



United States Department of the Interior
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Front Range District Office
3028 East Main Street
Cañon City, Colorado 81212



Rio Grande Natural Area Commission Meeting Minutes
September 13, 2012
Hampton Inn, Alamosa, Colorado

Attendees:

Andrew Archuleta, Acting BLM Front Range District Manager; Paul Tigan, Acting BLM Field Manager, San Luis Valley Field Office; Paul Robertson, Director of San Luis Valley Nature Conservancy; Harold Anderson, Costilla County Rancher and Costilla County Conservation Board Member; Steve Vandiver, Rio Grande Water Conservation District (Chair); Craig Cotten, Colorado Division of Water Resources; Mike Willet, Private Citizen; Rio de la Vista, Private Citizen (Vice Chair); Rick Basagoitia Colorado Parks and Wildlife; Denise Adamic, BLM Public Affairs Specialist; Marcia deChadenedes, BLM Colorado NLCS Coordinator; Larry Martinez, Conejos County Landowner; Ralph Curtis, former RGWCD General Manager; Michael Blenden, FWS Project Leader San Luis Valley NWR Complex; Ben Doon, Costilla County Administrator; Sandra Montoya, Rio Grande Water Conservation District; Clayton Davey and Sean Noonan, BLM San Luis Valley Recreation.

Steve Vandiver called the meeting to order at 10:15 a.m.

Introductions were made followed by a review of the minutes from the Commission's last meeting. Rio de la Vista moved to approve the minutes with one minor edit, Harold seconded, and the notes were approved unanimously. Paul Robertson announced that he is leaving the Nature Conservancy but will remain on the Rio Grande Natural Area Commission.

Public Comment

Larry Martinez pointed out that feral, abandoned and trespass horses are the largest issue that needs to be addressed within the Natural Area, especially east of La Sauses. Steve Vandiver agreed and said that resolving this issue is something that will take community involvement. Andrew Archuleta also pointed out that BLM has been taking actions to resolve the issue, and he hopes that the Natural Area Commission, along with the local landowners, can come up with a better solution than only using law enforcement.

Cadastral Survey

The Commission revisited the topic of how to define the Natural Area's boundaries. The BLM portion of the river (on the west side/south end) has been surveyed by the Cadastral Program; however, the rest of the west side and east side of the Natural Area (which are made up of private land) have not been surveyed as part of the Natural Area management planning effort. One of the concerns with the boundary is public access to the river. The BLM maintains access to both sides of the river, but on the east side this access is blocked by private land. In 2002, the BLM's Cadastral program sent letters to all the landowners on the east side of the river that were affected by the BLM's boundary survey.

The question before the Commission now is how to define the Natural Area boundary in a palatable way for private landowners. The BLM has no plans to fence its east boundary at the high-water mark as the BLM sees the purpose of fencing in the area as necessary for resource protection; not for blocking or directing recreational access. The Commission pointed out that a BLM defined boundary on the east side may be unpalatable to some landowners. It was also pointed out that Costilla County has not taken a formal position on the boundary issues, but all deeds associated with the Rio Grande Ranches subdivision and the Rio Grande River Ranches subdivision state that the property boundaries extend to the middle of the river. This, however, is different from BLM's boundaries which extend to the east river bank. This boundary discrepancy must be resolved, and one way one of achieving this is through the Natural Area's management plan.

For the next meeting, Andrew Archuleta will send a Cadastral proposal to the group. This will explain how the boundary could possibly be determined.

Cooperative Agreement

In the last Commission meeting, the BLM talked about entering a cooperative agreement with the Rio Grande Water Conservation District to share funds for the Commission's activities. Short term funding could be about \$10,200 for mailing, GIS mapping, travel, mileage, maps, miscellaneous. Long term funding might include \$10,450 for public meetings, federal register notices, GIS, map printing, paperwork, miscellaneous. The current budget for the RGNA Commission for the next 6 years is \$20,000.

Paul Tigan explained that a cooperative agreement had been finalized between the BLM and the Rio Grande Water Conservation District for an initial budget of \$10,000 for mailing letters to landowners. He then offered suggestions for how a larger budget may be used in the future. For instance, funds could be used to hire a Writer/Editor to assist in writing the Natural Area's management plan. Additional funds could be used for remote sensing monitoring/land health assessment by Open Range Consulting. These were offered only as suggestions because there are no existing funds to support either endeavor.

