

**United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

**Environmental Assessment
for the Tabeguache Trail Connection to Colorado State
Highway 141 near Whitewater, Colorado**

Grand Junction Field Office
2815 H Road
Grand Junction, Colorado 81506

DOI-BLM-CO-130-2013-0042-EA

SEPTEMBER 2015



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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.1 IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

BACKGROUND:

The Bangs Canyon area was designated as part of the Grand Valley Intensive Recreation Management Area (IRMA) in the Grand Junction Field Office (GJFO) Resource Management Plan (RMP) in 1987. It was subsequently designated as a Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) in the 1999 Bangs Canyon Management Plan. The 1987 GJFO RMP identified the importance of public access for recreation in this area on an existing primitive road traversing approximately 17 miles through rugged canyon country from Little Park Road to Colorado State Highway 141. This route, which now forms a segment of the Tabeguache Trail, lies mostly on BLM public lands, but crosses small parcels of private land between Rough Canyon and Bangs Canyon, and at its connection point with Hwy 141 immediately southwest of the community of Whitewater. No public access is allowed across the private property near Whitewater, thus preventing a through-route opportunity for motorized vehicles along this road. The 1987 GJFO RMP listed this route among those needing management actions to improve public access. In the intervening years, the BLM has pursued multiple efforts to secure public access for motorized vehicles to Highway 141 via the Tabeguache Trail. Also during that time, public interest in this route, and legal motorized access to Hwy 141, has remained high. The BLM has pursued land acquisitions and/or public easements, as well as construction of new routes that would remain on public lands. In 2011, when the most recent easement option proved impractical, BLM attention shifted to construction of a short connector route that would remain on public lands. The BLM prepared a preliminary EA to analyze two proposed connector route options. The BLM released the preliminary EA for public comment in February of 2015. This EA includes revisions based on comments received during the public comment period.

CASEFILE/PROJECT NUMBER:

DOI-BLM-CO-130 2013-0042-EA

PROJECT NAME:

Tabeguache Trail – Highway 141 Connector Route

PLANNING UNIT:

Grand Junction Field Office

1.2 PROJECT LOCATION AND LEGAL DESCRIPTION

The proposed trail connection is located approximately eight miles southeast of Grand Junction, CO and one mile southwest of Whitewater, CO on BLM-managed public lands within the Bangs Canyon SRMA. See locator maps (Figures 1 and 2) and project area detail map (Figure 3) below.

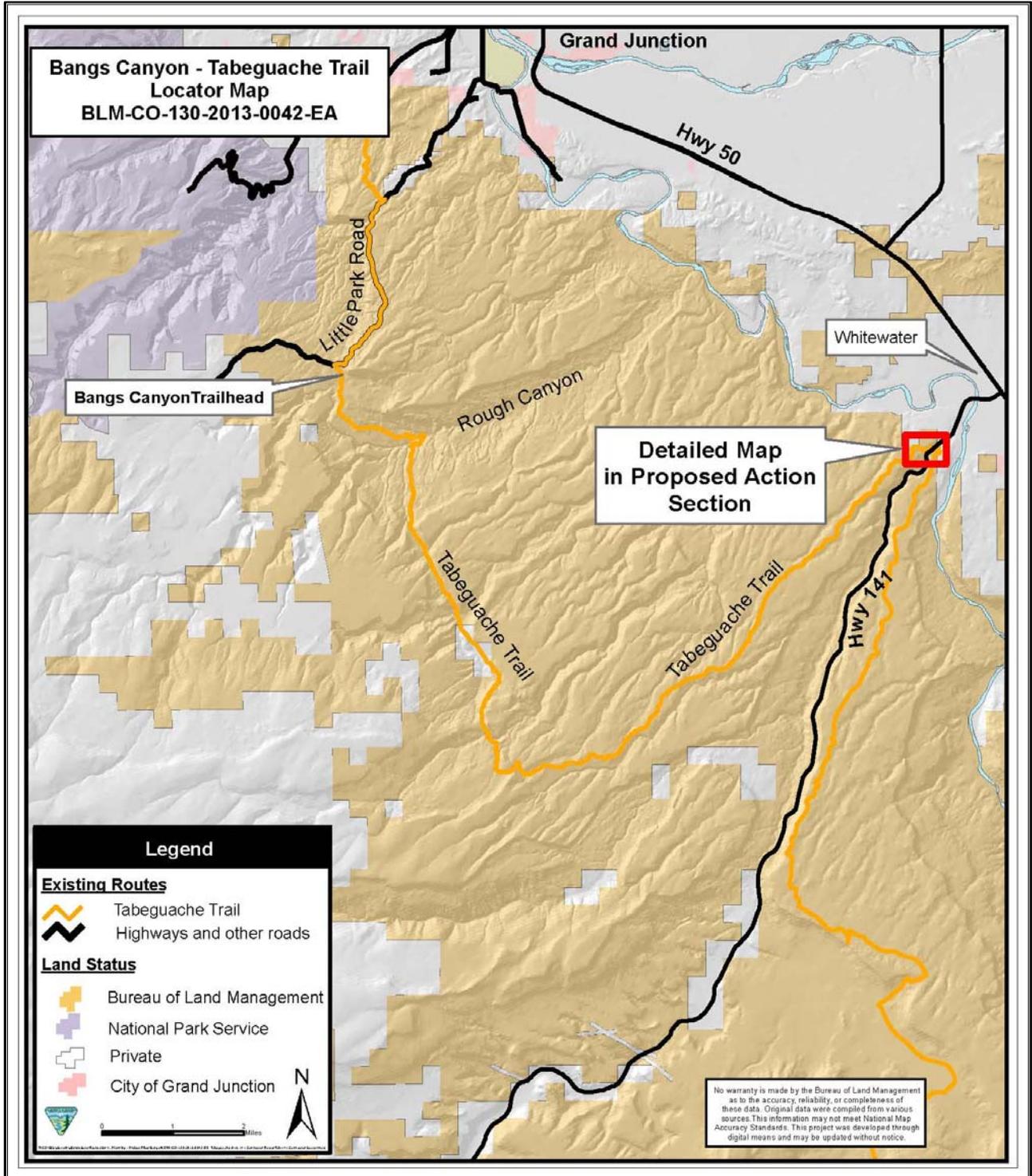
LEGAL DESCRIPTION:

6th PM, T. 12 S., R. 99 W., section 33.

Figure 1: General Project Location



Figure 2: Bangs Area Locator Map



1.3 PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of this proposed project is to provide an access route that provides for long-distance recreation opportunities from the Tabeguache Trail to Colorado State Highway (Hwy) 141 southwest of Whitewater, Colorado for motorized off-highway vehicles (OHVs), including high-clearance full-size four-wheel drive vehicles (4x4s), as well as motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), and utility vehicles (UTVs). Currently, a rugged 17-mile segment of the Tabeguache Trail in the Bangs Canyon area is open to OHV travel. The proposed OHV connector trail is needed because fenced and gated private land at the east end of this route near Whitewater currently blocks access to Hwy 141 for motorized vehicles. That prevents OHVs from looping back to Grand Junction or other destinations on state highways, or crossing Hwy 141 to access additional OHV recreation opportunities in the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area and Uncompahgre National Forest. Without a route connecting to Hwy 141, OHV recreation is limited to an out-and-back opportunity on this section of the Tabeguache Trail. Unprepared travelers occasionally trespass or request landowner permission to cross the private property and reach the highway. Securing and developing this connection for OHV access was identified as an objective for recreation access in the 1987 GJFO RMP, and OHV enthusiasts have consistently identified this connection as a high priority.

1.4 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1.4.1 Public Scoping: Extensive public scoping was conducted for this project proposal. The BLM invited public involvement by posting this project on the Grand Junction Field Office NEPA website. The BLM also scoped the proposed trail connection project with several local trail user groups, environmental groups, other agencies, Native American Tribes and private land owners. These groups included the Grand Mesa Jeep Club (GMJC), Western Slope ATV Association (WSATVA), Colorado Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition (COHVCO), Motorcycle Trail Riders Association (MTRA), Bookcliff Rattlers Motorcycle Club (BRMC), Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association (COPMOBA), Grand Valley Trails Alliance (GVTA), Conservation Colorado, Quiet Trails Group (QTG), Conservation Colorado, Grand Mesa Backcountry Horsemen, Colorado Mountain Club, Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, Southern Ute Indian Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, and James McCurter (private land owner). The BLM notified the owners of the private inholding traversed by the Tabeguache Trail at Needem Moore Seldom Feed Park (Lew and Lynnette Achord) in February and May of 2015. The landowners expressed concern regarding the proposed project and the potential indirect effects to their private property. Specifically, the landowners were concerned about potential increases in traffic across their property due to the proposed through-route and the potential for more trespass on their property, but did not have any other comments. The landowners and the BLM have had subsequent discussions to address these issues. The scoping efforts listed above included attending meetings, participating in site visits, and answering questions about the proposed project.

The Grand Valley Trails Alliance Roundtable also established a working group to discuss and analyze this proposed project. These scoping efforts helped BLM identify and refine issues of concern, potential project design features, and mitigation measures to address identified concerns. The GVTA Roundtable working group submitted a document summarizing their scoping comments. That document, and a summary of project site visits and other meetings,

including records of attendees and topic discussions, is included in the project file. Issues identified during public scoping are summarized in Section 1.4.3 below.

The BLM prepared a preliminary environmental assessment, DOI-BLM-CO-130-2013-0042-EA and made it available for a 30-day public comment period from February 25, 2015 to March 27, 2015. The BLM extended the comment period was by one week to April 3, 2015. The BLM received a total of 73 comment letters, forms, or emails. Appendix A summarizes those public comments, and BLM responses to those comments.

1.4.2 Internal Scoping: Internal scoping included notification of the GJFO NEPA interdisciplinary team and staff from CDOT and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. During this initial scoping, resource specialists identified concerns regarding potential impacts to special status plant species, cultural resources, water quality, and riparian habitat.

Initial tribal consultation for this project was initiated in 2012 and included site visits with representatives from the Northern Ute Tribe on 11/07/2012 and 10/14/2014, and the Southern Ute Tribe on 04/28/2015.

Cactus surveys and cultural surveys were conducted in the spring of 2013. A minor reroute of the original proposed route was made to avoid inventoried cactus. That reroute was incorporated into the route alignment proposed in Alternative A. On 11/26/2013, an onsite visit was conducted for BLM resource specialists and managers. Participants included the field manager, an assistant field manager, the planning and environmental coordinator, an archaeologist, wildlife biologist, ecologist, recreation planner, and park ranger. This group evaluated the proposed route, and identified an alternative route for consideration. That alternative route proposal (Route B) is described below in the Proposed Action.

Initial consultation with CDOT traffic engineers indicated that the proposed route connection point to Highway 141 would provide adequate sight distance for ingress and egress from the highway. Following release of the Preliminary EA, the BLM, CDOT, Mesa County and the Grand Mesa Jeep Club engaged in additional efforts to plan the trail/highway intersections and crossing, and to complete required CDOT permits.**1.4.3 Issues Identified:** Based on public scoping comments, public comments received in response to the Preliminary EA, and internal scoping among BLM resource specialists, the following issues were identified (not listed in priority order):

1. Would there be a substantial increase in recreation use, or changes in patterns of use, resulting in resource damage, or substantial changes to recreation opportunities and outcomes resulting from construction of the proposed route connection?
2. How would the proposal affect special status plant species, cultural resources, visual resources, water quality, and riparian habitat? Which route alternative would be preferred for protection of natural and cultural resources?
3. Is there resource damage and/or trespass on adjoining private lands due to the current dead end route?
4. Which route alternative would recreation users prefer?
5. How would OHVs safely and legally cross Hwy 141 to access the continuation of the Tabeguache Trail at the base of Nine Mile Hill?

6. Would non-motorized users continue to be able to access the area using the small existing parking area near the Hwy 141 East Creek bridge?
7. What types of informational and educational signage would be used to manage recreational use and protect resources?
8. How would the potential indirect effects of this proposal be managed?
 - Trail braiding, social trails, and scenic pullouts along the Tabeguache Trail resulting from increased use (if use were to increase substantially)
 - Impacts to quiet use opportunities resulting from increased motorized use (if use were to increase substantially)
 - Overnight camping along the trail
9. What should be done with the existing singletrack if the new multiple-use route is constructed?
10. Would there be potential impacts from recreation on grazing operations, and potential impacts to recreation from grazing – is there a need for fencing and gates and/or cattleguards?
11. Would additional hiking/equestrian trails be considered to provide additional non-motorized opportunities in the area?
12. Who would be responsible for ongoing monitoring and maintenance along the length of the Tabeguache Trail between Little Park Road and Hwy 141?
13. How would implementation of the project affect management of lands with wilderness characteristics as directed by BLM policy?

1.5 DECISION TO BE MADE

Based on the analysis contained in this Environmental Assessment (EA), the BLM will decide whether to implement one of the alternatives described below. This EA will analyze anticipated impacts from the construction, maintenance and use of the proposed trail connections. The BLM may choose to: a) implement the project as proposed, b) implement the project with modifications/mitigation, c) implement an alternative to the proposed action, or d) not implement the project at this time.

CHAPTER 2 - PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide information on the Proposed Action and Alternatives. Alternatives considered but not analyzed in detail are also discussed.

2.2 ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED IN DETAIL

2.2.1 Proposed Action – Route B Alignment

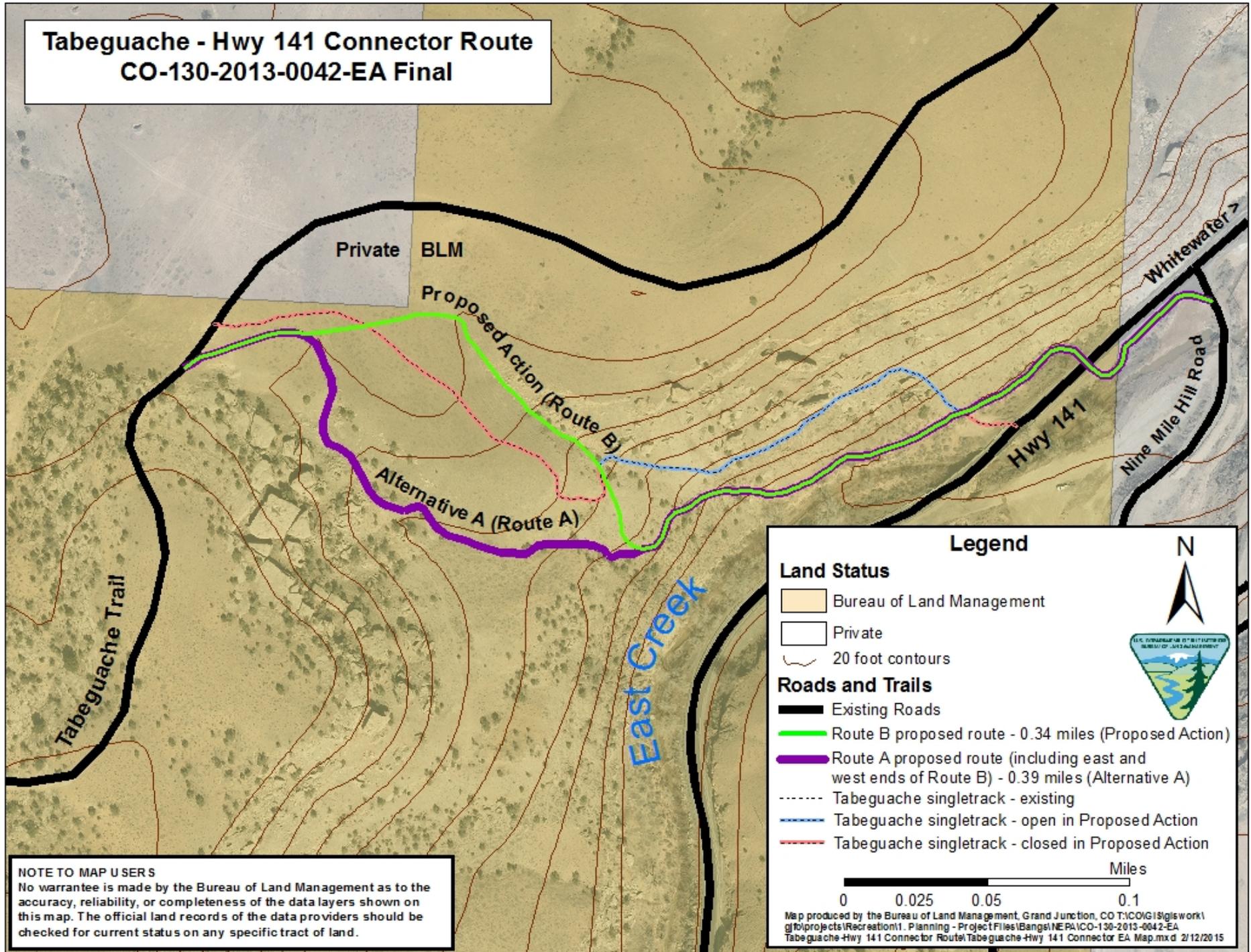
The proposed action is to construct approximately 0.34 miles (1,800 feet) of primitive trail on BLM-managed lands approximately 1.4 miles southwest of Whitewater, Colorado. This route is

slightly shorter and steeper than the Route A alignment described below. This trail would connect to the existing Tabeguache Trail immediately south of where it currently crosses onto private property. It would connect to Hwy 141 approximately 200 feet northeast of the first highway bridge over East Creek at the base of Nine Mile Hill (see map in Figure 3 below). Immediately across the highway from this intersection is the next segment of the Tabeguache Trail which continues up Nine Mile Hill to Cactus Park and eventually to the Uncompahgre Plateau. The BLM has submitted a State Highway Access Permit Application to the CDOT for authorization of the new access point onto Highway 141. CDOT also requires a special use permit and memorandum of understanding (MOU) to identify and document the parties responsible for management of the new route. Mesa County is partnering with the BLM and CDOT to complete permitting requirements. The CDOT permits and MOU are being developed concurrently with this Environmental Assessment.

