



United States Department of the Interior

Bureau of Land Management
3028 East Main Street
Canon City, Colorado 81212



Rio Grande Natural Area Commission Meeting Minutes March 14, 2013

ATTENDEES

Andrew Archuleta, BLM San Luis Valley Field Manager; Tom Heinlein, BLM Front Range District Manager; Harold Anderson, Costilla County Rancher and Costilla County Conservation Board Member; Steve Vandiver, Rio Grande Water Conservation District (Chair); Mike Willet, Private Citizen; Rio de la Vista, Private Citizen (Vice-Chair); Michael Blenden, FWS Project Leader San Luis Valley NWR Complex; Denise Adamic, BLM Public Affairs Specialist; Shelley Freer, BLM Administrative Assistant; Sandra Montoya, Rio Grande Water Conservation District Administrative Assistant; and Rick Basagoitia, Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

STEVE VANDIVER CALLED THE MEETING TO ORDER AT 10:40A.M.

Harold Anderson moved to approve the minutes, Rio de la Vista seconded, and the minutes were approved unanimously.

OPPORTUNITY FOR PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public comments.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND LANDOWNER LETTERS

The Rio Grande Water Conservation District mailed the landowner letters and has received several letters back that were returned due to incorrect addresses. Sandra M. will hold on to those and check with the counties in June to obtain updated addresses for the returned letters. One public response letter has been received to date, and Andrew A. has received a few phone calls from members of the public. None of the public comments received have been negative.

The Commission discussed how and when to get the general public involved in the RGNA management plan development process. The group agreed that a public meeting could be scheduled once the Commission has completed a workable draft of the management plan to present to the public. In the meantime, the Commission will continue to do outreach to landowners as opportunities present themselves.

WRITER-EDITOR DISCUSSION

Lauren Krizansky has been hired through a temporary contract with the Rio Grande Water

Conservation District as a writer/editor. Part of her role will be to help the RGNA Commission write the management plan for the Natural Area. The Commission discussed the need for having her attend the next meeting so that she can begin learning the inner workings of the group, as well as, help them begin developing the content of the Area's management plan. Also, the group decided that each subcommittee should meet with Lauren before the next full Commission meeting to brief her on what has been done thus far for each section of the plan.

CADASTRAL SURVEY

Andrew A. briefed the Commission on the cadastral survey of the Natural Area. The BLM may be able to delineate boundaries on maps by fall 2013, pending budget constraints. This subject may be discussed later in the spring once the federal budget has been ironed out.

PROTECTING/INTERPRETING CULTURAL RESOURCES IN NATURAL AREA

There were several opinions shared about taking out the concrete structure on the Costilla County side of the Natural Area; some members suggested that the structure ruined the "natural" state of the area, while others believed that if the structure was adequately interpreted so that its purpose and history were public knowledge, then the public could benefit from the structure remaining in place. It is believed the structure is more than 50 years old, which is the age for something to be considered "historic" in terms of the National Historic Preservation Act (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Historic_Preservation_Act_of_1966). Steve V. reminded the group that the RGNAC can only make recommendations on what the County should do with the structure, but the Commission has no authority as the structure is on county land.

Andrew A. will have the acting BLM Archaeologist, Angie Krall, look at the concrete structure in question and then present the approaches the Commission could pursue in conjunction with the county should the Commission be called upon for their formal recommendation. Andrew will present her findings to the Commission at the next meeting.

Another site that could potentially be interpreted through the management plan for the natural Area is the de Vargus Crossing. This is the site of Don Diego de Vargas's 1694 crossing of the Rio Grande River. This site could also be considered a cultural resource; however, it is on the private-land side (east side) of the Natural Area. The Commission discussed the possibility of doing conservation easements or completing land and water conservation proposals with natural resource agencies in order to preserve this and other culturally significant sites on private land. There could also be to the potential for obtaining funding to assist with projects through things such as the Heritage Area grant program. Rio said that she would look into such avenues and then let the group know what she found out.