Landowner Letter

The Rio Grande Water Conservation District has drafted a letter to be sent to the private landowners affected by the Natural Area's designation. This letter will inform them of the Commission and its role as well as limitations (i.e., recommendations only to private landowners) and invite those individuals to participate in future Natural Area planning efforts. The group reviewed the letter and made comments. The Rio Grande Water Conservation District will incorporate those edits into a clean version to resend to the Commission.

Subcommittee reports

In the May 2012 meeting, the RGNA Commission decided that the best way to approach writing a management plan for the Area is to break the committee into subcommittees that could focus on specific elements of the plan. 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 and Mike Willet
- C) Head: Rio de la Vista, Members: Mike Blenden, Sean Noonan and Ben Doon

Since the last meeting, each subcommittee met to discuss recommendations for their portion of the area's management plan.

Subcommittee A gave their report first (see attached report), recommending that landowners should be educated about what resources they possess on their lands and how the general public or the community value those resources in a way the landowners may not be aware of. This knowledge can promote a sense of pride among landowners. Mike Blenden asked how the Southwest Willow Flycatcher should be addressed in regards to sensitive species conservation. Andrew Archuleta explained that there currently isn't adequate habitat in the Natural Area, so restoring the area will benefit the birds. He also mentioned that the BLM has to analyze for that species in detail as part of the management plan it develops for the federal lands within the Natural Area. The RGWCD has developed a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) to assist private landowners in continuing traditional farming/ranching practices and to protect them from being impacted by this endangered species. Through the HCP, the RGWCD can also provide information to people who want to partake in activities to benefit wildlife on their property.

Marcia deChadenedes remarked that the management plan that the Commission is developing is not just a "non-federal" plan. It is also a collaborative planning process, so the Commission needs to create an environment that welcomes landowners to a cooperative management endeavor. Steve Vandiver echoed this point, reminding the Commission that there are many landowners who do not want the Commission's suggestions or interference with how they manage their private land.

Craig Cotton then gave an overview of the Rio Grande Compact, which is the water obligation that Colorado must fulfill to send water to downstream states and to Mexico. The amount of obligated water delivered varies depending upon river flows. The majority of water delivered occurs during the winter in drought years. The Conejos River delivery is already met for this year and the Rio Grande River has only three percent remaining in its delivery obligations. Craig noted that the Rio Grande is currently running at approximately 20 CFS.

Subcommittee B discussed the Lobatos Bridge and its historical significance. The working group then discussed the need to reach out to landowners with known archaeological sites to educate them, and encourage their protection and maintenance of these sites. The group also discussed the importance of the stagecoach crossing north of County Road Z and the Valdez Ferry site. As part of the discussion, Paul Robertson recommended reading *Empire of the Summer Moon*, which is about the Comanche tribe who lived in Southern Colorado.

The group discussed what to do with what is left of a dam structure within the Natural Area. Steve Vandiver suggested not removing the dam because it has some historical values. The concrete could be dressed up or removed to limit graffiti and trash. This led to a discussion about how to balance closing roads in the Area to protect cultural resources with Travel Management, public access, and what the Natural Area's legislation calls for. Steve Vandiver recommended a field trip to visit possible sites for interpretation as well as which areas, if any, should be closed to motorized traffic.

Subcommittee C covered a number of topics. (See attached report). The group identified the various recreational uses that are common in the RGNA, from boating, bird watching, hunting, and general enjoyment of the scenery and remote natural area. As travel management is a key element of accessing recreational uses, Sean Noonan discussed travel management plans in the RGNA relative to the current BLM San Luis Valley Travel Management Plan, the RGNA legislation, and current proposals under the America's Great Outdoors Initiative (a Department of Interior program to highlight public lands throughout the country). These issues will have significant impact on future recreational uses.

Sean explained how the BLM conducts Visual Resource Management (VRM). He proposed that the Commission consider that the entire Natural Area be managed under VRM Class 2 that strives to retain the existing and relatively natural character of the landscape.

Ben Doon discussed Costilla County's new Trails and Recreation Master Plan and the possible development of its county-owned parcel on the east side of the river. This development could include a small campground and some trails. Efforts to obtain funding are underway for the project.

What is an "NLCS" unit?