The proposed connector route traverses steep, rocky terrain, and the trail would be constructed to retain the primitive character of Tabeguache Trail, allowing access only to high-clearance 4x4s, UTVs, ATVs, motorcycles and non-motorized recreationists. The intent would be that the physical character of the road would prevent access by passenger vehicles, and even some less-capable 4x4 vehicles (low-clearance, long wheel-base, etc.). In order to filter vehicle use and allow only experienced OHV operators, a qualifier feature would be constructed within the first 500 feet of the route's intersection with Highway 141. The qualifier feature would be constructed with large rocks and soil obtained from the new road corridor and/or rocks of similar color and texture imported from outside the project area.

Construction of the route would likely be completed using a small trail dozer (e.g. Sweco) and/or small excavator or backhoe that could selectively move rocks and small amounts of soil. This project would not employ standard road-building techniques (cut and fill, crowning, etc.), but would instead utilize trail building guidelines and techniques to create an environmentally sustainable route that provides access for the targeted recreation activities. Tread width for this route would vary from 84 inches to 120 inches. Construction techniques would emphasize minimal soil disturbance, and excess soil would not be placed in drainages where it could more easily make its way into the East Creek riparian corridor. Partner organizations, including the Grand Mesa Jeep Club, Western Slope ATV Association, and Grand Valley Trails Alliance would be engaged to assist with construction of the route. The BLM would have access to a trail dozer with a trained operator. A mid-sized excavator with a thumb attachment would likely be rented for one to two days of work on the project. All construction equipment would be washed prior to use on the project to reduce the likelihood of introducing weed seeds. Post-construction reclamation and/or weed treatments would be implemented if necessary. To minimize impacts to air quality, construction activities would not occur when wind speeds exceed 35 mph. Parts of the route may be established by jeeps and ATVs/UTVs simply driving the marked route in locations where heavier equipment would create more ground disturbance than necessary.

Figure 3: Project Detail Map



Engaging partner groups and their vehicles in the construction phase would also help ensure the route is appropriate for the targeted users. The route would be signed using BLM signing standards. A cattle guard or gate would be installed where the route crosses the fence line parallel to Highway 141. The existing wire gate would remain in place to accommodate livestock passage for range management activities. The existing wire gate may also be used for access during construction of the new route, and for short-term (six to nine months) access by recreationists while CDOT, Mesa County and BLM complete planning and construction of the final trail/highway intersections and crossing.

Upon completion of this route, portions of the existing singletrack trail that connects to Hwy 141 would be closed and naturalized in order to reduce impacts from some steep and unsustainable existing trail parallel to the new route. Another short segment of the singletrack trail would remain open to non-motorized use on an interim basis. See Figure 3 for a map showing the proposed action for the existing singletrack. After constructing and opening the new route, the BLM and its partners would monitor use patterns on the new route and on the singletrack trail. If monitoring indicates that use patterns on the new route can safely accommodate both motorized and non-motorized trail users and provide for a quality recreation experience, the singletrack trail would be closed and reclaimed to lessen identified impacts to cultural resources, plants, soil and water.

The portion of the route left open would improve safety and user experience for non-motorized recreationists, while the closed segments would eliminate some steep and unsustainable existing trail.

Unless stipulated otherwise by CDOT permitting requirements, the existing small pull-off/parking area immediately north of the Hwy 141 bridge over East Creek would remain accessible on an interim basis for parking, livestock operations, and temporary construction access. The BLM and its partners would close and restore this parking area following completion of both the new highway/trail access point and completion of a highway crossing and trail access on the southeast side of Hwy 141. If construction of the connector trail is authorized prior to final engineering, permitting and authorization of the trail/highway intersection and crossing, the BLM and CDOT would grant temporary access through the existing wire gate for road-legal licensed vehicles.

Until an OHV crossing of Highway 141 is designed, authorized by CDOT, and constructed, unlicensed OHVs would not be able to legally travel on or across Hwy 141. Therefore, the BLM and/or its partners would post informational signs at the Bangs Canyon Trailhead, the beginning of the Third Flats Road, and at the intersection of the Windmill Road and Tabeguache Trail. Those signs would indicate the restrictions for OHVs at the new intersection of the Tabeguache Trail and Hwy 141. The following is sample language for those signs: "Attention Trail Users: Motorized vehicle access from the Tabeguache Trail to Hwy 141 is currently limited to licensed vehicles only. Unlicensed OHVs may not legally travel on or across Hwy 141. Efforts are underway to design and construct an authorized highway crossing for OHVs." The BLM and/or its partners would also post "Crossing Private Land Next ¾ Mile, Stay on Road" signs at both the north and south ends of the private inholding crossed by the Tabeguache Trail at Needem Moore Seldom Feed Park. The proposed construction timeframe for this road/trail would begin

in the fall of 2015, within the constraints of any timing limitations for resource protection identified in the analyses of this document. Construction would be cooperatively funded and coordinated by the BLM GJFO and the partner organizations identified in this document.

As of August 11, 2015, Mesa County had surveyed both sides of Hwy 141 and coordinated with BLM and CDOT to identify the preferred location for the new trail to cross the highway. The project map in this document has been updated to reflect the slightly modified trail/highway intersection location, and now shows the proposed highway crossing and roadside trail on the southeast side of the highway. The proposed action for the this EA includes construction of the highway crossing and roadside trail which lies in the CDOT right of way for Hwy 141, and crosses BLM-managed land for approximately 60 feet, then continues for approximately another 150 feet along the CDOT right of way before reaching the Nine Mile Hill Road. The roadside trail on the southeast side of the highway would be approximately 84-120 inches wide and would include a retaining wall along some or all of its length. The retaining wall would be set back a minimum of 20 feet from East Creek. Construction of the highway connections on both sides of the highway, and the roadside trail on the southeast side of the highway, may occur at the same time as construction of the connector trail, or may occur within approximately six months following construction of the connector.

Following completion of the new trail, the BLM and its partners would periodically monitor the physical condition of the trail, as well as visitor use patterns, to determine ongoing management and maintenance needs. The BLM and its partners would employ current best management practices for monitoring the trail's physical and social conditions, and for implementing corrective measures as needed to meet management objectives described in the GJFO resource management plan and any subsequent area-specific management plans. Prior to opening the new route for use, the BLM would install a traffic counter near the trail's intersection with Hwy 141 to provide visitor use data. All maintenance and management actions along the length of the Tabeguache Trail between Little Park Road and Hwy 141 would be coordinated with, and approved by, the BLM. The BLM would partner with recreation user groups to construct, install and maintain the trail and any associated signs, barriers, etc. Potential management actions along the trail could include: installing information kiosks with maps, trail etiquette messages, resource protection messages and safety messages; installing signs notifying trail users about private property boundaries; delineating and/or designating pull-offs and camping areas; trail maintenance to mitigate excessive erosion or safety hazards; and reclamation/restoration of undesignated routes. The BLM would engage trail stewardship partners (e.g. Grand Mesa Jeep Club, Grand Valley Trails Alliance) for ongoing trail monitoring, maintenance, and public outreach.

If post-construction monitoring indicates population-level impacts to desert bighorn sheep, additional mitigation may be required. Appropriate mitigation would be determined and developed in coordination with Colorado Parks and Wildlife and appropriate stakeholders at the time that impacts are observed.

If post-construction monitoring indicates negative impacts to the Colorado hookless cactus attributable to use of the trail, the BLM and its partners would identify mitigation measures to reduce impacts to the listed cactus.

Consultation with interested Native American Tribes and the Colorado State Historical Preservation Officer is ongoing, and additional mitigation measures may be added to those described below. To protect cultural resources, the following protective/mitigation measures would be implemented:

Placement of natural barriers, such as boulders or cactus to restrict pedestrian access into site 5ME6217. A BLM or BLM-permitted archaeologist would be present during construction of this portion of the trail when boulder or cactus placement is made;

In order to minimize, mitigate, or avoid adverse effects to currently known and unknown sites along the northern 17 miles of the Tabeguache Trail, the BLM plans to enter into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Colorado State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) for phased inventory of the trail within three to five years. This inventory would follow guidance regarding cultural resources pursuant to the *“Programmatic Agreement Among the Bureau of Land Management, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers Regarding the Manner in which Bureau of Land Management will Meet Its Responsibilities Under the National Historic Preservation Act”*; *State Protocol Agreement Between the Colorado State Director of the Bureau of Land Management and the State Historic Preservation Office Regarding the Manner in Which the BLM will meet its Responsibilities Under the National Programmatic Agreement Among the Bureau of Land Management, The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Offices* (hereinafter Colorado Protocol);

Following cultural inventories, the BLM would address adverse effects to cultural resources by creating a monitoring and mitigation plan through consultation with the SHPO and interested Indian tribes;

If sites of interest to local tribes are found during inventory consultation, additional consultation, which could include field visits to evaluate the sites, and discussions on the effects of the project, could occur, and appropriate protection measures would be incorporated into the Proposed Action before implementation;

If the Tabeguache Trail is determined to be an historic Ute trail, the BLM would consult with Native American tribes to develop interpretive materials describing the trail’s significance.

A stormwater management permit is in place for the Bangs Canyon SRMA requiring the BLM to adhere to all requirements outlined in EPA SWPPP Permit No. COR10CA9F including the following:

1. Inspect areas of disturbance every 30 days and after storms; any action needs to be taken within 7 days.
2. Once a trail or a section of trails has been completed, notify BLM-GJFO hydrologist so completed routes can be removed from BLM construction inspection responsibility.
3. Post signs at all access points to the trail system with EPA SWPPP Permit Number (COR10CA9F). Notify the public that a copy of this plan can be found at the BLM Grand Junction Field Office located at 2815 H Road, GJ, CO 81506.
4. Have pre-construction meeting with volunteers/contractors to explain BLM rules (ex.

don't throw out trash, where to refuel (away from streams), disturbing least amount of vegetation possible, what to do w/ cultural artifacts, threatened and endangered species, etc.). Go over BLM standard construction practices for trails to ensure minimum standards are understood and met.

Any spills of fuel and lubricants used during construction of the trails would be promptly reported to the BLM. Any contaminated soil would be promptly removed and either disposed of or treated, as determined appropriate by the BLM.

Based on review of the geology and known localities, it is not anticipated that there is a high potential for paleontological features to exist and be disturbed; however, it is standard to note that if vertebrate fossils or trace fossils are found during construction, work would be stopped in the immediate area and the BLM Geologist/Paleontology Coordinator would be notified. If the site is determined to be an important vertebrate fossil site, the route would be re-aligned. If the route could not be re-aligned, the newly discovered fossils would be removed and curated at a local museum.

2.2.2 Alternative A: Route A Alignment

This route would begin and end at the same locations as the Route B alignment described above, but would follow a drainage to the west of the Route B alignment (see map in Figure 3 below). This alignment is a modified version of a route first identified by members of the Grand Mesa Jeep Club in the 1990s, and mapped by the BLM in 2011. In 2013, Route B was identified as an alternative to Route A to reduce potential impacts to plant and cultural resources.

Route A is approximately 0.39 miles (2,060 feet) in length, slightly longer and less steep than Route B. Construction standards and techniques, construction timeline, partnership involvement, weed mitigation, wildlife monitoring, hazmat management, paleontological resource protection, cultural resource protection and stormwater management would be the same as described in the Proposed Action above. This alternative would also include the highway crossing and roadside trail described under the Proposed Action.

Upon completion of this route, the entire length of the existing singletrack trail that connects to Hwy 141 would be closed and naturalized.

2.2.3 No Action Alternative

In this alternative, the BLM would not construct the Tabeguache – Hwy 141 Connector Route. Recreationists would continue to use the existing trail system and there would be no legal public OHV access from Little Park Road to Highway 141 on the Tabeguache Trail.

2.3 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT ANALYZED IN DETAIL

2.3.1 Private Land Acquisition or Easement for Public Access

In 2011, the BLM secured Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) monies for the purchase of an easement across the McCurter property near Whitewater. This easement option presented

the potential for creating a road connection across private property from the Tabeguache Trail to Highway 141 approximately one mile south of Whitewater. This opportunity was actively pursued by BLM realty specialists, engineers and recreation planners. It presented multiple implementation constraints, including: a narrow easement corridor that would have substantially constrained engineering and management of the road; a need for extensive fence construction and maintenance; construction of a short section of road through a cliff face that presented substantial and costly engineering and construction challenges; concerns about the new road's impact on visual resources along the Unaweep-Tabeguache Scenic and Historic Byway; and recreation/travel management/safety concerns about the route's connection with Highway 141 approximately ½ mile from the continuation of the Tabeguache Trail at the base of Nine Mile Hill, potentially encouraging illegal highway use by unlicensed OHV users seeking to connect with the Nine Mile Hill segment of the Tabeguache Trail. Based on these constraints, the BLM terminated this option and returned the easement funding.

2.3.2 Construction of Alternate Connector Routes on Public Lands

During trail planning efforts for the 2006 Bangs Canyon Implementation EA, BLM recreation program staff researched construction of a series of new road segments that would link existing roads to form a connection between the Tabeguache Trail near Corduroy Spring, and Highway 141 approximately two miles north of Cactus Park. This connection was proposed for NEPA analysis in 2009 (DOI-BLM-CO-130-2009-0055-DNA) and would have required the construction of approximately four miles of new roads in rugged and remote terrain. Initial analysis of this alternative revealed multiple implementation constraints, including extensive cultural resource mitigation requirements, and substantial road design and construction challenges, all of which made implementing the project cost-prohibitive. Further consideration of this alternative was deemed unnecessary considering the much shorter length of the routes proposed above (Routes A and B.)

2.3.3 Leaving Open All of the Existing Singletrack Connector Trail in Addition to a New Full-Size Vehicle Route

Non-motorized recreationists expressed an interest in retaining use of the existing singletrack trail in order to keep motorized and non-motorized uses separated for safety and enhanced user experience. Some segments of the existing trail follow the fall line on steep cross slopes and do not meet BLM trail design criteria. Other segments place visitors closer to sensitive cultural and biological resources. The addition of a new full-size OHV route would render the singletrack a parallel travel route in close proximity to a multiple-use recreation route available to non-motorized users as well as motorized users. BLM resource specialists recommended elimination of duplicative routes in order to reduce overall ground disturbance and promote resource protection, an approach that was also relevant and important for tribal representatives as discussed during tribal consultation. Consequently, this alternative was not carried forward for detailed analysis. However, the proposed action proposes leaving a portion of the existing singletrack trail open, while Alternative A proposes closing and restoring the entire length of the existing trail.

2.4 PLAN CONFORMANCE REVIEW

The Proposed Action is subject to and has been reviewed for conformance with the following plans (43 CFR 1610.5, BLM 1617.3):

Name of Plan: Grand Junction Field Office Resource Management Plan

Date Approved: AUGUST, 2015

Decision Number/Page: REC-SRMA-MA-04 (Bangs SRMA)/102

Decision Language:

Manage the Tabeguache Trail from Little Park Road to Highway 141 as a high-clearance full-sized 4-wheel drive route to provide long-distance OHV recreation opportunities spanning portions of the Bangs SRMA, Dominguez-Escalante NCA, and Uncompahgre National Forest.

Decision Number/Page: REC-SRMA-AU-22 (Bangs SRMA RMZ 2)/109-110

Decision Language:

Manage that part of the Tabeguache Trail that is south of the zone, to Highway 141 as a high clearance full-sized 4-wheel drive route. This action is outside of the Magellan-Tabeguache OHV Zone (RMZ 2) but provides an essential trail link through the adjacent Bangs Primitive Backcountry Zone (RMZ 4) for meeting the RMZ 2 objective for long-distance OHV opportunities.

Decision Number/Page: REC-SRMA-AU-33 (Bangs SRMA RMZ 4)/116

Decision Language:

Allow motorized and mechanized vehicle use on the Tabeguache Trail through RMZ 4.

Name of Plan: Grand Junction Resource Management Plan

Date Approved: JANUARY, 1987

Decision Number/Page: 2-20

Decision Language:

To ensure the continued availability of outdoor recreational opportunities which the public seeks and which are not readily available from other public or private entities.

To protect resources, meet legal requirements for visitor health and safety, and mitigate resource user conflicts.

Decision Number/Page: 2-28

Decision Language:

Transportation Management: Planned Management Actions: Acquire public or administrative access into 37 areas of public land where legal access does not exist (Map 20). Use and improve existing roads and trails in these areas where feasible. Construct new roads and trails where none exist or where existing roads and trails are inadequate for BLM needs.

Decision Number/Page: Table 19 page 2-29

Decision Language:

UnawEEP to Little Park - Map reference access number 32, Benefiting Resources: Recreation, Forestry, Range

Decision Number/Page: 2-36

Decision Language:

Transportation: Acquire public access for general resource management from UnawEEP Canyon to Little Park and Cactus Park.

Name of Plan: Bangs Canyon Management Plan (Amended 1987 RMP)

Date Approved: August 1999

Decision Number/Page: page 5, II. Management Objectives

Decision Language:

1. Provide semi-primitive motorized, mechanized, non-motorized recreation opportunities, scenic and natural values, and activities such as horseback riding, hiking, trail running, mountain bike riding and trail oriented OHVs (motorcycles, ATVs, and jeeps).
2. Provide for compatible uses within each discrete unit.
3. Resolve resource user conflicts that stem from abuse of the area.
4. Protect natural resources by utilizing accepted ecosystem management principles, to include; range values, wildlife habitat, scenic, cultural, forestry, recreational, sensitive plant and animal habitats, soils, and watersheds.
6. Identify alternatives to land ownership issues and existing status.

Decision Number/Page: pages 5-6, III. Management Direction

Decision Language: New management direction is required to become more responsive to both the visitors and the land, to critical areas requiring intensive management to protect the more visible and popular resources, to public information and other visitor needs, and to provide facilities to help maintain the resource base and accommodate public use of the area. In no case will recreation management or other public land uses allow unique, scenic, and cultural resources of Bangs Canyon to be compromised. The management program will emphasize recreation in concert with other resource programs.

Decision Number/Page: 11

Decision Language: In recognition of the remote nature of the area, emphasize goal of minimizing environmental impact i.e. (in the consideration of new trails and/or new recreational opportunities.

Name of Plan: Bangs Canyon Implementation EA (CO130-04-018) Decision Record and FONSI

Date Approved: April 5, 2006

Decision Number/Page: 8

Decision Language: Area 6: B. The Tabeguache Trail connection to Highway 141 will occur as described in the Proposed Action. This will include the development/construction of a challenging 4 wheel drive route connecting the Tabeguache trail to the Northeast Creek Road (6-15 on Map 7). A short connector to Snyder Flats Road will be made from the North East Creek Trail (6-14). Another connector from Snyder Flats Road to the North East Creek Road (6-13) will be constructed, thus connecting to Highway 141.

