

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

CO-200-2006-0086 EA

Arkansas River Travel Management Plan

OHV Area Designations

Designation of Roads and Trails

USDI Bureau of Land Management

Royal Gorge Field Office

Fremont, Chaffee, and Custer Counties, Colorado

INTRODUCTION:

The 1996 Royal Gorge Field Office Resource Management Plan (RGFO-RMP) identified the following as long-term land management concerns and agency responsibilities:

- transportation and access
- off-highway vehicle (OHV) use
- associated resource impacts in the Arkansas River geographic area

The original RGFO-RMP designated several OHV open areas and limited OHV travel to existing roads and trails in other portions of the planning area. The OHV limitations and designations emphasized the protection of the following resource values: riparian areas, big game habitat, sensitive species habitat and threatened and endangered species habitat, to name a few.

Population growth, public lands recreation, and OHV travel have increased substantially, since the 1996 publication of the RGFO-RMP ROD, resulting in increased recreational travel, land and resource impacts, and user conflicts. In response to these concerns the Bureau of Land Management Royal Gorge Field Office (BLM-RGFO) initiated the Arkansas River Travel Management Plan and, subsequently, the Arkansas River Travel Management Plan Environmental Assessment (ARTMP-EA) in 2004.

Under the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality for implementation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 an Environmental Assessment (EA) must be prepared. By evaluating the following two actions, the EA determined if the proposed action and reasonable alternatives would cause significant environmental impacts requiring disclosure in an Environmental Impact Statement.

1. Changing OHV open and limited area designations to OHV limited and closed areas (RMP amendment action);
2. Designating individual travel routes and identifying implementation actions within the Arkansas River TMP area (RMP implementation action).

BLM also identified the following new and concentrated uses associated with travel management:

- concentrated target shooting
- an increase in user created roads
- the need for motorized and mechanized access

Concentrated target shooting on public lands in areas experiencing rapid residential growth and increased recreational traffic have resulted in risks to public safety as well as resource damage, exacerbating such issues as public trash dumping.

Areas that are open to OHV travel have experienced growth in user created roads which accelerate soil erosion, cause damage to riparian areas, and fragment vital wildlife habitat. In addition, the demand for motorized and mechanized access (including for trials bikes events and practice riding, and mountain bike trails) has evolved since the time of RGFO-RMP ROD inception

Under the ARTMP-EA, a range of comprehensive travel networks for motorized, mechanized, and non-motorized travel, including a no action alternative and the proposed action (Alternative C) was fully considered. A draft ARTMP-EA and accompanying unsigned Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) were issued for a 45 day public comment period from June 19, 2007 to August 3, 2007. The ID team summarized and responded to the comments received. The summarized comments and accompanying responses are located in Appendix 18 of the ARTMP-EA.

PLAN CONFORMANCE AND CONSISTENCY

The RGFO-RMP Record of Decision (ROD) specified that all lands in the resource area were to be designated in the Federal Register as open, limited or closed. The RGFO-RMP ROD also states that areas experiencing extensive resource damage will be restricted to designated roads and trails. The ARTMP-EA evaluates the impacts of implementing these RGFO-RMP ROD decisions.

The ARTMP-EA evaluated the closure of areas, and the designation of roads and trails in areas experiencing or likely to experience the following:

- habitat fragmentation
- archeological resource damage
- threatened and endangered species impacts
- riparian habitat damage

During the resource evaluations, required by the RGFO-RMP ROD, the RGFO Resource Staff discovered safety and special use requirement issues non-existent during the RMP process and, therefore, not considered in the RMP.

The first issue, concentrated target shooting, was identified by BLM RGFO resource staff and the public as causing resource damage, creating safety and noise issues, and resulting in exclusive recreation use. Since RGFO-RMP ROD approval, the planning area has

experienced increased residential development. This situation has created a serious public safety, noise, and compatible recreation issue for homeowners adjoining two concentrated target shooting areas. The proposed action, identified by the ARTMP-EA, recommends closing these areas to target shooting. Legally licensed hunting in the legitimate pursuit of game in these areas, however, would not be restricted under the proposed action.

The second issue, the need for an open area for trials bike practice, was raised by the trials bike community during the scoping phase. This sport requires riders to move through an ever changing course, based on rider skill, age and ability. As a result, the sport requires areas of hard surface where participants can practice maneuvers under multiple conditions. The proposed action is to designate Turkey Rock (a hard surface less susceptible to erosion and resource damage) for trials bike users. Following the mandate to eliminate resource damaging uses, outlined by the RGFO-RMP ROD, the proposed Arkansas River TMP-EA recommends closing Sand Gulch Open area and limiting the area to designated roads and trails (including limiting Turkey Rock to trials bikes).