Marcia deChadenedes explained what the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) is and what constitutes a 'unit' in that system. The NLCS highlights some of the West's most spectacular public lands. In 2000, the NLCS was created to conserve, protect and restore nationally significant landscapes recognized for their cultural, ecological and scientific values. NLCS areas are congressionally or presidentially designated. The BLM's solicitors have reviewed the RGNA legislation and determined that the Natural Area does not qualify as an NLCS unit because Congress did not specifically include it in the legislation. She said a non-Federal entity, such as a citizen's advisory group, would have to ask for that to happen, amending the legislation to include it as an NLCS unit. If it receives the designation, it could qualify for additional funding resources for projects in the area.

Steve Vandiver adjourned the meeting at 3 p.m.

The next meeting is scheduled for December 5, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

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

Steve Vandiver, Chairman
Rio Grande Natural Area Commission

DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WILDLIFE PORTION OF RGNA PLAN FOR PRIVATE LANDOWNERS

Describe substantial wildlife values of the area

Important winter and summer range for large herbivores

Substantial populations of mammalian predators and small herbivores sufficient to maintain community balance

Important area for raptors in both summer and winter

Emphasize the importance of riparian habitats to all wildlife

Describe primary factors that sustain wildlife values

Water availability & associated riparian habitat

Quality native desert grassland and shrub habitat

Primary factors that diminish wildlife values

Over-use of all habitats by cattle and feral horses, particularly riparian habitat

Negative impacts of roads and other human activities that fragment and destroy native grassland and shrub habitat

Recommendations to private landowners

Minimize negative impacts to riparian habitats by better control of grazing by cattle

Eliminate or substantially reduce impacts of feral horses, particularly to riparian areas

Encourage the formation of local wildlife/habitat focus group to organize a committee of local landowners to promote pride and interest in the natural area among both landowners and the local community, promote wildlife education and assist in informing other landowners of methods to maintain and enhance wildlife values.

Inform and encourage landowners (hopefully via a local committee of interested landowners) to take advantage of agency opportunities – NRCS, BLM, CDPW, USFWS - to restore and enhance wildlife values through such activities as fencing, invasive weed control, native grassland/shrub restoration, reduced use of toxicants, minimized predator control, and informed protection of raptors including important nesting sites.

**Rio Grande Natural Area Commission Cultural Subcommittee Meeting Notes
8.24.2012, La Jara BLM Office
Angie Krall, Cultural Program Lead, San Luis Valley Field Office, BLM**

Local Advisory Subcommittee Participants: Harold Anderson, Loretta Mitson and Mike Willet
BLM: Paul Tigan, Ken Frye, Angie Krall

Paul Tigan provided overview of legislation noting 66% of the RGNA is on non-federal lands. BLM will be developing plan with the Cultural Subcommittee providing guidance in that realm. We discussed the ongoing BLM ethnography and the tribal input that may be incorporated into the plan.

The group brainstormed about the various cultural resources within the RGNA that include: the de Vargas Crossing the historic ferry (Demetrio Valdez), Stewarts Crossing (N. of Los Sauces first crossing north of Espanola), Old Military Road (Ft. Garland to Alamosa), Old Spanish Trail, Big Prehistoric Camps along the River, King Turquoise Mine, Rock Dam, Battle of Kiowa Hill, Rock Art, Old Stage Coach Rd. and Stage Stop, Uranium Mining, and cable car and gauging station north of NM state line (1908). Discussed need for more archaeological inventory within the RGNA (what funding?).

Group agreed that interpretive signs could be identified in areas 'off site' of de Vargas and rock art sites such as the Lobatos Bridge and the 142 bridge (possible 'Portal Areas'). Discussed looking into the BLM buying or exchanging land for Costilla County side of de Vargas Crossing.

The group discussed the merits and pitfalls of closing certain roads in the area. Need to do more cost benefit analysis with regard to accessing certain rock art sites for educational purposes. The group agreed that Stewardship and Education of RGNA cultural resources will need to be stressed in both the BLM and non-federal land plans.