The reroute from Highway 141 to the Tabeguache and on to Little Park Road will be a two track primitive road available to all users (shared use). The Tabeguache reroute will provide a route from Highway 141 to Little Park Road that travels over more variety of terrain and a more challenging route than the existing alignment provides. Completion of the reroute will provide a through access for motorized users from Little Park Road to Hwy 141, which the current alignment does not.

In January 1997, the Colorado State Office of the BLM approved the Standards for Public Land Health and amended all RMPs in the State. Standards describe the conditions needed to sustain public land health and apply to all uses of public lands.

Standard 1: Upland soils exhibit infiltration and permeability rates that are appropriate to soil type, climate, land form, and geologic processes.

Standard 2: Riparian systems associated with both running and standing water function properly and have the ability to recover from major disturbance such as fire, severe grazing, or 100-year floods.

Standard 3: Healthy, productive plant and animal communities of native and other desirable species are maintained at viable population levels commensurate with the species and habitat's potential.

Standard 4: Special status, threatened and endangered species (federal and state), and other plants and animals officially designated by the BLM, and their habitats are maintained or enhanced by sustaining healthy, native plant and animal communities.

Standard 5: The water quality of all water bodies, including ground water where applicable, located on or influenced by BLM lands will achieve or exceed the Water Quality Standards established by the State of Colorado.

Because standards exist for each of these five categories, a finding must be made for each of them in an environmental analysis. These findings are located in Chapter 3 of this document.

CHAPTER 3 - AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This section provides a description of the human and natural environmental resources that could be affected by the Proposed Action and presents comparative analyses of the direct, indirect and cumulative effects on the affected environment stemming from the implementation of the actions under the Proposed Action and other alternatives analyzed.

This EA draws upon information compiled in the Grand Junction Resource Area RMP (BLM 1987) and the Bangs Canyon Special Recreation Management Area Plan (BLM 1999).

3.1.1 Elements Not Affected

The following elements, identified as not being present or not affected are not being brought forward for additional analysis in this EA:

Resource	Rationale
Prime or Unique Farmlands	There are no farmlands of unique value within the proposed action vicinity.
Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas	There are no designated Wilderness Areas or Wilderness Study Areas in the immediate vicinity of the proposed project.
Areas of Critical Environmental Concern	There are no ACECs in the immediate vicinity of the proposed project.
Geology	This project would not impact any unique geologic resources.
Land Status/Realty Authorizations	The only right-of-way (ROW) in the project area is the CDOT ROW for Highway 141 (serial Nos. COD-052499 and COC-05816). With the coordination with CDOT and application for a State Highway Access Permit, no impacts to the CDOT ROW are anticipated.
Minerals	Mineral resources would not be impacted by this proposal.
Range Management	Project design features (cattleguard and wire gate) would accommodate current and anticipated future range management operations.
Wild Horse and Burros	There are no wild horses and burros within the Bangs Management Area.
Fire/Fuels	No direct impact on fire/fuels management. Improved access would help

	with fire suppression in the area.
Wastes, Hazardous or Solid	Proposed Action and Alternative A adequately mitigate impacts

3.1.2 Past, Present, Reasonably Foreseeable Actions

NEPA requires federal agencies to consider the cumulative effects of proposals under their review. Cumulative effects are defined in the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations 40 CFR §1508.7 as “...the impact on the environment that results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions regardless of what agency...or person undertakes such other actions.” The CEQ states that the “cumulative effects analyses should be conducted on the scale of human communities, landscapes, watersheds, or airsheds” using the concept of “project impact zone” or more simply put, the area that might be affected by the proposed action. The area that may be affected by this project includes the 5th code watershed that contains the project area. To assess past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions that may occur within the affected area a review of GJFO NEPA log and our field office GIS data was completed. The following list includes all past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions known to the BLM that may occur within the affected area:

Past Actions:

- Livestock Grazing
- Rights-of-Way: Highway 141, power lines, telephone lines, and fiber optic lines

Present Actions:

- Ongoing implementation of Bangs Canyon Management Plan
- Management of Special Recreation Permits for commercial mountain bike and 4x4 tours and instructional courses, big game, and mountain lion hunting outfitters
- Livestock grazing
- Rights-of-Way: Highway 141, power lines, telephone lines, and fiber optic lines.

Reasonably Foreseeable Actions:

- Improvements for recreation access across Hwy 141 and across East Creek on the southeast side of Hwy 141 to accommodate better recreation route connectivity between the Grand Junction Field Office and Dominguez Escalante National Conservation Area. This could include parking/staging areas and a recreation trail along the highway right-of-way to access a bridge over East Creek.
- Closure of the existing small pull-off/parking area immediately north of the Hwy 141 bridge over East Creek following completion of both the new highway/trail access point and completion of a highway crossing and trail access on the southeast side of Hwy 141.
- CDOT closure of the existing access road immediately southwest of the Hwy 141 bridge over East Creek.
- Future agency management actions to meet growing demand for OHV recreation associated with general population growth and to address changing recreation technology (e.g. increased popularity of UTVs), and user demographics (e.g. aging population).
- Future agency management actions to meet growing demand for close-to-home opportunities for all types of recreation.
- Continued livestock grazing in the project area

This list of past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions are considered in the cumulative effects analysis included in sections 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5 below.

Table 1– Potentially Impacted Resources

Resources	Not Present On Location	No Impact	Potentially Impacted	Mitigation Necessary	BLM Evaluator Initial & Date	Comments
PHYSICAL RESOURCES						
Air and Climate	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ND 8/14/14	
Water (surface & subsurface, floodplains)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ND 8/14/14	
Soils	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ND 8/14/14	
Geological/Mineral Resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	DSG 11/19/13	
BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES						
Special Status Plants	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ARL 11/1/13	Alt B alignment recommended to avoid impacts
Special Status Wildlife	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	HLP 10/3/14	
Migratory Birds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	HLP 10/3/14	
Other Important Wildlife Habitat	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	HLP 10/3/14	
Vegetation, Forestry	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	JM 1/6/15	
Invasive, Non-native Species	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	MT 1/24/14	
Wetlands/Riparian Zones	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	CS 1/2/14	
HERITAGE RESOURCES AND HUMAN ENV.						
Cultural or Historical	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NFC 11/14/14	Route B preferred. Consultation is not complete.
Paleontological	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	DSG 11/19/13	No pre-construction survey is required.
Tribal & American Indian	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	NFC	Route B

Table 1– Potentially Impacted Resources

Resources	Not Present On Location	No Impact	Potentially Impacted	Mitigation Necessary	BLM Evaluator Initial & Date	Comments
Religious Concerns					11/14/14	preferred. Consultation is not complete.
Visual Resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	CPP 11/4/13	
Social/Economic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	CPP 11/4/13	
Transportation and Access	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	CPP 11/0/13	
Wastes, Hazardous or Solid	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	AK 11/21/13	PA adequately mitigates
LAND RESOURCES						
Recreation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	CPP 11/4/13	
Special Designations (ACEC, SMAs, WSR)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	CPP 11/4/13	
Wilderness & Wilderness Characteristics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	AW 7/21/15	
Range Management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	JM1/6/15	
Wild Horse and Burros	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	JRD 12/17/14	
Land Tenure, ROW, Other Uses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	RBL 1/5/15	
Fire/Fuels	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	JP 10/25/13	This access would help with possible fire suppression.

3.2 PHYSICAL RESOURCES

3.2.1 Air Quality and Climate Change

Current Conditions:

Air quality in the project area is typical of undeveloped regions in the western United States. No designated Class I airsheds are located within Mesa County. The primary sources of air pollutants in the region are fugitive dust from the desert surrounding the planning area, unpaved roads and streets, seasonal sanding for winter travel, motor vehicles, and wood-burning stove emissions. Seasonal wildfires throughout the western U. S. may also contribute to air pollutants and regional haze. The ambient pollutant levels are usually near or below measurable limits, except for high short-term increases in PM10 levels (primarily wind-blown dust), ozone, and carbon monoxide. Within the Rocky Mountain region, occasional peak ozone levels are relatively high, but are of unknown origin. Elevated concentrations may be the result of long-range transport from urban areas, subsidence of stratospheric ozone or photochemical reactions with natural hydrocarbons. Representative monitoring of air quality in the general area indicates that the existing air quality is well within acceptable standards.

The EPA General Conformity regulations require that an analysis (as well as a possible formal conformity determination) be performed for federally sponsored or funded actions in non-attainment areas and in designated maintenance areas when the total direct and indirect net air pollutant emissions (or their precursors) exceed specified levels. The Clean Air Act conformity regulations do not apply because the GJFO is not within a non-attainment or a maintenance area.

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Under the no-action alternative, no additional road construction would occur. No direct or indirect impacts to air quality or climate would result.

Cumulative Effects:

Cumulative effects to air quality and climate are not anticipated from the no action alternative as no new surface disturbance would occur and recreational activities in the area would utilize current travel management infrastructure.

Proposed Action

Direct and Indirect Effects: No lasting impacts to air quality are anticipated with successful implementation of the Proposed Action as described in section 2.2.1. Short term localized reductions in air quality may be associated with fugitive dust production resulting from 0.46 acres of surface disturbance associated with new construction and recreational use (25% fewer acres than Alternative A). Fugitive dust (PM10) levels would return to baseline conditions within a few hours of surface disturbing actions. Negative cumulative impacts to air quality are not anticipated under this alternative given current travel management regulations and implementation of appropriate design, placement, construction, and maintenance of routes. However, the Proposed Action would result in 25% less disturbance which would reduce potential for fugitive dust production when compared to Alternative A.

Cumulative Effects:

Cumulative effects would be the same as Alternative A.

Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: No lasting impacts to air quality are anticipated with successful implementation of the Alternative A. Short term localized reductions in air quality may be associated with fugitive dust production resulting from 0.53 acres of surface disturbance associated with new construction and recreational use. Fugitive dust (PM10) levels would return to baseline conditions within a few hours of surface disturbing actions. Negative cumulative impacts to air quality are not anticipated given current travel management regulations and implementation of appropriate design, placement, construction, and maintenance of routes.

Cumulative Effects:

If use were to increase substantially in the Bangs Canyon area, it may result in elevated production of fugitive dust from some areas (specifically those soils derived from shale parent material). However, much of the soils in the area are derived from sandstone and are not substantial sources of fugitive dust.

3.2.2 Soils (includes a finding on Standard 1)

Current Conditions:

Soils in the project area are developing in sandstone and shale sediments of the Dakota Sandstone and Burrow Canyon formations. Table 3.2.2-1 lists affected soil mapping units and important physical and engineering properties identified in a level III soil survey conducted by NRCS in Mesa County, Colorado. Typically, soils with shallow depth to bedrock (< 20-inches), minimal surface layer organic material content and structure, soil textures that are more easily detached and eroded (sand, loamy sand, very fine sandy loam, fine sandy loam, silty clay, or clay), or occur on slopes over 35 % represent higher risk of erosion and soil loss.

Table 3.2.2-1: Affected soil mapping units

Soil Unit Name (#)	USDA Surface Soil Texture	Hazard of erosion on roads and trails	Hazard of erosion off-road and off-trails	Suitability for roads (natural surface)	Affected Area (acres) assuming disturbance width of 120 inches.
27—Rock outcrop-Biedsaw complex, 25 to 65 percent slopes	Rock outcrop-unweathered bedrock Biedsaw-very cobbly clay loam	Severe	Severe to Very Severe	Poorly suited as a result of slope, rock fragments and low strength	Proposed Action (Route B): 0.46 acres Alternative A: 0.53 acres
45-Blackston very gravelly sandy clay loam	Very gravelly sandy clay loam	moderate	Slight	Poorly suited as a result of slope	Alternatives A and B: 0.00006 acres

Ratings in the column “hazard of erosion on roads and trails” are based on the soil erosion factor K, slope, and content of rock fragments. The ratings apply to un-surfaced roads and trails. The hazard is described as slight, moderate, or severe. A rating of “slight” indicates that little or no erosion is likely; “moderate” indicates that some erosion is likely, that the roads or trails may require occasional maintenance, and that simple erosion-control measures are needed; and

“severe” indicates that substantial erosion is expected, that the roads or trails require frequent maintenance, and that costly erosion-control measures are needed (NRCS 2007).

Ratings in the column “hazard of off-road or off-trail erosion” are based on slope and on soil erosion factor K. The soil loss is caused by sheet or rill erosion in off-road or off-trail areas where 50-75 percent of the surface has been exposed by logging, grazing, mining, or other kinds of disturbance. The hazard is described as slight, moderate, severe, or very severe. A rating of “slight” indicates that erosion is unlikely under ordinary climatic conditions; “moderate” indicates that some erosion is likely and that erosion-control measures may be needed; “severe” indicates that erosion is very likely and that erosion-control measures, including revegetation of bare areas, are advised; and “very severe” indicates that substantial erosion is expected, loss of soil productivity and off-site damage are likely, and erosion-control measures are costly and generally impractical (NRCS 2007).

The BLM conducted a formal land health assessment (LHA) in the Glade Park area (which includes the project area) in 2012. Results from this assessment indicate soils to be meeting Public Land Health Standard 1 for soils within almost all of the project area. However, the overall rating for the project area was “not meeting” primarily due to heavy livestock use, lack of native vegetation, and abundance of weeds. The LHA further summarizes that erosion appears to be functioning within the natural range of variability for the soil types.

No Action

Direct and Indirect Effects: The proposed motorized route would not be constructed. Use of the existing trail system would continue as Erosion problems resulting from existing routes would continue to be mitigated to the fullest extent practicable through implementation of BMPs outlined in the BLMs Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) for the Bangs Canyon Area (EPA SWPPP Permit No. COR10CA9F). No changes to the current finding for Public Land Health Standard 1 would result from the no-action alternative.

Cumulative Effects:

The Bangs Canyon area may receive increased recreational usage with a growing community. In the absence of additional motorized travel routes, user created routes could develop in areas poorly suited for these land uses. As a result soil erosion and soil loss could occur at rates above what is naturally expected for soil types in the Bangs Canyon area.

Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The Proposed Action would result in construction of approximately 0.38 miles (0.46 acres) of new road and reclamation of a portion of the existing singletrack trail, representing approximately 0.044 acres (950 feet by 2.0 feet). Reclamation of approximately 0.044 acres of existing singletrack would help reduce erosion from that area and eliminate future use of unsustainable portions of the route. As outlined in table 3.2.2-1 above, the Proposed Action would create new surface disturbance on soils identified as having severe erosion potential on un-surfaced roads and severe to very severe erosion potential off-road. Surface disturbance associated with route construction would directly impact soils through removal of soil stabilizing agents and altering natural drainage patterns causing increased erosion and soil loss from and adjacent to the route. However, because the proposed route would be designed to

maintain a level of surface roughness (using rock) appropriate to restrict use to only high clearance 4x4s, UTVs, ATVs, or motorcycles, erosion from and adjacent to the route could be minimized. Likewise, successful implementation of BMPs outlined in the BLMs SWPPP (EPA SWPPP Permit No. COR10CA9F) would further mitigate erosion and soil loss. As is typical with any new surface disturbance, some level of increased erosion from disturbed areas would persist although the severity of those impacts would be minimized through design features, BMPs, and maintenance. Therefore, erosion and soil loss can be minimized to the extent that Public Land Health Standard 1 continues to be met within the project area.

Cumulative Effects:

Under the Proposed Action it is anticipated that the Bangs Canyon area would receive higher use, and damage to designated travel infrastructure may result, leaving soil and other resource values at greater risk of degradation. Furthermore, the current level of maintenance for existing travel routes in the Bangs Canyon appears to be at maximum capacity with various erosion and drainage problems remaining unaddressed. Construction of additional travel routes would create additional maintenance workload and reduce the ability of BLM to properly maintain all of the routes. Public Land Health Standard 1 would continue to be met with successful implementation of BMPs outlined in the SWPPP, adequate maintenance of existing and proposed routes occurs, and enforcement of travel management rules and regulations curtailing unauthorized route development or uses (e.g. ATVs on single track, Jeeps on ATV trails).

Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts associated with the Proposed Action would be similar to those outlined under the Proposed Action. However, under Alternative A, 0.53 acres of surface disturbance would result (0.12 acres more than the Proposed Action). Reclamation of approximately 0.08 acres (1,700 feet by 2.0 feet) of existing singletrack would help reduce erosion from that area and eliminate future use of unsustainable portions of the route.

Cumulative Effects:

Cumulative impacts from Alternative A would be the same as those identified under the Proposed Action.

3.2.3 Water (surface and groundwater, floodplains) (includes a finding on Standard 5)

Current conditions:

Both of the proposed trail segments are situated within water quality stream segment six of the Lower Gunnison River Basin (COGULG06). More specifically, the proposed trail connector is within the East Creek watershed. East Creek is a perennial tributary to the Gunnison River near Whitewater, Colorado (although flow in East Creek may cease during periods of extended drought). Minimum standards for physical and biological, as well as numeric standards for inorganic and metals are identified in Regulation No. 35 Classifications and Numeric Standards for Lower Colorado River Basin (CDPHE 2014).

The 2012 CDPHE-WQCC Regulation No. 93 Section 303d List of Impaired Waters and Monitoring and Evaluation List, was reviewed to determine if Gunnison River Basin stream segment six was listed (CDPHE 2012). Stream segment six was not identified in Regulation

No. 93. Thus, it is currently assumed that water quality is meeting Public Land Health Standard 5.

The Proposed Action and Alternative A are located in upland areas away from any floodplains. There also are no seeps or springs located near the Proposed Action.

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Under the No Action alternative, no new surface disturbing activities would be authorized. Use of the existing singletrack route would continue and erosion issues with the non-sustainable portions would persist. Erosion from the singletrack route is not anticipated to measurably impact water quality in East Creek given the existing buffer width is greater than 100 feet and disturbance width is typically only 24 inches. Water quality in East Creek would continue to meet state water quality standards under the No Action Alternative.

Cumulative Effects:

The Bangs Canyon area may receive increased recreational usage with a growing community. In the absence of additional motorized travel routes, user created routes could develop in areas poorly suited for these land uses. As a result soil erosion and sedimentation rates to area water ways could be elevated above natural rates ultimately reducing water quality.

