Hookless cactus populations exist in the area. Make sure users don't damage the cacti.
- Hopes BLM is planting both male and female cottonwoods.
- Narrow riparian area can't provide firewood.
- Take care of hawk habitat along river.
- Does BLM have ability to regulate jet boats?

Discussion from BLM & Council

- Stevens: The BLM can manage recreation on the surface of the river, if and when there is a connection to effects occurring on BLM land.
- Blom: BLM has right to manage recreation. We could encourage the Division of Wildlife, Ducks Unlimited to tell us more about jet boating.
- Aquafresca: Motorized boats are important for hunters. This came through during Wild & Scenic Rivers discussions in Mesa County.
- Neuhof: We need better understanding about jet boats.
- Aquafresca: landowners might have thoughts too about motorized boating.
- Dave Upchurch, landowner, noted that he had seen motorized boaters on the river and that sometimes they revved their engines near his property.

Access conditions for rafters, canoeists, jet boaters are not ideal.

- Three access points – Escalante, Bridgeport and Whitewater –all are within the Union Pacific railroad right-of-way.
- Railroad concerned at Whitewater boat launch about rafters backing trailers into trestle timbers, weakening trestle.
- Takeouts at Bridgeport and Whitewater are inadequate for rafters

The bridge at Bridgeport changed the nature of recreation at the mouth of Dominguez Canyon

- According to BLM trail counters, use increased at the mouth of Dominguez around the time the Bridge went in, but then decreased again in the following year, maintaining at a higher level than before the bridge went in.
- Now 7,300 hikers and equestrians cross the bridge, annually.

- Some 30-40 percent travel up Dominguez Canyon, into Wilderness.

Environmental Assessment was just completed for project at Bridgeport to build a new parking lot, trail and underpass to run under railroad and provide safer access to Dominguez Canyon.

- Addresses safety issue along railroad tracks for hikers, drivers, and equestrians.
 - Dangerous to be caught in narrow space between tracks and steep hill/embankment, when train arrives.
- Massey: Suggested extending that trail up to the east-side canyon rim trail, plus dispersed campgrounds.

There are tradeoffs associated with building parking lot, trail and underpass.

- Parking lot, trail and underpass may *increase* foot traffic over bridge and through campgrounds used by river runners.

Council comments.

Neuhof: Has BLM thought about the implications of future population and recreation growth?

Stevens:-We could see what kind of information might be available on this, changes in visitation for other designations over time. The Bridgeport bridge went in use increased at the mouth of Dominguez Canyon, with most activity occurring between the bridge and the mouth of the canyon.

Public comment:

Centennial Canoe's Marty Genereux: Expanded foot traffic over bridge has damaged back country experience for his customers. Other campgrounds along river have problems and are less desirable. Outfitters and private groups race to snag scarce campgrounds at mouth of Dominguez Canyon.

Genereux noted the educational component of his trips (Note: Genereux has sent a more detailed letter about his Gunnison River experiences and observations to the BLM and Council.)

Genereux mentioned the following concerns:

- Lack of tent camping opportunities in Delta means that visitors must stay in motels
- Vandalism and theft from vehicles left at launch or takeout spots.
- With the new permit system being instituted on the Ruby-Horsethief section of the Colorado River, boaters will look to the Gunnison River as a free option. That means more boaters on the Gunnison.
- Foot traffic over the bridge has reduced the educational value of visitor experiences at the mouth of Dominguez Canyon because of over-crowding and disruptive campers.
- Offered to take Council members and BLM staff on float trip.
- "This area is being loved to death."
- Urged BLM to explore ways to reduce volume of visitors.
- Look at permits sooner than later. Controls on use of the Gunnison are long overdue.
- Has seen boats lined up half a mile to take out at Whitewater boat launch and has seen cars driven into the river at this boat launch

Casual use mining, Rattlesnake Gulch

Gold prospecting is defined as casual use mining by the BLM, which means that no or negligible damage to resources can occur as a result of the activity