As part of the general discussion for how the Area's cultural and historic resources should be handled, a suggestion was made to post portal signs along Highway 142 where the public is most likely to travel throughout the Natural Area. These signs could have photos and present information broadly about the type of resources found in the Natural Area without giving specific locations of where those resources could be found. For instance, a photo of some of the

rock art in the area could be posted with a description of what the rock art might mean, but there would be no location information given. This approach would be a bit more restrictive than having detailed information designating sections of the natural area or information kiosks at each resource's location.

It was also mentioned that bringing more attention to these resources may increase the risk of vandalism and damage, so maybe no public interpretation should be done. If this route were taken it could be perhaps the most preservation-oriented approach to the Area's resources; however, the public would miss out on the history of the area. The group decided that an assessment could be done soon to determine how/if visitation increases as the Natural Area gains more public attention. If visitation numbers do increase, the Commission needs to be thoughtful of how to alter the interpretation plan accordingly. For instance, the Commission should consider how the resources will be protected, if at all, once the public finds out where they are and vandalism begins?

SUB-COMMITTEE REPORTS

The sub-committees last presented at the September 2012 meeting. They have not met since then because the Commission decided that a writer-editor position should be hired before more documents were drafted. Now that a writer-editor has been hired, each sub-committee will meet with the writer-editor to brief her on their specific section of the plan, and what has been discussed / decided in meetings held thus far. Once that has been done, the committees can begin moving forward with gathering pertinent data for their specific portions of the plan, such as researching the BLM resource management plan for the area, the River Corridor plan and other environmental documents.

The BLM's Front Range District Manager told the group that he will now cover any subcommittee assignments that had been previously assigned to the BLM Colorado State Director.

The group asked for a recap of what the subcommittees were and who is on them. The seven sections of the plan were combined into three subcommittees: a) natural, scientific, and wildlife resources; b) historic resources; and c) scenic and recreation resources. The Commission then assigned members to each committee: A) Head: Paul Robertson, Members: Rick Basagoitia, Rio de la Vista, and Harold Anderson; B) Head: Harold Anderson and Steve Vandiver, Members: Helen Hankins (now Tom Heinlein), Mike Willet; and C) Head: Rio de la Vista, Members: Mike Blenden and Sean Noonan.

CLOSING DISCUSSIONS

The Commission discussed the importance of working with Costilla County throughout the process of developing the Natural Area's management plan. In that vein, the Commission decided to meet with the Costilla County Commissioners before the next RGNA Commission meeting. A few of the Commission members will either attend a regular County Commissioner meeting or a working to update the Commissioners on the RGNAC's progress.

Steve V. informed the Commission that he had attended the first meeting of the San Luis Valley Regional Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) steering committee. This is a community-based effort to provide landowners and local units of government with a self-governing process for compliance with the Endangered Species Act regulations through the voluntary conservation and enhancement of riparian habitat. The HCP is designed to improve habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher and other federally-protected species while also giving landowners and communities the assurances to conduct routine agricultural and infrastructure activities without the threat of federal regulation. The HCP is being coordinated by the Rio Grande Water Conservation District in partnership with Alamosa, Conejos, Costilla, Mineral, Rio Grande, and Saguache counties, local municipalities, and the State of Colorado. At this introductory meeting, the group worked on processes and planning. More information about the group can be found on line at: <http://slvhcp.com/>

WILD HORSE AND BURRO PROGRAM FIELD TRIP

The Commission took a tour of the Wild Horse and Inmate Program (WHIP) at the Federal Prison located just outside of Cañon City. The WHIP is a cooperative agreement with the Colorado Department of Corrections, in which select wild horses and burros receive personal and extensive training as part of an inmate rehabilitative program. Horses and burros are then offered for adoption two Friday's each month. Since the inception of the program, more than 3,000 inmates have participated. They have gentled or trained more than 5,000 animals gathered from western rangelands. The purpose of the field trip was for the Commission to see how the BLM manages wild horses and to come up with possible ideas for how to deal with the feral horse population in the Natural Area.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:05 p.m.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be held on May 29, 2013, from 10 a.m to 3 p.m. at the Rio Grande Water Conservation District Office in Alamosa.

Andrew Archuleta, Designated Federal Officer
San Luis Valley
Bureau of Land Management

Steve Vandiver, Chairman
Rio Grande Natural Area Commission