Proposed Action

Direct and Indirect Effects: As outlined in the soils section, the Proposed Action would result in construction of 0.38 miles of new road resulting in an estimated surface disturbance of 0.46 acres. The Proposed Action would also include rehabilitation of a portion of an existing singletrack route which would reduce soil erosion and sedimentation from approximately 0.044 acres (950 feet by 2.0 feet). New surface disturbance would occur on soils identified as having severe erosion potential on un-surfaced roads and soils identified as having severe to very severe erosion potential off-road (see table 3.2.2-1 in soils section). The Proposed Action would also result in surface disturbance on steeper slopes that typically have higher erosion potential than shallower slopes. Increased erosion from disturbance on steeper slopes would elevate potential water quality degradation associated with road construction and use. In areas where disturbance would include soil movement, water quality could be reduced as potential soil erosion and sedimentation to area drainages would be elevated due to removal of soil stabilizing agents and altering natural drainage patterns. In general, a route with greater tread width would result in more surface disturbance and thus represent greater potential to impact soil and water resources both from the route itself as well as from areas adjacent to route (impacts from drainage from route). Successful implementation of BMPs outlined in the BLMs SWPPP (EPA SWPPP Permit No. COR10CA9F) would help mitigate erosion and soil loss in these areas. However, some level of increased erosion from disturbed areas would persist. Overall, with implementation of BMPs outlined in the Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan and commitment to maintenance of all travel routes in the Bangs Canyon area, erosion and soil loss can be minimized to the extent that Public Land Health Standard 5 continues to be met.

The Proposed Action and Alternative A are located in upland areas and would not directly or indirectly affect a floodplain or alter its flood hazard. There are no seeps or springs near the Proposed Action, and there are no potential groundwater impacts identified.

Cumulative Effects:

With the proposed action it is anticipated that the Bangs Canyon area would receive higher use, and damage to designated travel infrastructure may result, leaving water quality and other resource values at greater risk of degradation. Furthermore, the current level of maintenance for existing travel routes in the Bangs Canyon area appears to be at maximum capacity with various erosion and drainage problems remaining unaddressed. Construction of additional travel routes would create additional maintenance workload and reduce the ability of BLM to properly maintain all of the routes. Public Land Health Standard 5 would continue to be met with successful implementation of BMPs outlined in the SWPPP, if adequate maintenance of existing and proposed routes occurs, and enforcement of travel management rules and regulations curtailing unauthorized route development or uses (e.g. ATVs on single track, Jeeps on ATV trails).

Alternative A:

Impacts associated with the Alternative A would be similar to those outlined under the Proposed Action. However, under Alternative A, 0.53 acres of surface disturbance would result (0.12 acres more than the Proposed Action). Most of the proposed construction would occur on bedrock outcrops leaving little potential for soil erosion from the Route A alignment. Reclamation of approximately 0.08 acres (1,700 feet by 2.0 feet) of existing singletrack would reduce impacts to water quality by reducing erosion from that area and eliminating future use of unsustainable portions of the route.

Cumulative Effects:

Cumulative impacts of Alternative A would be the same as those identified under the Proposed Action.

3.3 BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES

3.3.1 Invasive, Non-native Species

Current Conditions:

The Bangs Canyon and Tabequache Trail were inventoried for noxious weeds in the early 2000s by BLM weed crews. Russian knapweed was the primary weed found in isolated and small infestations along roads and at pond sites. Most of these weeds have been treated by BLM crews or contractors. No known infestations occur along the proposed routes (A or B).

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Since access is already existing (but not legal), the no action alternative actually makes it more difficult to manage from a weed perspective because it includes both private and BLM jurisdiction. More coordination would be needed to effectively manage the whole trail system.

Cumulative Effects:

Transportation routes that cross public and private lands are more difficult to manage from a weed perspective. This is a short route compared to most, but if it were added to the

transportation system, there could be a slight increase in effects when added to the rest of the routes with mixed jurisdiction.

Proposed Action and Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Either the proposed action or Alternative A would enhance weed management in the area. The connector would become part of the official travel system, and thus included in periodic inventory and treatment of weeds. Connecting the Tabeguache to Highway 141 would greatly improve BLM weed crew access to the southern portion of the Bangs area, and eliminate the need to travel the entire distance from Little Park road.

The initial construction would have some opportunity to introduce weeds (mostly annuals) due to the disturbance, but this would be mitigated by cleaning the equipment before construction and by follow-up reclamation or treatments following trail construction.

Cumulative Effects:

Proposed Action and Alternative A: The expected cumulative effects are minimal because this route is short, and it does not cross through a large area of weeds.

3.3.2 Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Species (includes a finding on Standard 4)

Current conditions:

The project area is known to contain the Colorado hookless cactus. A rare plant survey was conducted in 2013 by BLM staff. During the survey Colorado hookless cacti were found, and a minor reroute of Route A was proposed to avoid effects to the cactus. No other rare plants were recorded during the survey, however the project area contains suitable habitat for the Naturita milkvetch, and Grand Junction milkvetch. A follow-up field visit was done by BLM staff in November 2013, and an alternate route (Route B) was proposed to further protect resources. Route A and B alignments incorporate recommendations based on survey results to minimize impacts, and ensure avoidance of individual cacti, with the Proposed Action (Route B) alignment providing the greatest avoidance buffer.

The area where the trail connection is proposed is within a desert bighorn sheep production area, wintering area, and adjacent to a water source for this species (East Creek). The area is also mapped as a Bald Eagle Winter Concentration Area; however there are no large cottonwoods or other suitable roost locations along the trail alignment. The closest suitable habitat is along the Gunnison River, adjacent to Highway 141 and is not expected to be impacted by management of this trail system. Gunnison Sage-grouse do not occur within the Bangs Canyon area, nor is the area believed to be suitable or potential habitat for this species. Migratory Birds are likely to use the entire Bangs Canyon area and some of the higher elevation areas through which the Tabeguache Trail currently passes are likely to provide habitat for the BLM sensitive Northern Goshawk, Golden Eagle, and Brewers sparrow.

A Land Health Assessment of the project area was completed in 2012. The project area is meeting Standard 4; however the land immediately to the north (where the existing two track road is located) is not meeting this standard due to heavy concentrations of livestock grazing that have contributed to a depleted native plant community, and a corresponding abundance of weedy

species. The introduction of weeds from adjacent areas could threaten the ability of the project area to meet this standard in the future.

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The No Action Alternative would have no effect on rare plants, desert bighorn sheep, migratory birds or raptors as the connector route would not be constructed. Livestock grazing and hiking would continue. The Land Health status would not be expected to change under this alternative.

Cumulative Effects:

No cumulative effects would be anticipated from the No Action Alternative.

Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The proposed alignment (Route B) provides a 70-100 meter buffer from the nearest recorded Colorado hookless cactus, and completely avoids of the occupied cacti habitat. While direct impacts are not anticipated, the direct and indirect effects from this alternative could include the inadvertent destruction of individual Colorado hookless cactus if surveys missed any cacti in the project alignment, an increase in weed spread due to motorized activity, and increases in dust generation that could affect pollinator species, and ultimately the pollination and reproduction of the cacti. Follow-up field verification of survey results would reduce the chance of unrecorded cacti being within the route alignment, and sensitive areas could be flagged to ensure construction activities avoided these areas. With the implementation of the previous two conservation measures potential impacts to the cacti could be avoided. Under this alternative a portion of the existing singletrack would remain open for foot and bicycle travel. While impacts from foot travel to rare plants are less than that of motorized use due to less dust being generated, the foot traffic could add to the risk of weed spread, and would increase habitat fragmentation.

This alternative provides a shorter, more direct route to Highway 141, thus would subject fewer acres of land to potential weed and dust impacts. Follow-up surveys were done in 2014, and no cacti were found. If construction does not take place prior to the spring of 2015, follow-up surveys may be necessary to verify the absence of cacti. If any rare plants are recorded, realignment may be required to ensure avoidance of individual plants.

The creation of a loop trail from a route that was a dead end route may result in increased use of the Tabeguache Trail over time, although the relationship between direct increases in use and changes in patterns of use (e.g., visitors able to complete one through-trip vs two trips to complete an out-and-back) are difficult to predict and would be monitored. If increased trail use occurs, it could lead to an increase in displacement of sensitive wildlife species including Desert Bighorn sheep. Post-construction monitoring and adaptive management would help mitigate these potential impacts.

This alternative has the potential to negatively impact Land Health if it results in decreased desert bighorn sheep habitat suitability through displacement.

Cumulative Effects:

The recent designation of the adjacent Dominguez-Escalante NCA could increase usage of the proposed Tabeguache connector trail as well as the adjacent habitat (just to the south of the trail), over time, as the NCA becomes more of a destination. Increased recreational use could lead to a decline in habitat quality and an increase in displacement across populations for Special Status Species.

Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The proposed Route A alignment buffers recorded Colorado hookless cactus by approximately 20 meters. Direct and indirect effects from this alternative would be similar to the Proposed Action (Route B.) However, impacts would likely be greater as the route alignment is much closer to the cacti. Under this alternative the existing singletrack would be closed and naturalized, and only one route would be open for motorized vehicles, bicycles, and foot travel. This alternative would decrease habitat fragmentation, and potential weed spread.

Direct impacts to special status wildlife as a result of this alternative would likely be minimal. However, as described above, the relationship between direct increases in use and changes in patterns of use (e.g., visitors able to complete one through-trip vs two trips to complete an out-and-back) are difficult to predict and would be monitored. The creation of a loop trail from a route that was a dead end route may result in increased use of the Tabeguache Trail over time. If use does increase, it could lead to an increase in displacement of sensitive wildlife species including Desert Bighorn sheep. These impacts would be most detrimental to Desert Bighorn sheep in lambing season (Late January to March for this population) and in the summer months when desert bighorn sheep could be displaced away from watering areas. This disturbance could result in decreased reproductive success and survival of individuals. Post-construction monitoring and adaptive management would help mitigate these potential impacts.

This alternative would have the potential to negatively impact Land Health if it results in weed spread, and weeds were not treated; or if this alternative resulted in decreased desert bighorn sheep habitat suitability through displacement.

Cumulative Effects:

The recent designation of the adjacent Dominguez-Escalante NCA could increase usage of the proposed Tabeguache connector trail as well as the adjacent habitat (just to the south of the trail), over time, as the NCA becomes more of a destination. Increased recreational use could lead to a decline in habitat quality and an increase in displacement across populations for Special Status Species.

3.3.3 Vegetation (grasslands, forest management) (includes a finding on Standard 3)

Current conditions:

The following table lists plant communities and the dominant plant species for the ecological sites or woodland types as associated with the proposed action. An Ecological Site Inventory (ESI) was completed for the area in 1995. The majority of the vegetative communities on the mesas were in a mid seral stage whereas the canyons and pinon/juniper dominated areas were in a late seral stage. Apparent Trend was static in 1991 and 2007 and upward in 2001. Field notes indicate fourwing saltbush has good vigor with seedlings present. Livestock use in the area has

been minimal in the recent past. Forbs have remained about the same.

TABLE 3.3.3-1: PLANT COMMUNITIES AND DOMINANT PLANT SPECIES FOR ECOLOGICAL SITES OR WOODLAND TYPES

ECOLOGICAL SITE / WOODLAND TYPE	PLANT COMMUNITY APPEARANCE	PREDOMINANT PLANT SPECIES IN THE PLANT COMMUNITY
Semidesert juniper	Scattered pinon/juniper with shrub and grass understory	Galleta, Wyoming big sagebrush, needleandthread, saline wildrye, Indian ricegrass, blue grama, bottlebrush squirreltail, shadscale, Wyoming big sagebrush, broom snakeweed and low rabbitbrush
Loamy salted desert	Shrub grassland	Shadscale, Gardner saltbush, globemallow, Indian paintbrush, sego lilly, galleta, needleand thread, Indian ricegrass and squirreltail.

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Under the No-Action alternative, no new surface disturbing activities would be authorized. The No Action Alternative would have no effect on vegetation and/or forest management as the connector route would not be constructed. The Land Health status for vegetation would not be expected to change under this alternative.

Cumulative Effects:

No cumulative effects would be anticipated from the No Action Alternative.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard 3 for vegetation plant communities: The chart below projects the acreage meeting the standard over a ten year period.

Table 3.3.3-2

Allotment	Proposed Action	
	Acres Achieving	Acres Not Achieving
Round Knob	3892	0

Proposed Action and Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The proposed action is to construct approximately 0.34 miles (1,800 feet) of primitive road on BLM-managed lands. Alternative A would involve the construction of 0.39 miles of primitive road. Both alternatives would initially impact vegetation resources by removing existing plants for the road construction. However, due to the size of the project there would be negligible impacts to the vegetation and forest management resources from the proposed action and Alternative A.

Cumulative Effects:

No cumulative effects would be anticipated from the proposed action and Alternative A to vegetation resources.

Finding on the Public Land Health Standard 3 for vegetation plant communities: The chart below projects the acreage meeting the standard over a ten year period.

Table 3.3.3-3

Allotment	Proposed Action	
	Acres Achieving	Acres Not Achieving
Round Knob	3892	0

3.3.4 Wetlands & Riparian Zones (includes a finding on Standard 2)

Current conditions:

The project area contains riparian habitat associated with East Creek which is located to the south of the proposed route. East Creek parallels Highway 141 in this location and is located between the highway and the proposed route. The extent and condition of the riparian zone on East Creek in the project location has been limited by the existing highway and has also been influence to some extent by livestock grazing and recreation use.

Riparian plants that occur in this riparian system include: *Populus deltoids var. wislizenii* (Rio-Grand cottonwood), *Populus acuminata [angustifolia × deltoides]* (lanceleaf cottonwood), *Salix exigua* (sandbar willow), and *Equisetum arvense (horsetaili)*. *Eleocharis R. Br* (Spike rush), *Juncus balticus* (Baltic rush), and *Tamarix ramosissima* (tamarisk).

Public Land Health Standard 2:

Proper Functioning Condition (PFC) assessments for East Creek were completed in 2007 and 2011. This segment of the creek was found to be meeting PFC guidelines during both of the assessments. The primary factors found to be influencing the riparian extent and health were the proximity to the highway, water diversions, and historic vertical down cutting of the banks.

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Under this alternative the connector route would not be built and surface disturbance from constructing the route, impacts from use of the route, and impacts from maintenance of the route would not occur.

Public Land Health Standard 2: Under this alternative PLHS 2 for riparian systems would continue to be met on the adjacent reach of East Creek.

Cumulative Effects:

There would be no new cumulative effects to the riparian zone associated with this project. Ongoing impacts from the close proximity of Highway 141 would remain unchanged. Changes in impacts from recreation use would be minimal. Ongoing use from hikers would likely continue at current levels.

Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The Proposed Action (Route B) would have no direct impacts on the riparian zone along East Creek located in the project area. The creek crosses under Highway 141

at approximately 225 feet from the turn off from the intersection of Highway 141 and the Tabeguache Connector. The construction of the highway crossing and roadside trail (which lies in the CDOT right of way for Hwy 141, and crosses BLM-managed land for approximately 60 feet), will include a retaining wall that is set back a minimum of 20 ft from the creek. The retaining wall will be along the southeast side of the highway. Indirect impacts to the riparian zone could result during construction, maintenance, and use due to the close proximity of the creek to the proposed trail. Approximately 500 feet of the proposed route near the intersection with Highway 141 would be located 20 to 50 feet from the creek. Both of the routes cross drainages that tie into East Creek directly to the south of the proposed routes. The smaller drainage that is crossed by the Proposed Action alignment (Route B) would likely transport less sediment to the riparian zone than the drainage that is crossed by the Alternative A alignment (Route A). Sediment transport to the riparian zone from the Proposed Action would be reduced by proper construction techniques that carefully controlled the disposal of excess soil. Minimizing placement of soil in or near drainages would reduce sediment transport to the riparian zone. Broadcasting excess soil on the uphill side of the trail would also reduce sediment loading to the riparian zone.

Indirect effects on wetland and riparian areas from the proposed action could include sediment transport off of disturbed surfaces during and following construction if the route was not properly constructed and maintained. Depositing excess sediment away from drainages and reducing down slope broadcasting of sediment would decrease sediment transport to the creek and impacts to the associated riparian zone. Proper design and maintenance of the route would reduce long-term impacts. Increased sediment transport into the riparian area is expected to be slightly elevated during construction of the route. Reducing sediment transport and runoff from the route would reduce the potential for bank erosion and deposition of sediment that may impact rushes, sedges, and other shallow rooted grasses and forbs.

Closing a portion of the existing singletrack trail would reduce potential sediment loading into East Creek, however, the remaining singletrack segment left open in this alternative may continue to contribute to sediment loading into the East Creek riparian area.

Public Land Health Standard 2: Under this alternative PLHS 2 for riparian systems would continue to be met on the adjacent reach of East Creek.

Cumulative Effects:

Cumulative effects associated with the Proposed Action would be negligible and would be similar to those described for the current conditions, because the impacts would be short-term (1-5 years) and would occur immediately following construction of the new route. Short-term impacts are expected to be associated with sediment transport from disturbed areas to the riparian area. Long-term impacts are expected to be low with proper route construction and maintenance.

Alternative A

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts on the East Creek riparian zone would be similar to those described under the Proposed Action. The closer proximity of Route A to East Creek (on the north side), compared to Route B, would likely result in slightly more sediment loading into the riparian area during and immediately following construction. Over the long term the larger

watershed that is crossed by the Alternative A alignment (Route A) would likely transport more sediment to the riparian zone than the drainage that is crossed by the Proposed Action alignment (Route B).

Closing the entire length of the existing singletrack trail would reduce potential sediment loading into East Creek.

Public Land Health Standard 2: Under this alternative PLHS 2 for riparian systems would continue to be met on the adjacent reach of East Creek.

Cumulative Effects:

Cumulative effects associated with Alternative A would be similar to those described above for the Proposed Action.

3.3.5 Wildlife (includes fish, aquatic and terrestrial) (includes a finding on Standard 3)

Current conditions:

Primary species of concern in this area are big game, mule deer, and elk. Other species likely to occur include fox, mountain lion, black bear, turkey, numerous small mammals, reptiles, and resident birds. The Bangs Canyon area contains a resident herd of mule deer and is also mapped as severe winter range and a winter concentration area for the species.