In 2009, the BLM determined that gold prospecting in Rattlesnake Gulch had gone beyond casual use –

- Was safety issue associated with large holes left on the benches above the river
- Prospecting was occurring near individuals of the Colorado hookless cactus, a species protected under the Endangered Species Act

In response, the BLM increased law enforcement in the area

Prospectors largely stopped using the Rattlesnake Gulch area, but they have now requested that prospecting in the area be allowed under this RMP, with rules defining use

The NCA is withdrawn from entry for mining, therefore this activity falls under recreation. No mining claims are held in the area or will be held in the future, which means continued use is under BLM discretion

Stevens: BLM can't allow prospectors to go beyond casual use. Standard is no/negligible impact on environment. The Council should hear from recreational prospectors on what kind of use they're looking for and what might be permissible within the casual use standards.

Blom: Prospectors are active in Dolores and San Miguel, but use the river itself and not the banks above the river. They also hold mining claims in the area that they use. Since none of the prospectors are in attendance, it might make sense to discuss this at another meeting.

Wild & Scenic Rivers

Two segments of the Gunnison River is eligible for Wild and Scenic River protections (due to outstandingly remarkable values and free-flowing nature). The outstandingly remarkable values for the Gunnison River are:

- Recreational
- Cultural
- Historical
- Fish

The suitability of segments will be decided in this RMP.

A local stakeholder group has recommended that no segments in the NCA be found suitable for Wild and Scenic River protection, while a coalition of environmental groups has recommended that several river segments should be protected.

The Council will discuss the Wild and Scenic River process further at the June 1st meeting.

Break

Recreation Discussion for Zone 2

Using a process and flowchart established at a prior meeting, the Council discussed whether BLM should consider making a specific commitment toward recreation in Zone 2.

Discussion:

Prop-driven boats can't use Gunnison – too shallow and lack of put-ins. Jet boats and jetskis can – mostly during fall hunting season. Massey noted the need to use motorized boats in emergency

situations with livestock. Stevens noted that this could likely be allowed for as administrative use if any restrictions on motorized boating are made.

Regarding overcrowding at mouth of Dominguez Canyon, there are limited options:

- Limit numbers of visitors via river or via Bridgeport bridge.
- Disperse visitors away from Dominguez Canyon mouth, with improved, alternative campgrounds, public and private. Need to look into alternative camping spots.
- Backcountry character of campgrounds at Dominguez Canyon mouth might be difficult to achieve.
- Option is more facilities constructed there and elsewhere on river.
- Blom: could divert people up onto a rim trail, which could reduce some traffic to Dominguez Canyon

Public & Council comment/discussion:

Eric Rechel. Public sentiment, given the NCA designation, might make Wild and Scenic River designations more acceptable.

Aquafresca: Better to protect the values, and not worry about labels. Over the years, federal managers are more sophisticated with better tools. Wild & Scenic River Act was necessary when passed.

Stevens: Consider ORVs and threats to free-flowing character.

Massey: are we managing for a National Conservation Area or a National Recreation Conservation Area? Two different things going on here. Are we trying to protect resources, not necessarily draw in a big crowd of people? Primary purpose is the NCA.

Steele: Our intent is not a neon recreation sign. Recreation will increase. Manage what is coming at us.

Stevens: Recreation is both a purpose and something that impacts other resources. The Council has decided to use recreation as a focal point.

Massey: Overuse is a real problem, and will get worse if you want a backcountry experience, not a carnival or a lot of people.

Steele: We're looking for a happy medium. Can't just have no regulations. But would be concerned to just seal it off. The question is where do we place a cap?

Wilson: When I started, my impression is to protect this area from over-recreation. Establish guidelines to protect resources.

Next meeting

The next meeting, June 1, will be in Delta at the Performing Arts Center (822 Grand Ave). Focus of meeting will be Wild & Scenic Rivers. Also to be discussed will be recreational prospecting and further information about waterfowl hunting and jet boat use on the river.