

CANYON CLARION

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BLM



Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area • COLORADO



EIS next critical step in D-E NCA planning

What is an Environmental Impact Statement and how does it relate to the resource management plan for the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area? The EIS is the next critical step in the planning process, as the BLM works on draft impact analysis.

To understand what the EIS will look like, it helps to look at why EISs were created, which means a brief history lesson. EISs were created by the National Environmental Policy Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1969, and signed into law in 1970. NEPA requires all federal agencies to prepare a detailed EIS on the:

- Impact of proposed actions on the environment
- Adverse environmental impacts if proposals are undertaken

- Alternatives to proposed actions
- Extent to which proposed actions involves tradeoffs between short-term and long-term environmental gains and the extent to which the proposed action forecloses future options; and
- Any irreversible loss of resources caused by proposed actions.

The goal or purpose of an EIS is not to determine policy, but to ensure that decision-makers are fully informed about policy alternatives or trade-offs before committing to policies.

When an activity or action is proposed on BLM-administered public lands in Colorado, the BLM conducts an interdisciplinary review of the environmental effects of the proposal to provide relevant

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environmental information for citizens and public officials.

The majority of NEPA documents prepared by BLM Colorado are Environmental Assessments (EAs). An EA is prepared to determine if a proposed action or alternative will significantly affect the quality of the environment. If the impacts are determined to be insignificant, the BLM prepares a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). If the impacts are determined to be significant, the BLM may reject, modify or prepare an EIS for the proposed action.

Major federal actions that may significantly affect the human environment require an EIS. BLM policy defines a resource management plan as a major federal action, because the plans will guide management for the planning area for 20 years or more; thus requiring more in-depth and detailed analysis through an EIS. After an EIS and RMP are released, a less detailed EA often suffices for proposed actions since detailed information and analysis are included in the original EIS.

The BLM awarded the EIS analysis contract to Environmental Manage-



ment & Planning Solutions, Inc. of Boulder. The consulting firm is already familiar with the Grand Junction and Uncompaghre field offices and their RMPs.

The analysis for the D-E NCA RMP is based on several other resources. The first is the 2009 Omnibus Act, which created D-E NCA and lists the

nity Access Group, Western Slope and Southwest ATV associations, Grand Mesa Back Country Horsemen, Quiet Trails, Western Slope 4- Wheelers and Grand Mesa Jeep Club.

Public comments

Frequently heard themes among motorized recreationists included:

- A preference for Alternative A among motorized recreationists, which reflects the current management of the NCA.
- Concerns about increasing quiet use designations in D-E NCA and what that would mean for motor-

purposes and resources of the area. The second is a review of resource conditions within D-E NCA. The third is a proposed range of alternative management plans. With resource conditions in mind, the contractor will consider how each of the alternative management plans would affect D-E NCA resources, on both a short-term and long-term basis (e.g., how each of the proposed alternatives might affect vegetation in the D-E NCA).

Each alternative has different management approaches, actions and priorities, which would have different vegetative impacts and consequences. Because past and current activities in D-E NCA have already caused changes in the D-E NCA, even the current management approach would have consequences for vegetation and the habitat, livestock and recreationists. The task is to consider all of the above documentation, research and experience to extrapolate into the future and forecast what can be reasonably expected from any of the preferred alternatives.

Once the BLM thoroughly considers and digests the EIS, the agency then drafts a preferred management alternative.

ized recreationists A suggestion that BLM should only close damaged trails after user groups are asked if they can help repair the trails.

- A suggestion that the BLM should allow historic motorized access and recreation to continue in the Hunting Grounds.
- An endorsement for trail courtesy and public education as the best way to reduce recreational conflicts.

Conservationists favored:

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- A multiple-use approach, with a few trails reserved for quiet use.
- BLM consideration of wildlife habitat needs.
- Public education to reduce conflicts, but separation of different recreation groups onto different trails could work as a last resort.
- Encouraging different recreation groups to learn more about each other.

Council report

A Council sub-group reported out on discussions on travel management options with horseback, motorized, quiet use and mountain bike representatives. The group approached the project on the basis of zones.

Zone 1, Hunting Grounds: The sub-group reached the consensus that the area should remain open to motorized use. If heritage tourism (Old Spanish Trail) is pursued for auto tours, the sub-group suggested that ATVs should also be considered. Equestrians requested a dedicated trail to the rim above the Gunnison River.

Zone 2, Gunnison River Corridor: The sub-group reached consensus on the need for more designated campgrounds in the corridor and allowing some motorized boat use during waterfowl season.