A Land Health Assessment of the Bangs area was completed in 2012. The Bangs Canyon area is mostly meeting Standard 3, with a few areas meeting with problems or not meeting. Those areas in Bangs Canyon that were not meeting were documented as having heavy elk grazing use.

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The No Action Alternative would have no effect on wildlife as the connector route would not be constructed. The Land Health status would not be expected to change under this alternative.

Cumulative Effects:

No cumulative effects would be anticipated from the No Action Alternative.

Proposed Action and Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Direct impacts to wildlife species from either alternative A or B are not expected. The relationship between direct increases in use and changes in patterns of use (e.g., visitors able to complete one through-trip vs two trips to complete an out-and-back) are difficult to predict and would be monitored. If use does increase, indirect impacts from increased recreational use as a result of the creation of a loop trail from a route that was a dead end route has the potential to negatively impact mule deer and other wildlife species through displacement and increased disturbance. These impacts are expected to be most detrimental in winter months, when energy reserves for most wildlife species are at their lowest and increased energy expenditure as a result of displacement and disturbance can lead to death.

This alternative has the potential to negatively impact Land Health if it results in decreased wildlife habitat suitability.

Cumulative Effects: The recent designation of the adjacent Dominguez-Escalante NCA could increase usage of the proposed Tabeguache connector trail as well as the adjacent habitat (just to the south of the trail), over time, as the NCA becomes more of a destination. Increased recreational use could lead to a decline in wildlife habitat quality and an increase in displacement across populations.

3.4 HERITAGE RESOURCES AND HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

3.4.1 Cultural Resources

Current Conditions:

The BLM manages cultural resources on public lands in accordance with the Antiquities Act of 1906, National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, and various other laws and Executive Orders. The management process is also governed by the Colorado BLM's Protocol with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), implementing the BLM's National Programmatic Agreement with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. Section 106 of the NHPA applies to consideration of the presence of and effect to cultural resources on both public and private lands in the area of potential effect (APE).

A BLM archaeologist conducted a file search for the proposed connector, as well as for the 17-mile segment of the Tabeguache Trail from the trailhead at Little Park Road to the proposed connector, as well as the proposed highway crossing and roadside trail. A Class III cultural resources inventory was completed in 2012 by Grand River Institute (BLM GJFO CRIR 1113-01/ OAHF Doc. No. ME.LM.R816) for the proposed connector. One site, 5ME718 which is a prehistoric sheltered camp with rock art was located in the APE for Alternative A (Route A). This site has been determined to be officially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Site 5ME6217 which is a prehistoric sheltered lithic site was located within the APE for the Proposed Action (Route B). This site has been determined "needs data" for listing on the NRHP.

The singletrack proposed for remaining open under the Proposed Action, and for being closed under Alternative A, was also surveyed by Grand River Institute under BLM GJFO CRIR 1113-01/ OAHF Doc. No. ME.LM.R816. Two additional sites were located along the singletrack trail—5ME19588, a prehistoric sheltered camp determined eligible to the NRHP, and 5ME6218, a prehistoric rock art panel determined eligible for listing on the NRHP.

Prior to this project, only five percent of the 17-mile length of the Tabeguache Trail from Little Park Road to the proposed connector had been surveyed to current standards by portions of project numbers BLM GJFO CRIR 1093-10, 1198-16, 1199-21, 8302-01, 15804-01, 1102-14, 1003-08, 1005-31, 1006-02, 1006-04, 14506-02, 1108-01, 1009-04, 1109-01, 1510-01, 1011-20, 1013-12, and 14513-01. Table 3.4.1-1 below summarizes the 15 known sites along the 17-mile northern segment of the Tabeguache Trail. In addition, five prehistoric isolated finds have been located along the trail (5ME4397, 5ME5368, 5ME5370, 5ME13014, and 5ME16762). In-field

survey work has now been completed on the remainder of the 17-mile length of the Trail and consultation with the SHPO is ongoing.

The proposed highway crossing and roadside trail has been surveyed to current standards by BLM GJFO CRIRs 1100-19, 1110-07, and 1113-01. No cultural resources were located along this portion of the proposed trail.

**Table 3.4.1-1
Previously Recorded Sites Along the Northern 17 Miles of the Tabeguache Trail**

Site number	Site type	Eligibility	Cultural Affiliation
5ME.323	Prehistoric Open Camp	Field Needs Data	Fremont
5ME.324	Prehistoric Open Camp	Field Eligible	Fremont
5ME.858	Prehistoric Open Lithic	Field Not Eligible	Unknown Native American
5ME.929	Historic Jewett Ranch	Field Needs Data	Euroamerican
5ME.4206	Prehistoric Open Lithic	Field Needs Data	Unknown Native American
5ME.4208	Prehistoric Open Lithic	Field Not Eligible	Unknown Native American
5ME.4212	Prehistoric Open Lithic	Field Needs Data	Unknown Native American
5ME.4273	Prehistoric Open Lithic	Field Not Eligible	Unknown Native American
5ME.4274	Prehistoric Open Lithic	Field Needs Data	Unknown Native American
5ME.4278	Prehistoric Open Lithic	Field Needs Data	Unknown Native American
5ME.11922	Prehistoric Open Camp	Officially Not Eligible	Unknown Native American
5ME.13009	Prehistoric Open Camp	Officially Needs Data	Unknown Native American
5ME.14287	Prehistoric Sheltered Camp	Officially Needs Data	Unknown Native American
5ME.15371	Prehistoric Open Lithic	Officially Not Eligible	Unknown Native American
5ME.18324	Historic Road	Officially Not Eligible	Euroamerican

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The connector would not be authorized, and use of the Tabeguache Trail from Little Park Road to the turn-around near the proposed connector would remain the same or similar. No impacts to cultural resources near the proposed connector would occur.

Cumulative Effects:

The connector would not be authorized, and use of the Tabeguache Trail from Little Park Road to the turn-around near the proposed connector would remain the same or similar. No impacts to cultural resources near the proposed connector would occur.

Proposed Action (Route B):

Direct and Indirect Effects: If Route B is selected, site 5ME6217, determined needs data for listing on the NRHP, may be indirectly impacted by creating easier access to the site. This site is somewhat hidden from view, and cultural deposits (if there are any) would not be directly affected by the trail construction. Impacts occur when 1) construction and use of the trail disturbs intact cultural deposits; 2) the trail connector introduces a visual aspect that affect the integrity of the site; and 3) the proposed trail connector creates easier access to the site, increasing the chance of unauthorized collection and vandalism.

Leaving the lower portion of the existing singletrack trail open would allow continued access to sites 5ME6218 and 5ME19588. Impacts are more likely at the rock art site (5ME6218), as it is easily visible and recognizable from the trail. Impacts to rock art sites occur when visitors touch,

scratch, or vandalize petroglyphs. Impacts to 5ME19588 could occur through soil disturbance and possibly vandalism or looting as users stray off-trail into the alcove site.

Although the relationship between direct increases in use and changes in patterns of use (e.g., visitors able to complete one through-trip vs two trips to complete an out-and-back) are difficult to predict, they would be monitored and compared against current visitation estimates. If the Proposed Action does change use of the entire 17-mile route of the Tabeguache Trail from Little Park Road to Highway 141, there could be indirect impacts to cultural resources along the existing route by increasing access and use.

Cumulative Effects:

In addition to the impacts mentioned under direct and indirect effects, the continued maintenance and use of the Tabeguache Trail and the connector would incrementally increase damage to sites through vehicular access and surface disturbance. This could create accelerated rates of erosion and crushing and movement of artifacts, causing further damage even after the connector is constructed.

Alternative A (Route A):

Direct and Indirect Effects: If the proposed Alternative A is selected, site 5ME718, which has been determined eligible for listing on the NRHP, would be impacted. Impacts occur when 1) construction and use of the trail disturbs intact cultural deposits; 2) the trail connector introduces a visual aspect that affect the integrity of the site; and 3) the proposed trail connector creates easier access to the site, increasing the chance of unauthorized collection and vandalism.

Closing the entire length of the existing single-track would restrict access to sites 5ME6218 and 5ME19588, thereby protecting them. Because the Proposed Action and Alternative A both distance users from these sites, they would be less visible from the trail, and therefore are less likely to suffer from visitation and the impacts noted above. However, it is still possible that users could stray off trail to visit 5ME6218 and cause impacts to the site.

Indirect impacts to cultural resources along the entire 17-mile route of the Tabeguache Trail from Little Park Road to Highway 141 would be the same as those described for the Proposed Action.

Cumulative Effects:

In addition to the impacts mentioned under direct and indirect effects, the continued maintenance and use of the Tabeguache Trail and the connector would incrementally increase damage to sites through vehicular access and surface disturbance. This could create accelerated rates of erosion and crushing and movement of artifacts, causing further damage even after the connector is constructed.

3.4.2 Paleontological Resources

Current Conditions:

The BLM GIS paleontological site database was reviewed and revealed there are no known vertebrate or invertebrate fossil sites within one mile of either proposed route A or B. The surface geology of the area impacted by both proposed connector routes is composed of the

Cretaceous age Burro Canyon and Dakota Formations. Both of these geologic units have a moderate potential to contain fossilized dinosaur bones or tracks, and in this region are classified by the BLM as Class 3 using the Potential Fossil Yield Classification (PFYC) system (IM 2008-009).

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Neither route would be constructed, so no new paleontological sites would be found, nor damaged.

Cumulative Effects: There would be no additional paleontological knowledge gained, and there would be no additional negative impact to paleontological resources in the area.

Proposed Action and Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: If paleontological resources are present within the route corridors, they could be discovered during construction of the new route, then removed, and studied and/or curated at a museum. They could also be accidentally impacted by equipment during construction.

Cumulative Effects:

If new paleontological sites are found, they would increase the knowledge of paleontological resources within the region. If fossil resources are damaged, it would add to unknown damages occurring to paleontological resources in the region.

3.4.3 Tribal and Native American Religious Concerns

Current Conditions:

American Indian religious concerns are legislatively considered under several acts and Executive Orders, namely the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 (PL 95-341), the Native American Graves Environmental Assessment Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (PL 101-601), and Executive Order 13007 (1996; Indian Sacred Sites). In summary, these require, in concert with other provisions such as those found in the NHPA and ARPA, that the federal government carefully and proactively take into consideration traditional and religious Native American culture and life and ensure, to the degree possible, that access to sacred sites, the treatment of human remains, the possession of sacred items, the conduct of traditional religious practices, and the preservation of important cultural properties are considered and not unduly infringed upon. In some cases, these concerns are directly related to “historic properties” and “archaeological resources”. In some cases elements of the landscape without archaeological or other human material remains may be involved. Identification of these concerns is normally completed during the land use planning efforts, reference to existing studies, or via direct consultation. Tribal consultation was initiated in the spring of 2013 and is ongoing.

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: None known to the agency.

Cumulative Effects:

There are no impacts known to the agency.

Proposed Action

The Ute have a generalized concept of spiritual significance that is not easily transferred to Western models or definitions. As such the BLM recognizes that they have identified sites that are of concern because of their association with Ute occupation of the area as part of their traditional lands. The Tabeguache Trail is possibly in part or fully an historic Ute trail. Therefore, in accordance with Section 101(d)(6)(B) and Section 110 of the NHPA, the BLM will consult with Indian tribes that attach traditional religious and cultural significance to historic properties that may be affected by this undertaking. The BLM will also consult with Indian tribes regarding the nature of the Tabeguache Trail as a possible Ute trail, and any interpretive materials proposed for this route will be consulted on with interested Indian tribes. The BLM will consult with tribes on the monitoring and mitigation plan for sites found along the Tabeguache Trail after inventory is complete.

Cumulative Effects:

Cumulative effects would be the same as direct and indirect effects.

Alternative A

Direct and Indirect Effects: Effects would be the same as Proposed Action.

Cumulative Effects:

Cumulative effects would be the same as Proposed Action.

3.4.4 Visual Resources

Current Conditions:

The area in which the project is proposed is managed with VRM Class II objectives. Under VRM Class II objectives, the existing character of the landscape should be retained. The level of change to the landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen, but should not attract attention.

The visual resource inventory (VRI) for the area was updated in 2009. The overall VRI rating is Class II and III, high and moderate valued scenic resources. The project area is located adjacent to Colorado Hwy 141, the Unaweep Tabeguache Scenic and Historic Byway.

Currently, there is a pull-out off the highway that is used for parking by non-motorized recreation users.

The lower part of the project would be visible from Hwy 141.

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: There are none known to the agency.

Cumulative Effects:

No cumulative effects are expected.

Proposed Action and Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Since both the Proposed Action and Alternative A would use the same alignment adjacent to Hwy 141, the effects of both alternatives would be similar. The proposed action would replace the existing parking area with a new access onto Hwy 141. The visual contrast of the new access points would be similar to the existing parking areas on either side of the highway. The new trail beyond the highway access would add a new line to the existing landscape. Since the intent is to limit use on the new trail to four-wheel drive, high clearance vehicles, the new trail would not use standard road construction techniques (e.g. cut and fill). As a result the new line created by the trail would not create a strong contrast within the existing landscape.

The proposed project would be visible by both southbound and northbound traffic. Southbound traffic is starting to enter that part of East Creek where the road follows the creek and has several sharp turns. As a result the attention of drivers is focused more on the road than on the surrounding landscape. At normal driving speeds, the project would be visible for approximately 30 seconds. The project is visible for northbound traffic as vehicles are leaving the narrow part of East Creek Canyon. From this direction, cottonwood trees hide most of the trail. Like the eastbound traffic, the trail would only be visible for approximately 30 seconds at normal driving speeds.

Combined, the low level of contrast created by the new trail and the short viewing time from the highway, the new trail would be visible, but would not attract attention and changes to the existing landscape would be low.

Cumulative Effects: Due to the confined nature of the landscape (the narrow canyon along East Creek) BLM does not anticipate additional developments in the area. As such, no cumulative effects are anticipated.

3.4.5 Social, Economic, Environmental Justice

Current Conditions:

The project area is located in Mesa County, which has a population of approximately 147,544. Grand Junction, Colorado, with a population of 59,899, is the closest large city, and the regional hub of banking, health care, retail trade, and government services in western Colorado and eastern Utah, according to the Census estimates (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Additional important industries in all of these Western Colorado counties include tourism, energy services, ranching, and fruit and vegetable farming. Tourism in the counties focuses on outdoor recreation activities, including hunting, fishing, rafting, kayaking, bicycling, hiking, and skiing.

Between 1990 and 2000, the rate of population growth in Mesa County was slightly lower than statewide and regional growth rates. During this time, Colorado's population increased 31 percent, the population of Northwest Colorado increased 29 percent and Mesa County's population increased 25 percent (from 93,145 to 116,255). This trend reversed between 2000 and 2010 and the rate of population growth in Mesa County exceeded statewide and regional averages. Over the decade, Colorado's population increased 17 percent, the population of Northwest Colorado increased 24 percent and Mesa County's population increased 26 percent (to 146,723) (Census Bureau, 1991; 2001 and 2011a).

The Colorado Department of Local Affairs (CDOLA) projects moderate growth in Mesa County in coming years. Between 2010 and 2020, Colorado's population is projected to increase 19 percent, Northwest Colorado's population is projected to increase 22 percent and Mesa County's population is projected to increase 17 percent (to 171,581) (CDOLA, 2012a).

Personal income measures the income that individuals receive through earnings, asset ownership and transfer receipts (*i.e.* income received for services not currently rendered). Earnings, which include proprietor, self-employment and wage income, typically comprise a large portion of personal income. In 2010 earnings contributed 69 percent to per-capita personal income in Colorado, 62 percent in Northwest Colorado and 59 percent in Mesa County. Investment income, or dividends and interest and rent, accounted for 18 percent of per-capita personal income in Colorado and 21 percent in Northwest Colorado and Mesa County. Transfer receipts, which include retirement and pension benefits, disability and unemployment insurance benefits, medical payments and veterans' benefits, accounted for 13 percent of per-capita personal income in Colorado, 16 percent in Northwest Colorado and 20 percent in Mesa County (Bureau of Economic Analysis - BEA, 2012).

Between 2000 and 2010, per-capita personal income grew more rapidly in Northwest Colorado and Mesa County than Colorado as a whole. During this time, per-capita personal income increased from \$33,977 to \$42,451 in Colorado (25 percent increase), from \$27,110 to \$36,582 in Northwest Colorado and from \$25,565 to \$34,281 (34 percent increase) in Mesa County (BEA, 2012).

Travel and recreation-based tourism also contribute to employment in Mesa County. The travel industry is not represented by a single industrial sector, but includes businesses in several industries, primarily the Accommodation and Food Services, Transportation and Retail sectors. According to a 2012 study commissioned by the Colorado Tourism Office, the total economic impacts of travel spending by overnight visitors to Mesa County increased from \$143 million in 2000 to \$252.6 million in 2011. The employment supported by this spending increased from 2,400 jobs in 2000 to 2,870 jobs in 2011. During this time, employment related to travel spending accounted for approximately 5 percent of Mesa County employment. In 2011 annual earnings in the travel industry averaged \$19,268 in Mesa County (Dean Runyan Associates, 2012).

Property tax, sales and use tax and intergovernmental transfers are major sources of revenue to Mesa County government. Between 2006 and 2011 sales and use tax accounted for an average of 20 percent and property taxes accounted for an average of 17 percent of annual county revenues. Total revenues to Mesa County government increased from \$141 million in 2006 to \$177.3 million in 2010. Due to contracting economic conditions, county revenues fell to \$150 million in 2011. In recent years, increases in property tax and intergovernmental revenues have offset losses in sales tax and other revenue sources (Mesa County, 2012).

No Action:

Under the No Action the proposed connection route would not be constructed or available for use. Recreational users would have to continue to use the existing trail as an out and back instead

of as a loop trail. Possible increased visitation and associated expenditures in surrounding communities would not be realized under this alternative. However, revenue generation associated with the project is expected to be low due to the small scope of the project and the limited construction costs.

The absence of this long-distance motorized recreation opportunity could indirectly result in additional recreational use, potential crowding, and negative user interactions elsewhere on public lands.