The ARTMP-EA analyzed travel management as mandated by the RGFO-RMP ROD. The areas encompassing this plan were inventoried and evaluated for resource damage. The proposed action (Alternative C) provides a balance between public use and resource protection for uses originally evaluated under the RGFO-RMP, and evaluates newly discovered uses and provides recommendations for managing these new uses.

The full administrative record, including the ARTMP-EA that discusses and analyzes the proposed action and alternatives, is available for review at the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Royal Gorge Field Office, 3170 E Main Street, Canon City, Colorado. The ARTMP-EA is also available at the following website address:

http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/rgfo/travel_mgmt/arkansas_river_travel0.html

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT DETERMINATION

Based upon review of the ARTMP-EA and the supporting documents, I have determined that the proposed action Alternative C, will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment (individually or cumulatively) with other actions in the area. No environmental affects meet the definition of significance in context or intensity as defined in 40 CFR 1508.27. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. This finding is based on the context and intensity of the proposal outlined below:

CONTEXT: The 531,736 acre planning area covers the public lands within the 75 mile-long Arkansas River corridor between Canon City, Buena Vista, Colorado and the northern half of Custer County to Westcliff. The area includes 240,555 acres of BLM administered public lands. The public land planning area includes:

- 9,338 acres designated as OHV Open in the Texas Creek area
- 2,016 acres designated as OHV Open in the Grand Canyon Hills area
- 866 acres designated as OHV Open in the Sand Gulch area.

The current travel management regulations for most of the ARTMP area limit OHV travel to existing roads and trails.

Under the Proposed Action (Alternative C) the **OHV Open** designations for all three areas would be changed to **OHV Limited**. The Proposed Action would also establish a small (52 acres) area at Turkey Rock as **OHV Limited to Vehicle Type** for riding trials bikes; a specialized class of motorcycle. In addition, four **OHV Closed** areas currently exist in the ARTMP planning area: Browns Canyon, McIntyre Hills, Upper Grape Creek, and Lower Grape Creek Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). A fifth area with WSA status, High Mesa Grassland Research Natural Area/Instant Study Area (RNA/ISA), is currently designated **OHV Limited**. Under the Proposed Action all four WSAs that are currently **OHV Closed** would continue to be designated and managed as **OHV Closed** areas, and the **OHV Limited** designation for the 680 acres in the High Mesa Grassland RNA/ISA, would be changed to **OHV Closed**, in order to comply with the Interim Management Policy for Lands Under Wilderness Review.

The Proposed Action (Alternative C) would also designate a system of primitive roads and trails in the ARTMP planning area, which will become part of BLM's official transportation system. This action designates the specific routes for motorized and non-motorized use and revises some travel management regulations.

INTENSITY:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse:

The beneficial effects of the Arkansas River Travel Management Plan (ARTMP) include the designation of routes which should dramatically slow the proliferation of user created routes. This would slow the increase in resource damage and habitat fragmentation occurring in this area. It will also provide areas for motorized and non-motorized recreation travel, lessening user conflicts.

Adverse effects include; increased motorized use of existing areas that may result in soil compaction (possibly creating increased erosion in those geographic areas) as well as the potential overuse of limited areas.

2. Degree of effect on public health and safety

The elimination of target shooting at Turkey Rock in Fremont County and on BLM lands south of the town of Salida in Chaffee County will increase public health and safety by preventing fire arm discharges in areas experiencing increasing residential development and other non-shooting recreational use. Also, the designation of roads and trails separates conflicting recreational uses and creates a safer and more enjoyable experience for all users.

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

There are no prime or unique farmlands or wild and scenic rivers in the planning area. However, the area is bounded by several Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), four Wilderness Study Areas (WSA), and an Instant Study Area (ISA).

The Arkansas Canyonlands ACEC is managed to protect, enhance and interpret scenic, historic and archaeological values, including habitat for the endangered Brandegi Wild buckwheat, Bighorn sheep, peregrine falcons and other raptors. The High Mesa Grassland ACEC-ISA protects a relic plant community that contains 17 native grass species and, based on the Interim Management Policy for Lands Under Wilderness Review, must be closed to motorized uses regardless of the chosen alternative.

Browns Canyon WSA, Mcintyre Hills WSA and Upper and Lower Grape Creek WSAs provide the solitude and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation necessary to designate them Wilderness Study Areas. As such, the BLM, according to the Interim Management Policy on Lands Under Wilderness Review, must protect these values through management.

The ACECs that accompany the aforementioned WSAs are managed to protect and enhance scenic values, wildlife habitat, significant fisheries and riparian values.

The ARTMP-EA, by closing open areas, and designating roads and trails, will enhance and protect the values required by law to maintain the wilderness qualities in the WSAs and the unique historic, cultural, archeological and important habitat protected by the ACECs and the ISA.

4. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial:

The BLM held numerous public meetings, and conducted telephone calls, interviews, and field trips to address the affects of the action on the human and natural environment. At the start of the process BLM representatives met, communicated and solicited input from the following groups:

- Front Range Resource Advisory Council
- US Forest Service
- Colorado Division of Wildlife
- Rocky Mountain Recreation Initiative
- Colorado Mountain Club, Sierra Club
- Audubon Society
- Colorado Motorized Trails Association
- Rocky Mountain Trials Association
- Colorado Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition
- local ATV and 4WD Clubs
- Backcountry Horsemen of America
- Salida Mountain Trails Committee
- affected grazing permittees
- holders of rights-of-way in the planning area

The EA was released via library, mail, and internet for a 45-day public comment period that ended on August 3, 2007. Recipients included individuals and members of the aforementioned groups, as well as signatories to the BLM Sportsman Roundtable Memorandum of Understanding.

The RGFO received over 700 comments on the proposed plan. Public comments received were mixed and represented public opinion both supportive of and/or in opposition to the proposed action. Many of the views that expressed disagreement with the proposed action came from members of the motorized community and centered on travel route designations, particularly motorcycle trails in the Fernleaf Gulch area of Texas Creek.

Opponents also expressed disagreement with recreational target shooting closures at Turkey Rock near Howard, CO and on BLM lands south of the town of Salida, CO. Aware of the safety concerns and in support of the proposed action; the Front Range Resource Advisory Council passed a unanimous resolution in support of these closures on July, 17, 2007. Fremont and Chaffee County governments also expressed support of this implementation decision during the public comment period in 2007. Other opposing viewpoints expressed philosophical disagreement with BLM RGFO decisions to close user-created roads and perceived limits to access to public lands.

In sum, the effects on the human environment are controversial for some but not for others. The effects on natural resource values and the natural environment are present and damaging.

The RGFO-RMP ROD requires the RGFO to designate roads and trails to protect the lands in the planning area from resource damage and provide a safe environment for the public, which includes adjacent landowners. To that end, the ARTMP-EA follows established mandates outlined in the RGFO-RMP ROD, BLM national policy on Comprehensive Travel Management Planning, and BLM Colorado standards for public land health.

5. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risk.

The failure to implement the proposed action to limit target shooting at Turkey Rock near Howard, CO and on BLM lands south of Salida, CO could create public safety hazards to adjacent landowners, Trials Bikes users and other members of the recreating public.

6. 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:

The proposed action incorporates a 100 ft maximum off-road parking distance, for any use, consistent with the recently approved Gold Belt Travel Management Plan. This proposal deviates from the Gold Belt Travel Management Plan by instituting an adaptive management approach to managing these uses.

The adaptive management plan will delineate and monitor areas where parking uses occur. Should resource damage be documented, BLM will consider stricter use regulations. This

adaptive management approach ensures resource damage is documented and appropriate steps are taken to eliminate the uses causing the damage.

Target shooting closures on BLM lands south of Salida and at Turkey Rock in the proposed action is consistent with similar closures undertaken in the Gold Belt Travel Management Plan.

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

The proposed action does not produce any individual or cumulatively significant environmental impacts. On the contrary, the proposed action, by designating roads and trails, significantly reduces the adverse impacts from the no-action alternative.

8. Degree to which the proposed action may adversely affect field office; sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources:

The Royal Gorge Field Office (RGFO) operates under a programmatic agreement between the RGFO, the Colorado State Historical Society, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the Commanche Tribe as a concurring party. Site specific surveys are done on a smaller scale for individual projects that are known to cause ground disturbance.

The overall affect of designating roads and trails, closing open areas and decreasing user created routes is positive for the preservation of historically, culturally and scientifically significant resources. Therefore, the proposed action of designating roads and trails, closing open areas and decreasing user created roads, provides protection to these important resources.

9. Degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat:

The proposed action does not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species. Rather the proposed action lessens impacts to the following rare plant species: Arkansas canyon stickleaf, Brandegeee wild buckwheat, Golden blazing star, and Jeweled blazing star. The proposed action also enhances core habitat for larger species susceptible to habitat fragmentation from suburban development.

Conclusion:

The context and intensity of the proposed action supports the legal mandates as well as the direction outlined in the RGFO-RMP. Therefore, based on the analysis provided in the ARTMP-EA and the requirements set forth in the RGFO-RMP I hereby approve the Finding of No Significant Impact resulting from the assessment of the Proposed Action, Alternative C.

Approved by:

/s/ Roy Masinton
Roy L. Masinton
Field Manager
Royal Gorge Field Office

12/18/2007
Date