Zone 3, Cactus Park: The group agreed that a few dedicated horse and foot trails would be beneficial. The mountain bike representative focused on the need for trails in rim area. Quiet use advocates would like a dedicated trail in the East Creek area, which provides for rock climbing and auto touring. The group also suggested that a single track trail for motorcycle use should be added for Sawmill Mesa,

Zone 4, Escalante Canyon: No additional options are needed.

Zone 5, areas south of Escalante Canyon: The sub-group agreed that Cottonwood Canyon has pristine quality. Overall, Alternative C protects biological resources the best.

Further discussion included the idea that mountain biking can be considered a quiet use. The sub-group suggested that by separating mountain bike and equestrian users, conflict can be avoided in heavy use areas.

How to manage conflicts

The council discussed how the BLM addresses conflicts when there are many different users in the same zone. The BLM's most common solution to user conflict is to separate the users from each other.

One management approach would focus on providing the *opportunity* for a recreational experience rather than focusing on *quality* of experience. Another management approach would focus on the *quality* of the experience, often dedicating areas and trails and defining use types, settings and recreational experiences.

Other ideas include using public education as a way to prevent conflicts. One example was of motorized users pulling off a trail and turning off motors so as not to spook an approaching horse and rider. Another idea was to use marketing to manage expectations. Council members agreed that marketing designed to bring in more visitors should be avoided. They also agreed that the highest risk is to try and manage for all recreational activities in the same area.

Delta meeting

At the March 22 meeting at the Delta County Courthouse, Advisory Council members focused on the proposed management alternatives undergoing analysis by a BLM contractor.

As the Council worked through the proposed management alternatives, the

overarching themes included:

- Exotic weeds won't go away naturally – active management is needed.
- General unhappiness with Alternative B, which would rely on natural processes, rather than active management.
- A “very good” status for some vegetation is not a realistic goal – the Council prefers a *trend* toward improvement.
- No active management for wilderness area – leave it alone.
- Interpretative sites can be positive tool and benefit public.
- Fire can be an effective management tool at upper altitudes, while mechanical treatments work best at lower elevations. Fire at lower altitudes helps spread cheatgrass.
- Alternative A, the no-action alternative, isn't viable since humans already affect D-E NCA and will have greater impact as human population grows.
- If riparian areas get closed to livestock, ranchers need alternative water for herds.
- Considering developing thresholds and triggers before closing trails or habitat.
- Considering traffic growth and the state of county roads, as well as the impact on residents before encouraging heritage tourism in Escalante Canyon,.
- Micro-geocaching sites could trigger wear and tear on habitat.



Council provides feedback on alternatives

The Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area Advisory Council is providing feedback to the BLM regarding the range of management alternatives throughout the resource management planning process, based on expertise and public feedback collected over the past year.

In developing its preferred alternative, the BLM is currently reviewing four draft alternatives. The Preferred Alternative will likely be comprised of a mix of management approaches identified in the other alternatives.

The Council made the following suggestions at an April 4 meeting in Grand Junction.

Biological and Natural Resources

The BLM should consider structuring objectives as trends versus required thresholds to be attained.

The BLM should consider the management constraints associated with an alternative focused primarily on natural processes: The Advisory Council agreed this alternative would not be viable from a preferred alternative standpoint because of limitations on tools to restore natural resources (natural processes alone would not remediate some of the biological health issues in desert ecosystems, such as noxious weeds).

The BLM should preserve the tools to maintain and restore ecosystem conditions.

- Alternative B is too restrictive for revegetation in particular.
- The BLM should consider three specific vegetation or habitat criteria as priorities for management attention:
- Riparian (including seeps and springs) because of the high dependence of wildlife species and other resources on these systems.
- Sagebrush (because of west-wide declines).
- Areas with sensitive species (e.g., Colorado hookless cactus).

Desert bighorn sheep

The BLM should consider that stress from increasing recreation as a significant factor on bighorn health (not just potential disease transmission).

- The Advisory Council supports the division of probabilities of bighorn/domestic sheep interaction into high, medium and low classifications.

Wilderness

The BLM should consider the need for multiple access points to the wilderness and provide for a transportation system that gets people to the wilderness boundary in multiple places.

- The Advisory Council supports the concept of managing the wilderness by zone. Different zones have different management needs. Trends in the lower Big and Little Dominguez Canyon are distinct from other places.
- In situations where permits would be required in the wilderness, the Council would like the BLM to establish triggers.

Cultural Resources

The BLM should not draw attention to all sites, and carefully consider which sites to publicize. When a site is known, interpretation and education can be powerful management tools.

- Self-discovery is generally an important theme. Consider fewer opportunities and guided options.