Cumulative Effects:

Cumulative effects associated with the No Action are expected to be negligible. Cumulative social impacts may result if demand for motorized recreation increases and additional trail development opportunities are not offered, or if other appropriate actions for managing increased use do not occur.

Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: All of the socioeconomic impacts associated with the project are expected to occur within Mesa County. Construction of the proposed route would likely be completed by BLM employees or by volunteers from interested user groups. No new jobs are expected to be created solely in relation to construction or maintenance of the trail. Construction of the connector route may increase visitor use in the project area due to the expansion of existing opportunities, but use is not anticipated to increase dramatically. Currently five percent of trail users are estimated to travel the full distance of the existing route. Low use on the entire route is likely related to the remoteness and rugged character of the route.

The proposed project may generate some indirect economic benefits to local and regional businesses through the purchase of goods and services, if out of area visitor use increases on the trail. Directly related regional benefits are expected to be minimal and would be most likely to occur in Grand Junction, where most local recreation users live. As a result of the limited scope and costs associated with the project, the Proposed Action is not expected to impact recreation-based tourism or travel-related employment in the Project Area.

The Proposed Action may generate some increases in sales and use tax revenue to Mesa County through the sales of taxable goods either purchased in the county or purchased elsewhere and imported into the county. Most sales and use tax revenue would result from retail expenditures by recreation users living in the Grand Junction area.

Cumulative Effects:

No substantial cumulative effects associated with this project are anticipated. Visitation to the area may increase slightly but most of the increased visitation is expected to be from local recreational users.

Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Impacts under the proposed action would be similar to those that are described for the Proposed Action.

Cumulative Effects:

The cumulative effects would be the same as those described under the Proposed Action.

3.4.6 Transportation/Access

Current Conditions:

Current public access to BLM-administered public lands in the immediate vicinity of the trail proposals is limited to non-motorized access. The Tabeguache Trail is a two-track, full-sized vehicle trail from Little Park Road to where it enters private land 0.3 miles from Colorado State Hwy 141. The final 0.3 miles is a single-track trail that is designated for non-motorized use. There is no public access across the private land for OHVs (motorcycles, ATVs and jeeps) to access Hwy 141. As a result, any OHV that travels along the Tabeguache Trail from Little Park Road must turn around at the private property and return to Little Park Road (approximately 17 miles).

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Under the No Action alternative, the new connector trail would not be constructed and the current access would not change. Through-access to Hwy 141 from the Tabeguache Trail starting at Little Park Road would be limited to non-motorized recreational users. OHV recreational users would continue to lack through access to Hwy 141 via the Tabeguache Trail from Little Park Road.

Cumulative Effects:

There are no cumulative effects known to the agency.

Proposed Action and Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Under the Proposed Action and Alternative A, there would be new OHV access to BLM-administered public lands north of Hwy 141. Until CDOT authorizes a highway crossing, and access trails to that crossing are constructed, not all OHV traffic could utilize the proposed access. Since the proposed access would connect BLM-administered public lands with a Colorado State highway, only licensed OHVs that can legally travel on a state highway could use the access. In the short term, OHVs would have to turn around at Hwy 141 and return to Little Park Road, or transport their OHV on a licensed vehicle using the small existing parking lot on the north side of Hwy 141. Licensed OHVs (e.g. motorcycles and jeeps) could travel on Hwy 141, and therefore use the new access. Once constructed, the proposed highway crossing and roadside trail on the southeast side of the highway would provide full access for all OHVs. Completion of this phase of the project would fulfill the overall project objective of providing an OHV travel connection between the Bangs Canyon SRMA and the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area.

Building a new access that connects to a state highway where unlicensed OHVs are not permitted could create a safety hazard along the highway. ATVs and unlicensed motorcycles may choose to ride along or across the highway rather than return to Little Park Road. The proposed signage along Little Park Road, at trailheads off of Little Park Road, and along the Tabeguache Trail would reduce the safety hazard by informing the public that the motorized

access at Hwy 141 is limited to licensed vehicles. This impact would be short-term, or non-existent, depending on the timing of completion of the two phases of the project.

Cumulative Effects:

There are no cumulative effects known to the agency.

3.5 LAND RESOURCES

3.5.1 Recreation

Current Conditions:

As described above in section 1.1, the proposed project area lies within the Bangs Canyon SRMA. Specifically, the proposed project is in Area 5 where management is focused on remote backcountry recreation opportunities for both motorized and non-motorized recreationists. Public recreation access between the Tabeguache Trail and the north side of Hwy 141 using motorized vehicles is limited because the existing trail crosses private property and is blocked by a locked gate. Non-motorized recreationists currently have access to Hwy 141 on a singletrack trail that remains on BLM-managed public lands.

The BLM does not have any traffic counter data for routes in the immediate vicinity of the proposed route. Data from a traffic counter on the Tabeguache Trail near the Bangs Canyon Trailhead has indicated an average of 4,760 visitors annually between 2012 and 2014. Due to the remote and rugged character of the trail, and the absence of a through-route for OHVs, fewer than five percent of those visitors (primarily OHV and mountain bike recreationists) likely travel the 17 miles along the Tabeguache Trail to the area of the proposed trail connection. Those OHV recreationists that do travel the length of this route must backtrack to Little Park Road. The Tabeguache Trail is generally 96 to 120 inches in width, with some wider sections and trail braiding where vehicle passing occurs, or trail users seek alternate routes around obstacles.

The existing singletrack trail is used by a small number of hikers (likely fewer than 400 annually) who access the trail from a small undeveloped pullout on the northwest side of Hwy 141 near the East Creek bridge. These hikers typically use this access point to explore Bangs Canyon and other areas adjacent to the Tabeguache Trail. Besides the Tabeguache Trail, there are no designated trails or developed recreation facilities in the immediate project area. Undeveloped dispersed camping is allowed in the area, but does not commonly occur.

Public comments expressed during project scoping, and received during the public comment period for the EA, indicated a desire by recreationists for the singletrack to remain open. Commenters stated that the singletrack would separate motorized and non-motorized recreationists, increasing safety and user experiences. However, BLM resource specialists identified impacts to cultural resources, plants, soil and water that would result from leaving the singletrack open.

Fall and winter big game and mountain lion hunting occurs in the area, especially in the mid- to upper-elevations of the Tabeguache Trail. In this area, the BLM GJFO administers special recreation permits (SRPs) for two commercial big game hunting outfitters (Biggerstaff Guides and Outfitting, and Ladder Canyon Outfitters), and six mountain lion hunting outfitters

(Alameno Outfitters, Biggerstaff Guides and Outfitters, Backcountry Outfitters, Cat Track Outfitters, Mark Davies Outfitting, and Travis Krukenburg Outfitting).

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Under this alternative, the BLM and its partners would not build a new full-sized vehicle route, and recreationists using motorized vehicles would not have the opportunity to access Hwy 141 via the Tabeguache Trail. The recreation use patterns and opportunities described above would likely continue in the immediate vicinity of the proposed project. Infrequent use of the area by motorized vehicles would preserve the quiet, uncrowded setting that some non-motorized recreationists currently seek in the area.

Not constructing a connector route for OHVs would likely compromise long-term cooperative partnerships that recreation user groups have built between one another and with the BLM.

The absence of this long-distance motorized recreation opportunity could indirectly result in additional recreational use, potential crowding, and negative user interactions elsewhere on public lands.

Cumulative Effects: This alternative, coupled with a general increase in demand for OHV recreation opportunities, would likely result in greater potential for crowding and increases in negative user interactions in other locations, and unmet demand for long-distance OHV recreation opportunities in the Bangs Canyon SRMA.

Proposed Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: Implementation of the proposed action would provide improved motorized OHV recreation opportunities in the Bangs Canyon SRMA and would indirectly provide access to additional recreation opportunities in adjacent public lands in the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area and Uncompahgre National Forest. Four-wheel drive enthusiasts, ATV and UTV riders, and off-highway motorcyclists would gain a long sought-after trail connection between Little Park Road and Hwy 141, which would also be more consistent with how the Tabeguache Trail is described (e.g., as a long-distance, 142-mile route connecting Grand Junction and Montrose). This route, and the access it provides to adjacent public lands, would provide new long-distance, technically challenging OHV recreation opportunities.

In the short term, OHV recreationists using licensed vehicles would be able to legally travel to or from the Tabeguache Trail on either side of Hwy 141 (GJFO or DENCA). Unlicensed OHVs would gain similar access pending approval and development of the proposed highway crossing. Short-term illegal use of unlicensed OHVs on Hwy 141 could occur from recreationists that do not heed the planned travel restriction signs.

Motorized OHV recreation would likely increase to some degree on the Tabeguache Trail due to the new opportunities and access provided by the route; however, this is somewhat difficult to predict due to the potential change in pattern of use (e.g. some number of out-and-back trips may convert to one-way trips with construction of the new connector.) Adjacent OHV trails would likely experience a corresponding increase in use. A spike in use would likely occur during the first year or so of the trail's opening as curious recreationists explore the new route. In the

longer term, a moderate increase in use compared to current conditions is expected. The remote, rugged and technical nature of this route would likely preclude large increases in use. It is not expected that overall use of the Tabeguache Trail between Little Park Road and Hwy 141 would exceed visitor use numbers currently estimated near the Bangs Canyon Trailhead (4,760). The proposed visitor use monitoring would help to evaluate the change in use. The planned monitoring and adaptive management described in the proposed action would help protect the recreation and resource protection objectives for the SRMA. The addition of a new motorized recreation opportunity in the area could disperse use and reduce crowding on other trails in the vicinity. Conversely, overall use on area trails could increase slightly due to attention drawn by a new recreation opportunity.

The new connection to Hwy 141 would likely change the remoteness setting characteristics of the area and use patterns for both motorized and non-motorized recreationists. The portion of the Tabeguache Trail that is currently the most difficult to legally access using a motorized vehicle via public lands (i.e. the trail's terminus at the private property boundary) would be within a short drive or ride from Hwy 141. Following completion of the proposed connector trail, the most remote part of the route for motorized recreationists would be at the midpoint between Little Park Road and Hwy 141 because licensed motorized OHV recreationists could access the trail from either end, instead of only from Little Park Road.

Easier access for motorized vehicles from Hwy 141, along with anticipated increases in use due to the creation of a through route for motorized use, may indirectly alter the recreation setting character, and consequently, the recreation experiences and outcomes that non-motorized recreationists currently seek along and adjacent to the Tabeguache Trail between Little Park Road and Hwy 141. Hikers, equestrians, mountain bikers, and hunters would likely encounter more motorized vehicles and evidence of motorized vehicle use. For these non-motorized recreationists, the sights, sounds and presence of motorized vehicles could diminish non-motorized recreation experiences by potentially compromising opportunities to experience naturalness, solitude, and quietness, or to harvest game. These impacts would be small in scope and limited in extent, and would generally be limited to recreationists using the Tabeguache Trail and/or areas within close proximity of the trail.

Impacts to recreation settings (e.g. solitude, quietness) would be most pronounced for recreationists traveling on the trail itself. These impacts would diminish the further one traveled away from the trail. Sound impacts would depend on the volume and intensity of the sounds as well as the proximity of the recreationist to the trail. The impacts from sound would diminish the further one traveled away from the trail. The extent of sound impacts would also vary depending on topography and vegetation density adjacent to the trail. More heavily vegetated areas, like those along the higher elevation portions of the Tabeguache would absorb more sound than the more sparsely vegetated lower elevation portions of the trail. The rugged and variable topography along the Tabeguache would in some cases absorb or dissipate sounds, and in other cases, amplify or redirect sounds (e.g. echoes off canyon walls). Therefore, the corridor of sound impacts would vary along the length of the trail. In general, sound impacts could be expected within one-quarter mile on either side of the trail. Mountain bikers would be limited to the designated trail, but hikers, equestrians, and hunters could travel off of, and away from the designated route to experience a more natural and/or remote setting.

Additional indirect effects along interior portions of the Tabeguache Trail could include trail braiding or short-cutting, development of social trails and/or scenic pullouts, and impacts from overnight camping (trampling, fire rings, human waste). Monitoring the area for these impacts, and implementing adaptive management to mitigate identified impacts would minimize long-term effects.

The new route would create a more prominent access point to the area that would likely increase use by non-motorized recreationists. The extent of that increase is difficult to predict. It would be important to monitor any physical and social impacts from non-motorized uses of the area. Any future trail or facility development to accommodate non-motorized recreation in the area would require a separate planning process.

As initially evaluated by trail users and BLM Recreation Program staff, the proposed Route B alignment would provide a steeper, more direct and technically challenging trail than Route A, but perhaps with less aesthetic appeal and trail flow than Route A. Route B would be moderately more difficult to construct than Route A.

Leaving a portion of the existing singletrack trail open would provide an alternative route to separate motorized and non-motorized users on the steepest portion of the new route. This may decrease concerns about safety on this section by separating users for slightly longer. However, given the anticipated low levels of traffic and low speeds due to the challenging nature of this part of the route, the likelihood of collisions on a shared route would be low. The separate singletrack route would also enhance user experiences on that short section of the route by separating users and reducing the likelihood of negative user interactions at this primary access point where use would probably be most concentrated. Again, the likelihood of congestion on this route is anticipated to be low. The adaptive management strategy prescribed in the proposed action would allow the BLM and its partners to make a more objective determination of the value of separating users along this short section of the route, in balance with protecting natural and cultural resources in the area. If the singletrack were eventually closed, all trail use would be concentrated on the new route, however hikers and equestrians would still be allowed to travel off of the designated route if necessary. Therefore, impacts from this action would be minimal.

Cumulative Effects: This alternative would address the demand for long-distance OHV recreation opportunities in the Bangs Canyon SRMA, and the regional demand for additional OHV recreation opportunities, while lessening the likelihood of crowding and negative user interactions in other locations. This alternative, in combination with ongoing livestock grazing and management actions to address overall increases in demand for public lands recreation, would likely diminish opportunities and experiences sought by some non-motorized recreationists.

Alternative A

Direct and Indirect Effects: The effects on recreation from utilizing Route A instead of Route B would be similar to those described above in the Proposed Action.

The proposed Route A alignment would be less difficult to build than Route B, and would follow a more gradual, natural, and aesthetically appealing trail flow across the landscape.

Closing the entire length of the existing singletrack trail would eliminate a short non-motorized singletrack recreation opportunity. All trail users would be limited to the new full-sized vehicle-width trail. This may increase concerns about visitor safety by decreasing separation between trail users on the steepest portion of the new route. However, given the anticipated low levels of traffic and the low speeds due to the challenging nature of this portion of the route, the likelihood of collisions on a shared route would be low. For some users, hiking, horseback riding or mountain biking on the wider, shared-use trail would be less appealing than using the separate singletrack. There would also be a higher likelihood of negative user interactions on this section of trail where use could be concentrated. However, the likelihood of congestion on this route is anticipated to be low, and the singletrack segment replaced by the new route would be short (750 feet).

Cumulative Effects: Cumulative effects would be similar to those described for the Proposed Action. Closure of the existing singletrack would eliminate a non-motorized singletrack recreation opportunity.

3.5.2 Wild and Scenic Rivers

Current Conditions:

East Creek was inventoried as eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System (NWSRS) in the 2009 Wild and Scenic River Eligibility Report for Bureau of Land Management Grand Junction Field Office. The outstandingly remarkable value (ORV) is geological (primarily focused on Unaweep Canyon upstream of the proposed action).

“East Creek flows east from the Unaweep Divide, through Unaweep Canyon to the Gunnison River, while West Creek flows out of the other end of the canyon to the Dolores River. These creeks originate in the canyon and do not have a source large enough to create a canyon of such magnitude. It is hypothesized that this canyon was carved by one or both of the modern day Gunnison or Colorado Rivers (the present course of the Colorado River through DeBeque Canyon lines up with Unaweep Canyon, and the Gunnison River was thought to enter at Cactus Park), which were rerouted after the second uplift of the Uncompahgre Plateau (Chronic 1980). This has led to the exposure of multiple layers of rock, including the Precambrian basement layer of the Uncompahgre Plateau, and high canyon walls of up to 1000 feet. In addition, the divide located in the middle of the canyon, separating East Creek and West Creek, is rare (Foutz 1994) and Unaweep Canyon is the only canyon in the world with a divide in the middle and a creek flowing out of each end (Ikenberry 2002).”

The tentative classification is recreational due to the proximity of the creek to Hwy 141.

No Action:

Direct and Indirect Effects: There are no impacts known to the agency.

Cumulative Effects:

There are no cumulative effects known to the agency.

Proposed Action and Alternative A:

Direct and Indirect Effects: The Proposed Action and Alternative A would not affect the free-flowing nature of East Creek. Since the ORV (geological) is associated with Unaweep Canyon higher in the watershed, no impact is anticipated. The trail construction could result in sediment reaching the creek. The design features of minimal construction activities and sustainable trail alignment would minimize impacts to the creek's water quality.

Cumulative Effects:

Due to the constricted topography of the area around the proposed action, further development in the area is not anticipated. As such, no cumulative effects to the creek's eligibility for inclusion in the NWSRS are anticipated.

3.5.3 Lands with Wilderness Characteristics

Current Conditions:

BLM's wilderness inventory in this area was completed in 1999, validated in 2009, and updated in 2012. The project area is just outside each of these inventory units for the BLM's Bangs Canyon area, which was inventoried and determined to have wilderness characteristics. The 2012 inventory update concluded, "An inventory was completed by the BLM in 1999 and no changes have occurred to alter the findings. The 1999 findings were validated in 2009 as no new routes; range improvements, rights-of-way or other ground disturbing activities were issued or constructed since the inventory was completed." The 2012 inventory identified 20,434 acres as having wilderness characteristics.

In 2011, the BLM issued a new policy for conducting inventories for lands with wilderness characteristics outside designated wilderness and outside wilderness study areas (WSAs). The new policy (BLM manual 6310) included specific guidance to determine boundaries for inventory areas. Since the 2012 Grand Junction Field Office inventory of the Bangs Canyon area relied on the 2009 review of the 1999 inventory, there are inconsistencies between the boundaries in the 1999 inventory and the guidance for determining boundaries in the 2011 inventory policy, and the BLM has not re-inventoried the broader Bangs area yet under this new guidance. Generally, these inconsistencies are with what should be used for area boundaries.