The group identified the following sites that warrant interpretation and protection within the RGNA:

- De Vargas crossing (5CN23/5CT213)
- Rock Art Site 5CN204
- Rock Art Site 5CT262
- Lobatos Bridge
- Valdez Ferry (5CN23)
- Dam Site (1940s/1950s)
- Rock Art Site 5CT263
- Paleoindian Site at Rio Grande Cave (needs cadastral survey)

Themes that can be carried forward:

- Aboriginal Riverine Use and Occupation
- Water Development: Water is Life
- Transportation/Travel Corridors
- Early Mining (Turquoise/Uranium)

Date: August 14, 2012
Report to: **Rio Grande Natural Area Commission**
From: **Scenic and Recreation Committee**
Members: Rio de la Vista, Commissioner; Mike Blenden, Commissioner;
Sean Noonan, BLM; Ben Doon, Costilla County

Introduction:

This report will cover identified issues and items related to the Scenic and Recreation aspects of the Rio Grande Natural Area. We recognize that the work of other committees, addressing wildlife and grazing issues will have significant affects on the recreation and scenic values of the area and will work together for integrated recommendations for the final plan. This is clearly a work in progress and we look forward to input from other Commission members and interested people.

Recreation:

Gathering and referencing studies from various relevant agencies- including:

- 1) BLM's Recreation Area Management Plan
- 2) BLM's Transportation plan - key to accessing recreation sites on the BLM's Rio Grande corridor land

Note that there are existing conflicts/lack of alignment between the BLM's Travel Management Plan, America's Great Outdoors and the RGNA legislation. A BLM Rio Grande Corridor Plan from 2000 also informs the work of the Commission, and the plan that we will develop will replace it and hopefully resolve these and bring the plans and the legislation into agreement. Land Health Assessment is also underway by the Watershed Health folks in the BLM. This information will be useful to the Recreation and Scenic Committee as well as others.

- 3) Costilla County's new Trails, Recreation and Open Space Plan (TROS)
- 4) Conejos County- to be determined
- 5) SLV Great Outdoors- Trails and Rec planning for entire SLV, Steering Committee meeting and raising funds for projects, including a request to Americas Great Outdoors for developing facilities at Costilla County's site on Rio Grande
- 6) Others?

Key recreational uses currently and future potential:

Boating: while there is a limited boating season due to water levels, this is an attractive use of the area. The key issue is access. The existing access points are at Road Z bridge, at Hwy 142 Bridge. The Lobatos bridge is another major access point, especially for those that are intending to experience rapids in New Mexico. There is trespass is at the State line in the vicinity of the last gauging station, where people exit on the east side and ascend a user-created trail that is privately owned. This relates to road access - to be discussed and explored for Commission recommendations to the BLM.

Birdwatching: Much of the boating has a bird watching element, as the river is flat water through the Natural Area, even in high water flows.

Fishing: There is fishing activity especially at the bridge sites and expected once Costilla County develops facilities at the 142 location.

Hunting: need to clarify closure timing with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Most hunting on the BLM is for deer and waterfowl along the river corridor and antelope on the uplands.

Hiking: At this point, much of the river corridor on the BLM is accessible via two-track road along the west side of the river. Therefore, the addition of a trail seems inappropriate. The RGNA legislation calls for removal of road south of the Lobato Bridge. We will discuss in more depth in order to make Commission recommendations to the BLM.

Other: There is use of the area by people driving along the river for “scenic access” – road locations and issues will be discussed.

Scenic:

Gathering and referencing studies from various relevant agencies- including:

- 1) BLM’s Visual Resource Management (VRM) inventory
 - The current management classes in the RGNA are 3 and 4. That is from the BLM’s 1991 Resource Management Plan and pre-dates the NA. They have a current ‘inventory’, which states how the land actually is, which is different than how they choose to manage it. In the case of the NA, the Sean Noonan’s proposal is that it be managed entirely as VRM Class 2 (see attached sheet for explanation).
- 2) Costilla County’s TROS—planning for possible Open Space acquisitions and/or conservation easements to consolidate small parcels along the east side of the river corridor when opportunities arise and landowners are willing.
- 3) Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust and conservation partners – available to work with landowners. RiGHT and others will continue to prioritize conservation easements on private lands along the river corridor whenever opportunities arise and landowners are willing. Would ask that funding for conservation in the Natural Area be recommended in the final plan, allowing for future appropriations for easements.
- 4) Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project—will approach them about possible removal of old dam and river function rehabilitation at Costilla County owned site—would enhance scenic and recreation qualities

Issues for discussion:

- Ways to encourage consolidation of lots on Costilla County side of river
- Ways to encourage conservation opportunities on private land
- Dam site rehabilitation
- Possible recommendations for future buildings on private land to maintain scenic qualities of the area
- Trash dump sites- locate on maps and discuss how to address