BLM received comments from the Wilderness Society and Conservation Colorado specifically pointing out these inconsistencies as part of the public comment period for the Grand Junction Field Office Draft Resource Management Plan. These comments suggest the BLM boundary is incorrect based on the new policy. These comments suggest the proper boundary is along Hwy 141 and would include the area of the proposed project. These comments also suggest that a larger area to the south and west also has wilderness characteristics.

The BLM's inventory summarized the uses that are occurring in the inventoried area:

Recreation: Recreational activities occurring within unit boundaries include mountain biking, hiking, backpacking, hunting, driving off-highway vehicles, and horseback riding. A short segment of the 142-mile Tabeguache Trail, an extension of the Colorado Plateau

Mountain Bike Trail System, traverses the inventory unit. This particular segment is rated as difficult and is used by a relatively small number of mountain bike enthusiasts annually. This section of the Tabeguache Trail is also open to motorized vehicles and as with mountain bikes, the recreation use is relatively low.

Grazing: Thirteen stock reservoirs are found within the area's canyon system. There are currently portions of seven range allotments covering the unit, and livestock management continues with a few scattered range developments and access routes.

Rights-of-way: Record search through Legacy Rehost 2000 shows no rights-of-way.

Oil and gas leasing: No leasing has occurred within the unit.

Road Maintenance: Four roads have been cherry-stemmed out of the inventory unit and one route (Tabeguache Trail) bisects the area. This route is an important route for access and connectivity for motorized and non-motorized recreation. These routes may receive maintenance depending on the purpose and need of the route, condition or access issues.

The updated inventory concluded the area appeared natural:

“In conclusion, the natural-appearing portion of the inventory unit consists of several long, remote and seldom-visited canyons and their surrounding mesa tops. The upper ends of the canyons and their tributary side canyons appear entirely natural and pristine. Some of these appear to have never been grazed by livestock. To a great degree, the extreme topographic relief of this area has prevented past surface disturbance.”

The updated inventory described outstanding opportunities for solitude:

“The Bang's Canyon inventory unit offers visitors outstanding opportunities for solitude in many locations throughout the portion of the unit retaining its natural character. The varied topography, including 35 miles of steep-walled, frequently rugged, seldom visited, terrain within the unit's three main and tributary side canyons (Bang's Canyon, West Bang's Canyon, and the canyon of North East Creek), provides outstanding opportunities for visitors to find a secluded place and isolation. The area's overall size, the vegetative screening afforded by the mesa tops and uplands often dense pinyon and juniper woodland, and the riparian vegetation growing among the boulder-strewn canyon bottoms, all contribute to a visitor's ability to locate places where a perception/feeling of being totally alone or remote from others can be found.”

The updated inventory described outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation:

“The Bang's Canyon inventory unit offers visitors outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation in many locations throughout the portion of the unit retaining its natural character. The area's overall size, diversity of wildlife, lush riparian habitats in canyon bottoms, perennial stream flows, steep-walled and boulder-strewn canyon slopes, and other erosional features all contribute to opportunities for recreational activities that require an open, unconfined setting, and which do not demand developed facilities. Hiking, backpacking, camping, sightseeing, photography, and studying nature are primitive and unconfined activity opportunities considered outstanding within the inventory unit.”

Finally, the updated inventory described supplemental values:

The Bang's Canyon inventory unit is described as critically sensitive from a cultural resource standpoint. The area was utilized as long ago as 10,000 years - first by the paleo Indian culture and successively by the cultures commonly referenced as the archaic, Fremont, and Ute. Use was most likely temporal, seasonal, and spread throughout the area. The availability of water/springs and rock shelters in the unit's moderately deep canyons contributed to this use and habitation (considered probable during winter-month periods). The unit's mesas and canyons provided a main travel corridor from the high country of the Uncompahgre Plateau to the lowlands along the Gunnison River. Lithic source material is prevalent in the unit, and a solid quartzite quarry is also present.

From a botanical perspective, the Bang's Canyon inventory unit is home to a host of plants of interest. These include: 1) Colorado hookless cactus (federal listed, threatened); 2) Naturita milkvetch (BLM sensitive); 3) false helleborine (BLM sensitive); 4) osterhout (BLM sensitive); 5) catseye (BLM sensitive); 6) kachina daisy; 7) eastwood monkeyflower; and 8) longflower catseye. The State of Colorado is very interested in these plant species as a part of the Colorado Natural Areas Program. A remnant stand of old, very large pinyon and juniper trees is located at the end of the way extending into the unit on an upper bench of North East Creek.

From a wildlife perspective, the Bang's Canyon inventory unit is home to a host of animals of interest. These include: 1) canyon tree frog (sensitive, but not BLM sensitive); 2) desert bighorn sheep; 3) fringed myotis; 4) Yuma myotis; 5) spotted bat; 6) bald eagle (wintering only, and roosting up Bang's Canyon); 7) osprey (migratory only); 8) northern goshawk (nesting occurring); 9) gray vireo (a Partners in Flight priority species); 10) flamulated owl; and 11) peregrine falcon.

From a fish perspective, the Bang's Canyon inventory unit is home to healthy populations of rainbow trout and dace in the perennial flow of North East Creek. This is somewhat unique for a semi-arid area otherwise devoid of perennial streamflow and resident populations of fish. The eastern portion of the Bang's Canyon inventory unit has a relatively large area of Morrison Formation exposed. This has the potential for additional fossil vertebrate dinosaur sites within the region.

Important to the analysis of this project, and as described in the Purpose and Need sections of this EA, the nature of motorized recreational use along the Tabeguache Trail tends to be out and back rather than one way. Since there is no legal motorized access along Hwy 141, motorized recreational outings typically start and finish at the Bangs Canyon Staging Area along Little Park Road.

Subsequent to the release of this preliminary EA, and the associated comment period, the GJFO released its new Approved Resource Management Plan (ARMP) and Record of Decision (ROD) in August 2015. The new RMP identified the Bangs Canyon unit to be managed to protect its wilderness characteristics (BLM 2015 - ROD, p. 12, BLM 2015 - ARMP, p. 80, 116). It also commits the BLM to maintaining an ongoing inventory to comply with current BLM guidance regarding lands with wilderness characteristics (BLM 2015 - ROD, p. 13, BLM 2015 - ARMP, p. 83). Additionally, the Approved RMP and ROD designates the Tabeguache Trail as a high-

clearance full-sized 4-wheel drive route (BLM 2015 – ARMP, REC-SRMA-MA-04, p. 102). The ARMP and ROD are based on impacts analyzed and disclosed in an Environmental Impact Statement contained in the GJFO Proposed RMP (BLM 2015 – PRMP).

Environmental effects:

Impacts to lands with wilderness characteristics would include any change to the identified characteristics described in the inventory that would result from a proposed action.

No action alternative

Under the no action alternative, the new connector route would not be constructed. As a result, the current use, motorized, mechanized and non-motorized/non-mechanized, would likely continue at current levels. There would be no expected changes to the identified wilderness characteristics.

Proposed Action and Alternative A

Although the project area is currently outside the area found by the BLM to have wilderness characteristics, for the purpose of this analysis, the BLM has included the analysis assumption that wilderness character does in fact exist in the project area. This is not a determination on the inventory submitted; rather, it is an analysis approach to ensure that the BLM decision-maker understands the most substantial impacts possible, and that this impact assessment will remain valid when the inventory is updated in the vicinity of the project area in the future, and to give the decision-maker a realistic opportunity to consider whether this “incomplete information” would materially change the decision.

Under either boundary, recreational use may increase as a result of the proposed action. More visitors would likely use the route to access the area. Motorized users (jeeps, ATVs, motorcycles) traveling between Little Park Road and Hwy 141 would be more common along the Tabeguache Trail. Since the new route would be designed in such a way that typical 4x4 vehicles could not travel on it, the increased vehicle use would be limited to highly capable 4x4 vehicles, ATVs, UTVs, and motorcycles. Even though the number of visitors may increase, the extent of that increase is somewhat difficult to predict due to the potential changes in patterns of use (e.g. some number of out-and-back trips may convert to one-way trips with construction of the new connector), so the impacts to opportunities for solitude may not substantially change. Since current motorized use is typically out and back from Little Park Road, one vehicle could potentially be seen twice by other visitors to the area. Under the Proposed Action, some motorized outings (particularly jeeps and other full sized licensed vehicles) along the Tabeguache Trail would be one way, so one vehicle would likely only be seen once. However, the new route would also allow motorized recreationists to start from highway 141 to access this portion of the Tabeguache Trail. Considering the remote, technically challenging nature of this portion of the Tabeguache trail, and the potential changes in use patterns, the long-term net result would likely be a moderate increase in use, and slightly diminished opportunities for solitude, compared to current conditions. The planned monitoring and adaptive management described in the proposed action would help with ongoing identification and protection the area’s wilderness characteristics.

The proposed action would not change the opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. No recreation facilities would be added and there would be no restrictions on hiking, backpacking, camping, sightseeing, photography, and studying nature.

As disclosed above, using the analysis assumption that wilderness character does in fact exist within the project area, the proposed action would create an additional 0.34 miles of wilderness boundary road for the purposes of lands with wilderness characteristics. Alternative A would create an additional 0.39 miles of wilderness boundary road for the purposes of lands with wilderness characteristics. As such, the size of the area proposed by the public comment would be reduced by the area of the new road. This size reduction would be minor (Route B 0.41 acres and Alternative A 0.48 acres). This would not change the overall acres of the area to less than 5,000 acres and disqualify the area as lands with wilderness characteristics, nor would it meaningfully impact any of the specific supplemental resource values or the quality of the additional acreage to the south and west identified to have wilderness characteristics in public comment.

Under the proposed action, impacts to supplemental values are discussed in other sections of this EA. See the cultural section for impacts to the cultural supplemental values; see the vegetation and sensitive plant section for impacts to botanical supplemental values; see the wildlife section for impacts to wildlife supplemental values; and see the paleontological section for impacts to paleontological supplemental values.

Cumulative Effects:

The construction of the new trail combined with past livestock grazing projects would result in more human development in the area. Since the new trail is short and would be very primitive, the changes to apparent naturalness would be minor. The new access combined with past and projected future recreation demand from a growing population in the Grand Valley could result in more visitors to the area. As discussed in the direct and indirect impacts, the overall potential increase in visitors encountering other visitors could be very low. As such the cumulative effects to opportunities for solitude would also be minor. No other cumulative effects are anticipated.

CHAPTER 4 - CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

4.1 LIST OF PREPARERS AND PARTICIPANTS

INTERDISCIPLINARY REVIEW

NAME	TITLE	AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY
Julia Christiansen	Natural Resource Specialist	Surface Management and Permitting for Oil & Gas
Natalie Clark	Archaeologist	Cultural Resources, Native American Religious Concerns
Michelle Bailey Chris Pipkin Andy Windsor	Outdoor Recreation Supervisor Outdoor Recreation Planner Outdoor Recreation Planner	Access, Transportation, Recreation, VRM, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wilderness, ACECs
Scott Clarke	Range Management Specialist	Vegetation
Jacob Martin	Range Management Specialist	Forestry
Jim Dollerschell	Range Management Specialist	Range, Wild Horse & Burro Act
Scott Gerwe	Geologist	Minerals, Geology, Paleontology
Alan Kraus	Hazardous Materials Specialist	Hazardous Materials
Robin Lacy	Realty Specialist	Land Tenure/Status, Realty Authorizations
Heidi Plank	Wildlife Biologist	T&E Species, Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Terrestrial & Aquatic Wildlife
Anna Lincoln	Ecologist	Land Health Assessment, Range Ecology, Special Status Plant Species
Christina Stark	Assistant Field Manager Resources and Planning/Environmental Coordination	Environmental Justice, Prime & Unique Farmlands, Environmental Coordinator, Riparian and Wetland
Nate Dieterich Paula Belcher	Hydrologist	Soils, Air Quality, Water Quality, Hydrology, Water Rights
Mark Taber	Range Management Specialist	Weed Coordinator, Invasive, Non-Native Species
Lathan Johnson	Fire Ecologist Natural Resource Specialist	Fire Ecology, Fuels Management

4.2 TRIBES, INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, OR AGENCIES CONSULTED

Northern Ute Tribe
Southern Ute Tribe
Ute Mountain Ute Tribe
Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT)
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)
Grand Mesa Jeep Club (GMJC)
Western Slope ATV Association (WSATVA)
Colorado Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition (COHVCO)
Motorcycle Trail Riders Association (MTRA)
Bookcliff Rattlers Motorcycle Club (BRMC)
Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association (COPMOBA)
Grand Valley Trails Alliance (GVTA)
Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Quiet Trails Group (QTG)
Conservation Colorado
Grand Mesa Backcountry Horsemen
Colorado Mountain Club
James McCurter (private land owner)

CHAPTER 5 - REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A

DOI-BLM-CO-130-2013-0042-EA Tabeguache-Hwy 141 Connector Preliminary Environmental Assessment Public Comment Summary and BLM Response

The BLM prepared a Preliminary Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-CO-130-2013-0042-EA and made it available for a 30-day public comment period from February 25, 2015 to March 27, 2015. The BLM extended the comment period was by one week to April 3, 2015. The BLM received a total of 73 comment letters, forms, or emails. Among all of the comments received, including substantive and non-substantive comments, sixty-nine commenters support construction of the trail connector as described by either the proposed action or Alternative A. Four commenters support the trail connection in general, but requested additional mitigation measures to address concerns about potential impacts related to project implementation.

Included below is a summary of substantive comments, followed by the BLM responses to those comments. A comment is considered “substantive” if it suggests the analysis is flawed in a specific way and includes rationale for that assessment. Generally these comments challenge the accuracy of information presented, challenge the adequacy, methodology or assumptions of the environmental or social analysis (with supporting rationale), present new information relevant to the analysis, or present reasonable alternatives (including mitigation) other than those presented in the document. Non-substantive comments include comments expressing a preference or value that don’t include justification or facts to back up the statement, and those types of comments are not considered further in this document.

Complete comment texts are available upon request.

Motorized recreation opportunities

Summary

Motorized recreationists support implementation of the proposed action, and listed the following factors as reasons for their support:

- A connection has been sought since access across private property was blocked approximately 30 years ago. The 1987 GJFO RMP contained an action item to acquire access for motorized vehicles.
- Other access routes from the Tabeguache Trail to Hwy 141 have been assessed, but have proven infeasible.
- The current situation creates a dead end route that requires a long return trip, or trespass across the private property that currently blocks access to Hwy 141.
- The primary objective is making the short connection between the existing Tabeguache Trail and Hwy 141. Whether that connection is via Route A or Route B is not important. The Route B alignment in the proposed action is completely adequate.
- Motorized recreation opportunities enhance the local economy through increased tourism and desirability of the area as a place to live.
- Leaving the existing singletrack trail open would provide a viable alternative route for non-motorized use, unless leaving that route open would result in additional impacts to cultural resources.

- Many motorized recreationists, along with municipal leaders, are ready to support the planning, construction, monitoring and maintenance of the new route should it be authorized.
 - The Grand Mesa Jeep Club and Grand Valley Trails Alliance have offered ongoing support for this project.
 - The Grand Mesa Jeep Club, Thunder Mountain Wheelers, Grand Valley Trails Alliance and Mesa County are committed to assisting with follow-up work required to develop a multiple-use Hwy 141 crossing to provide legal access from the new connector to the southeast side of the highway.

BLM Response

The BLM addresses these comments in its decision to implement the proposed action, with modifications and mitigation measures to address other public comments.

Lands with Wilderness Characteristics

Summary

The commenters are not opposed to the project, but request that the EA incorporate more thorough assessment and analysis of impacts to lands with wilderness characteristics, as well as additional design features and/or mitigation measures to address the following issues and recommendations:

- 1. The BLM’s lands with wilderness characteristics inventory should be updated to align with current BLM policy.**
 - The BLM is required by law to maintain a current inventory of lands with wilderness characteristics.
 - The BLM is required to consider impacts to identified lands with wilderness characteristics.
 - The BLM is required to consider whether to update or conduct a wilderness characteristics inventory when a project that may impact wilderness characteristics is undergoing NEPA analysis.
 - The BLM GJFO updated its lands with wilderness characteristics inventory as part of the RMP revision process.
 - The updated inventory identified a portion of the Bangs Canyon area as meeting the BLM criteria for lands with wilderness characteristics.

- 2. The updated inventory would show the proposed project falling within a lands with wilderness characteristics unit.**
 - The commenters want to ensure that this project does not preclude the BLM from managing the area to protect its wilderness characteristics.
 - The Wilderness Society and Conservation Colorado submitted inventory information to the BLM which suggests a different boundary for the Bangs lands with wilderness characteristics unit based on BLM wilderness characteristics inventory policy.
 - Based on the alternative lands with wilderness characteristics boundary, the proposed trail connection would fall within the Bangs lands with wilderness characteristics unit.

- The BLM has not responded to the alternative inventory information. Consequently, the BLM should not proceed with this EA under the assumption that the proposed project lies outside the lands with wilderness characteristics unit.
- The BLM must disclose, analyze and mitigate potential impacts to lands with wilderness characteristics.
- The EA fails to adequately address likely impacts to lands with wilderness characteristics from increased motorized use, possible illegal incursions, and noise.

3. The analysis did not adequately discuss impacts to opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

- The proposed project could result in indirect impacts to opportunities for solitude and primitive non-motorized recreation due to potential increases in use of the Tabeguache Trail by motorized recreationists.

4. Recommended mitigation measures:

- Limitations on total visitor use, perhaps through a permit system.
- Group size limitations
- Camping restrictions along the Tabeguache Trail
- Reclamation/restoration of undesignated routes

BLM Response

The BLM updated the Lands with Wilderness Characteristics section of the EA (Section 3.5.3) with a more thorough summary of:

- The GJFO's lands with wilderness characteristics inventory history;
- The BLM's new lands with wilderness characteristics policy and inventory guidance (BLM manual 6310);
- Inconsistencies between previously inventoried boundaries and current guidance for determining boundaries;
- The alternative lands with wilderness characteristics boundary recommended by commenters for the Bangs Canyon unit; and
- The findings of the BLM's most recently updated inventory regarding the following eligibility criteria:
 - Uses occurring in the area
 - Naturalness
 - Outstanding opportunities for solitude
 - Opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation
 - Supplemental values

The BLM also updated Section 3.5.3 to include analysis of the proposed project under the assumption that the project area lies within an area possessing wilderness characteristics. This is not a determination on the current inventory status; rather, it is an analysis approach to ensure that the BLM decision-maker understands the most substantial impacts possible, and that the impact assessment will remain valid when the inventory is updated in the vicinity of the project area in the future, and to give the decision-maker a

realistic opportunity to consider whether this “incomplete information” would materially change the decision.

Even under the assumption described above, the analysis in the EA determines that implementing the proposed action would not preclude the BLM from managing the area to protect its wilderness characteristics. The proposed action would not significantly change the area’s wilderness characteristics inventory components for size, uses, naturalness, opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, or supplemental values. (See Section 3.5.3, pages 50 and 51).

This EA now also includes references to the recently released GJFO Approved Resource Management Plan (ARMP) and Record of Decision (ROD) which identifies the Tabeguache Trail between Little Park Road and Hwy 141 for management as a high-clearance full-size vehicle 4x4 route, and also identifies a 19,600 acre Bangs unit to be managed to protect wilderness characteristics. (See Section 3.3.5, p. 50)

The BLM added language to the proposed action in the EA (Section 2.2.1) prescribing the use of best management practices and adaptive management for addressing potential direct and indirect effects to opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. The EA does not prescribe specific monitoring or mitigation protocols, but instead lists potential management actions (including those suggested by commenters), and allows management flexibility for addressing issues as they arise.

Opportunities for primitive recreation

Summary

The commenters are not opposed to the project, but request that the EA incorporate more thorough assessment and analysis of impacts to opportunities for primitive recreation, as well as additional design features and/or mitigation measures to address the following issues and recommendations:

- 1. Projected increases in use along the Tabeguache Trail following project implementation could compromise opportunities for primitive recreation.**
 - The proposed project is within Area 5 of the Bangs Canyon SRMA (1999 Bangs Canyon Management Plan), where management is focused on remote backcountry recreation opportunities.
 - The EA does not discuss the increasing prevalence of UTVs, which could contribute to increased motorized recreation along the Tabeguache Trail.
 - The commenters favor leaving open some, or all, of the existing singletrack trail for non-motorized use to enhance visitor safety and experience.
 - Project proponents who have pledged to support ongoing maintenance and stewardship of the route need training and specific guidance about trail stewardship protocols.
- 2. The EA does not provide adequate resource monitoring, maintenance and mitigation guidance.**
 - The BLM should define a more thorough strategy/protocol for monitoring trail conditions, visitor use patterns, and wildlife resources, and for assessing impacts to both non-motorized and motorized recreationists, opportunities for solitude, and wildlife resources.

- The commenters recommend potential mitigation measures including reclamation/restoration of undesignated routes, visitor number limitations, group size limits, use permits, and camping limitations.
- 3. The EA does not provide adequate baseline visitor use data, and resource condition data.**
- The EA does not include specific estimates of current visitor use on the Tabeguache Trail south of Rough Canyon. Commenters recommend installation of a counter to record baseline visitor use prior to construction of the connector trail. This would provide comparative data for pre- and post-construction trail use. That data could help determine if and when mitigation measures should be implemented to protect opportunities for primitive recreation.

BLM Response

In the Recreation section (Section 3.5.1) of the EA, the BLM describes current recreation management objectives and use patterns in the vicinity of the proposed project, as well as the proposed action's potential direct and indirect effects on opportunities for primitive non-motorized recreation. In Section 3.1.2 the BLM added a reference to the increasing popularity of UTVs.

The BLM revised the proposed action in the EA regarding the existing singletrack. In response to public comment, and impact analysis from BLM resource specialists, the EA proposes an adaptive management strategy that leaves the singletrack open on an interim basis, pending monitoring to determine use patterns and safety conditions on the new route (See Section 2.2.1, page 7). The BLM also updated the impact analysis in the Recreation section (Section 3.5.1) to reflect the effects of the revised proposed action.

The BLM added language to the proposed action in the EA (Section 2.2.1) prescribing the use of best management practices and adaptive management for addressing potential direct and indirect effects to opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. The EA does not prescribe specific monitoring or mitigation protocols, but instead lists potential management actions (including those suggested by commenters), and allows management flexibility for addressing issues as they arise.

The BLM utilized the best available information at the time of the analysis in the preliminary EA. As described in that document, no traffic counter data was available for estimating baseline visitor use. As described in the EA, data from a traffic counter on the Tabeguache Trail near the Bangs Canyon Trailhead has indicated an average of 4,760 visitors annually between 2012 and 2014. Due to the remote and rugged character of the trail, and the absence of a through-route for OHVs, fewer than five percent of those visitors (primarily OHV and mountain bike recreationists) likely travel the 17 miles along the Tabeguache Trail to the area of the proposed trail connection. Motorized OHV recreation would likely increase to some degree on the Tabeguache Trail due to the new opportunities and access provided by the route; however, this is somewhat difficult to predict due to the potential change in pattern of use (e.g. some number of out-and-back trips may convert to one-way trips with construction of the new connector); thus, monitoring is recommended and any mitigation should be informed by the results of that monitoring.

The BLM added text to the EA to prescribe installation of a traffic counter prior to opening of the new route. While this counter will not provide extensive pre-construction visitor use data, it will provide baseline data showing use starting from the initial opening of the new route.

Visitor Safety and Awareness

Summary

The trail/highway intersection that would be created by the proposed project creates safety hazards and administrative challenges for trail users accessing the Tabeguache Trail and/or crossing Highway 141. Those issues should be mitigated. Commenters supported and/or suggested the following measures to enhance visitor safety and awareness:

- Leave open the small existing parking lot on the northwest side of the highway until an engineered highway crossing and access trail is built to provide safe access to a larger parking area on the southeast side of the highway.
- Leave open some, or all, of the existing singletrack trail to separate motorized and non-motorized use, thereby enhancing safety.
- Develop designated pull-out locations along the trail to allow for short-term parking and passing.
- Install a kiosk at the trail entrance with a map, information about trail etiquette, and resource protection.
- Post signage about administrative uses (e.g. livestock grazing) and protocols (e.g. gate management).
- On the first few weekends when the new trail opens, and prior to completion of a highway crossing and access trail, personnel from partner organizations should be onsite to remind users about highway safety concerns, temporary use restrictions for unlicensed vehicles, and future plans for an official highway crossing and access trail on the southeast side of the highway.

BLM Response

Since release of the preliminary EA, the BLM has continued to coordinate with CDOT, Mesa County and the Grand Mesa Jeep Club about plans for the trail/highway intersections and crossing. The BLM added a sentence with this message to the EA at the end of Section 1.4.2.

The BLM revised language in the EA to clarify the timeline and intent for closing the existing parking area on the northwest side of the highway. See Section 2.2.1, page 9, and Section 3.1.2, page 18.

The BLM revised the proposed action in the EA regarding the existing singletrack. In response to public comment, and impact analysis from BLM resource specialists, the EA proposes an adaptive management strategy that leaves the singletrack open on an interim basis, pending monitoring to determine use patterns and safety conditions on the new route (See Section 2.2.1, page 9). The BLM also updated the impact analysis in the Recreation section (Section 3.5.1) to reflect the effects of the revised proposed action.

The BLM added language to the proposed action in the EA (Section 2.2.1) prescribing the use of best management practices and adaptive management for addressing potential direct and indirect effects to visitor safety and awareness. The EA does not prescribe specific monitoring or mitigation protocols, but instead lists potential management actions (including those suggested by commenters), and allows management flexibility for addressing issues as they arise.

Private Property

Summary

The EA does not address the private inholding (Needem Moore Seldom Feed Park) crossed by the Tabeguache Trail between Rough Canyon and Hwy 141. There is no indication about the legal

status of the trail through that property, or whether the landowner was consulted during the analysis of this proposal. Commenters advocate an acquisition or easement to secure long-term public use of this trail segment. In the short-term they suggest posting signs with the following message: “Private Property next ¾ mile, Stay on Road.”

BLM Response

The BLM added text to the EA documenting notification of the landowner (see Section 1.4.1, page 4), and specifying signage installations along the Tabeguache Trail at each end of the private inholding (see Section 2.2.1, page 8.)

**UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
GRAND JUNCTION FIELD OFFICE
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**Tabeguache Trail Connection to Colorado State Highway 141
DOI-BLM-CO-130-2013-0042-EA**

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment, and considering the significance criteria in 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) §1508.27, I have determined that the Proposed Action (Route B) for Tabeguache Trail connector located along Highway 141 in the Environmental Assessment (EA) will not have a significant effect on the human environment. An environmental impact statement is therefore not required.

BACKGROUND

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) prepared an EA which analyzed the effects of constructing approximately 0.34 miles (1,800 feet) of primitive road on BLM-managed lands approximately 1.4 miles southwest of Whitewater, Colorado. The EA considered a range of three alternatives that included a no action alternative (no new construction) to constructing 0.39 miles of new primitive road. See Figure 3 in the EA for a map of the Proposed Action and alternatives. The EA was made available for a 30-day public review on February 25, 2015. The comment period was extended by one week to April 3, 2015. A total of 73 comment letters, forms or emails were received.

Intensity

I have considered the potential intensity/severity of the impacts anticipated from the Tabeguache-Hwy 141 Project decision relative to each of the ten areas suggested for consideration by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). The following findings have been made with regard to each of the ten CEQ considerations:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.

This project would have substantial long-term benefits for motorized Off Highway Vehicles (OHV) recreationists, providing improved access and OHV recreation opportunities in the Bangs Canyon Special Recreation Management Area, and would provide connectivity to OHV recreation opportunities in the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area, and Uncompahgre National Forest. The new route would provide additional access options for weed management and range management. The project may have minor short-term impacts to air quality, visual resources and vegetation, and moderate long-term impacts to soils, water, wildlife, cultural resources, lands with wilderness characteristics and primitive non-motorized recreation opportunities. These impacts are not significant.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health and safety.

The proposed action would provide access to and from Highway 141 for motorized vehicles. This would lessen the likelihood of visitors being stranded on the Tabeguache Trail. It would also lessen emergency response time for emergency medical response incidents or search and rescue operations. Ingress and Egress at the trail/highway intersection would increase the likelihood of collisions at Hwy 141, however, the engineered highway crossing being coordinated between the BLM, Mesa County and Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) would minimize hazards at the intersection. The adaptive management strategy of monitoring use patterns and safety concerns at the beginning of the new route would provide effective risk management options.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity of historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

There are no significant impacts to riparian vegetation, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, or wild and scenic rivers within the project area. The project has been modified to minimize impacts to cultural and historic resources. There are no municipal water supplies in the project area.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The proposed project has been extensively scoped, and a preliminary EA was made available for public comment. All public comments expressed at least conditional support for the proposed project. The BLM modified the EA to address concerns raised in public comments and/or identified by BLM resource specialists in the impact analysis. Therefore the environmental effects are not likely to be controversial.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The analysis in this EA discloses some uncertainty about the indirect effects that would result from the proposed project. For example, it is difficult to predict the extent of potential changes in visitor numbers, or changes to visitor use patterns on the Tabeguache Trail that might result from construction of the proposed connector trail. However, adaptive management strategies described in the EA would provide the BLM and its partners the flexibility to address currently unforeseen risks.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

This decision is like one of many that have previously been made and will continue to be made by BLM responsible officials regarding recreation and travel management on public lands. The decision is within the scope of the Resource Management Plan and is not expected to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or a decision in principle about a future consideration. The BLM recognizes that future facilities (e.g., parking area, access coordination) may be needed to support this proposed action, but those actions are also routine in nature and the process for implementing them successfully is well understood.

7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

BLM resource specialists identified some potential cumulative effects from this project in combination with past, current, and reasonably foreseeable future influences on the project area. The surface disturbance created by the new route, and anticipated increases in use along the Tabeguache Trail, would affect water quality, soil erosion, and special status species, but implementation of best management practices would minimize those effects. Anticipated increases in recreational use of the area could directly and indirectly contribute to cumulative effects on the area's cultural resources and tribal concerns. Ongoing surveys, monitoring, and adaptive management would minimize cumulative impacts to cultural resources. The project would increase overall OHV recreation opportunities while diminishing opportunities for non-motorized recreationists.

Collectively, there are no significant cumulative effects on the environment, either when combined with the effects created by past and concurrent projects, or when combined with the effects from natural changes taking place in the environment or from reasonably foreseeable future projects.

8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.*

In consultation with the Colorado State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), the BLM has determined that the creation of the connector route has the potential to increase direct and/or indirect impacts to cultural resource sites along the northern 17-mile length of the Tabeguache Trail. Although the relationship between direct increases in use and changes in patterns of use (e.g., visitors able to complete one through-trip vs. two trips to complete an out-and-back) are difficult to predict, they would be monitored and compared against current visitation estimates. If the Proposed Action does change use of the 17-mile route of the Tabeguache Trail from Little Park Road to Highway 141, there could be direct and indirect impacts to cultural resources along the existing route by increasing access and use. Sites along the connector route may also be impacted directly or indirectly. In order to mitigate any potential adverse effects to cultural resources, the BLM has entered into a Programmatic Agreement (PA) with the SHPO to incrementally survey the 17-mile northern length of the Tabeguache Trail. Once survey and reporting to SHPO has been completed, the BLM, under the PA and in consultation with interested Native American Tribes and the SHPO, will complete a Treatment Plan to address any potential adverse effects.

9. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

During project scoping the BLM identified the Endangered Species Act listed Colorado Hookless cactus (*Sclerocactus glaucus*) in close proximity to the initial proposed route alignment (Route A). Subsequently, the BLM and its partners identified Route B as an alternative route that avoided direct impacts to the listed cactus. Route B was carried forward in the proposed action thereby reducing impacts to endangered or threatened species or their designated critical habitats.

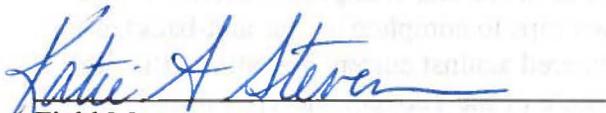
10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The BLM has worked closely with the Colorado Department of Transportation and Mesa County to ensure compliance of this project with State and County regulations. The BLM has submitted a CDOT Highway Access Permit application (137-1) for authorization of the trail connection to Hwy 141. Mesa County is working with CDOT and the BLM to complete the requirements for that permit. Mesa County is also coordinating completion of a CDOT Utility and Special Use Application for the highway access and crossing portion of the project.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

On the basis of the information contained in the EA, and all other information available to me, it is my determination that: 1) the implementation of the Proposed Action or alternatives will not have significant environmental impacts beyond those already addressed in the "Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan," (August 2015); (2) the Proposed Action is in conformance with the Resource Management Plan; and (3) the Proposed Action does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement or a supplement to the existing environmental impact statement is not necessary and will not be prepared.

This finding is based on my consideration of the CEQ criteria for significance (40 CFR §1508.27), both with regard to the context and to the intensity of the impacts described in the EA.


Field Manager
Grand Junction Field Office


Date

**UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
GRAND JUNCTION FIELD OFFICE
2815 H Road, Grand Junction, CO 81506**

**DECISION RECORD
Tabeguache Trail Connection to Colorado State Highway 141
DOI-BLM-CO-130-2013-0042-EA**

DECISION:

I have decided to authorize the Proposed Action (Route B) for the Tabeguache Trail Connector as described in the Environmental Assessment (EA) referenced above. This decision allows construction of a 0.34 mile primitive road connecting the Tabeguache Trail with Colorado State Highway (Hwy) 141 on BLM-managed lands near Whitewater, Colorado. This primitive road will be open to all motorized off-highway vehicles (OHV) capable of navigating the technically challenging route. The connector route will create a through-route for OHV recreationists to travel between Little Park Road and Hwy 141. The decision also allows construction of a roadside OHV trail along 200 feet of Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) right-of-way on the southeast side of Hwy 141, pending final approval from CDOT. Both routes will also be open to non-motorized recreationists. A portion of an existing singletrack trail will continue to be open on an interim basis for non-motorized use.

Extensive public scoping and internal agency scoping was conducted for this project proposal. The BLM scoped the proposed trail connection project with several local trail user groups, environmental groups, other agencies, Native American Tribes, and private land owners. Additionally, the BLM prepared a Preliminary Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-CO-130-2013-0042-EA and made it available for a public comment period. The BLM received a total of 73 comment letters, forms or emails. All of the commenters expressed at least general support for constructing a connector trail to allow OHVs access to or from the Tabeguache Trail and Hwy 141. Several commenters expressed conditional support of the proposed project. The BLM summarized the public comments and responded to them by carrying forward the proposed action with several revisions to address specific comments (see Appendix A). See sections 1.4.1 and 1.4.2 for more details about public and agency scoping for this project proposal.

This office completed an Environmental Assessment and reached a Finding of No Significant Impact. Therefore, an EIS will not be prepared.

RATIONALE:

This decision addresses long-standing management objectives and public interest in improved recreation access between the Bangs Canyon Special Recreation Management Area and Colorado State Highway 141 near Whitewater. Through engaged scoping, broad public involvement and careful planning, the BLM has designed a project that will provide new long-distance recreation opportunities for off-highway vehicles. The new route, and the design features described in the EA, will provide those new OHV recreation opportunities while minimizing impacts to other recreationists, natural resources and cultural resources.

MITIGATION MEASURES\MONITORING:

Project design features are incorporated into the EA's proposed action to address monitoring and mitigation needs.

PROTEST/APPEALS:

This decision shall take effect immediately upon the date it is signed by the Authorized Officer, and shall remain in effect while any appeal is pending unless the Interior Board of Land Appeals issues a stay (43 CFR §2801.10(b)). Any appeal of this decision must follow the procedures set forth in 43 CFR Part 4. Within 30 days of the decision, a notice of appeal must be filed in the office of the Authorized Officer at Grand Junction Field Office, 2815 H Road, Grand Junction, Colorado, 81506. If a statement of reasons for the appeal is not included with the notice, it must be filed with the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of Hearings and Appeals, U.S. Department of the Interior, 801 North Quincy St., Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22203 within 30 days after the notice of appeal is filed with the Authorized Officer.

NAME OF PREPARER: Chris Pipkin

NAME OF ENVIRONMENTAL COORDINATOR: Christina Stark

DATE: 9/9/15

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL:



Grand Junction Field Manager

DATE SIGNED:

September 9, 2015