

Rio Grande Natural Area – A Cooperative Plan for Non-Federal Lands

Draft

September 2013

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List of abbreviations

DRAFT

The Rio Grande Natural Area Commission

In 2006, the U.S. Congress established the Rio Grande Natural Area (RGNA) along with a nine-member commission comprised of local citizens, state government and federal government officials to advise the Secretary of the Interior prepare a land management plan related to non-federal properties located within the area's boundaries.

The act was the result of 20 years of local conservation efforts to protect a variety of natural resources while taking into account local priorities like water and land management. A critical element of this conservation work is the cooperative relationship between citizens and state and federal resource managers to create a singularly managed landscape. The non-binding RGNA plan will work in tandem with a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) plan to protect the diverse and vital environment and it is considered an amendment of the BLM San Luis Management Plan.

Although the RGNA plan cannot dictate a private lands area management strategy, it is the commission's priority to engage and solicit all landowners for their input and participation, particularly in regards to private property lines east of the Rio Grande in Costilla County.

RGNA Commission

RGNA commissioners have knowledge and experience in fields of interest relating to the preservation, restoration and use of the area. The BLM evaluated the nominees based on their education, training, experience and knowledge of the RGNA's geographical area, and their ability to demonstrate a commitment to collaborative resource decision-making.

Harold Anderson, Citizen of the Local Region

Rick Basagoitia, Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife

Michael Blenden, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Craig Cotton, Colorado Division of Water Resources

Helen Hankins, Bureau of Land Management

Steve Vandiver, Rio Grande Water Conservation District

Rio de la Vista, Citizen of the Local Region

Michael Willet, Citizen of the Local Region

Open seat

Introduction and Statement of Work

The RGNA is designated as all land one-quarter of a mile from either bank of the Rio Grande from the southern boundary of the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge to the New Mexico state border. Its purpose is to conserve, restore and protect the natural, historic, cultural, scientific, scenic, wildlife and recreational resources of the area.

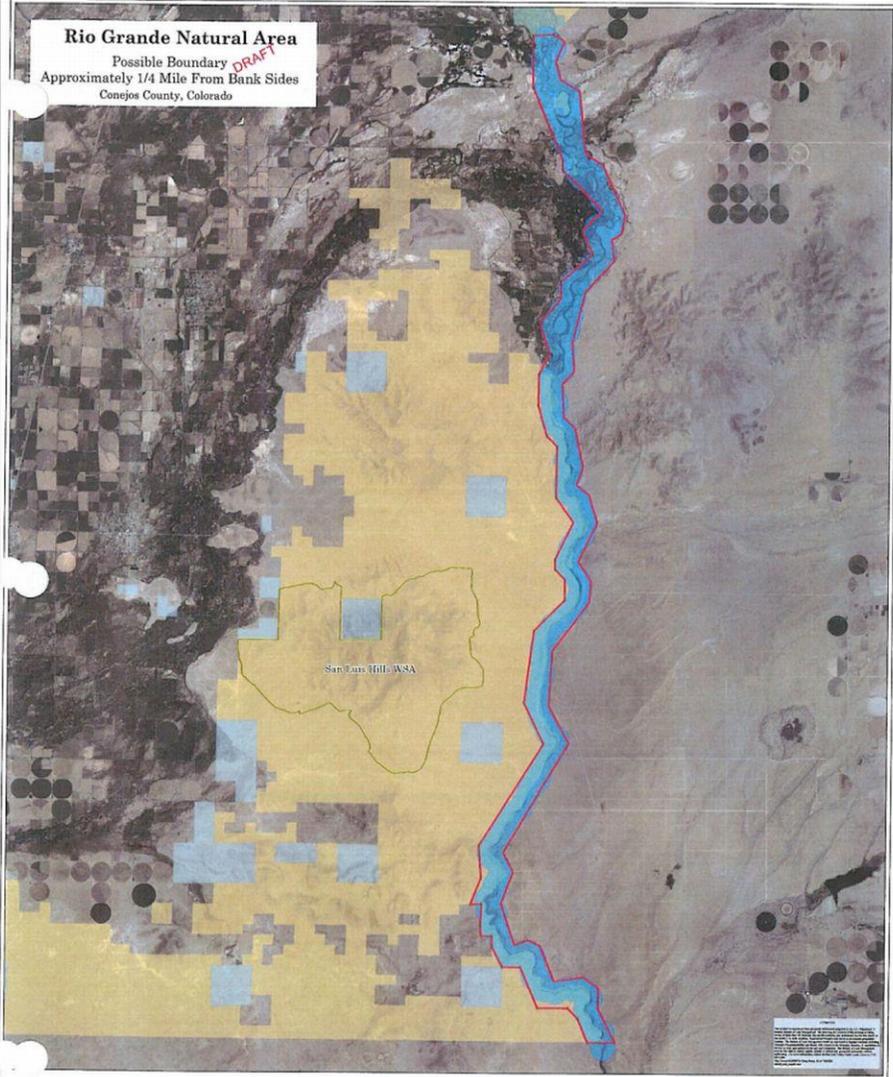
Encompassed by approximately 5,900 acres of private land, about 66 percent, and 2,900 acres of BLM public lands, the RGNA includes a 33-mile stretch of river dividing Conejos County to the west and Costilla County to the east. All of the land on the Costilla County side is privately owned except for a small parcel of county owned land near Hwy 142, while the Conejos side is split 75/25 between BLM and private ownership.

The inventory of RGNA resources is derived from a number of existing documents that discuss the resources of this area or nearby areas, and the recommendations are based on the commission's and the public's input. A detailed inventory is provided at the end of the document in addition to resource studies and links referenced within the report.

The RGNA Commission's recommendations are founded on public input and collaborative decision-making, and will guide future RGNA land management objectives.

The plan, prepared under section 6(b)(2)(A), shall apply to private land in the RGNA only to the extent that the private landowner agrees in writing to be bound by the management plan.

Rio Grande Natural Area
 Possible Boundary **DRAFT**
 Approximately 1/4 Mile From Bank Sides
 Conejos County, Colorado



-  Rio Grande Banks Buffered 1/4 Mile
-  Simplified Boundary
-  GCDB Points
-  San Luis Hill WSA Boundary
-  BLM Administered Lands
-  Private
-  State
-  US Fish and Wildlife Service



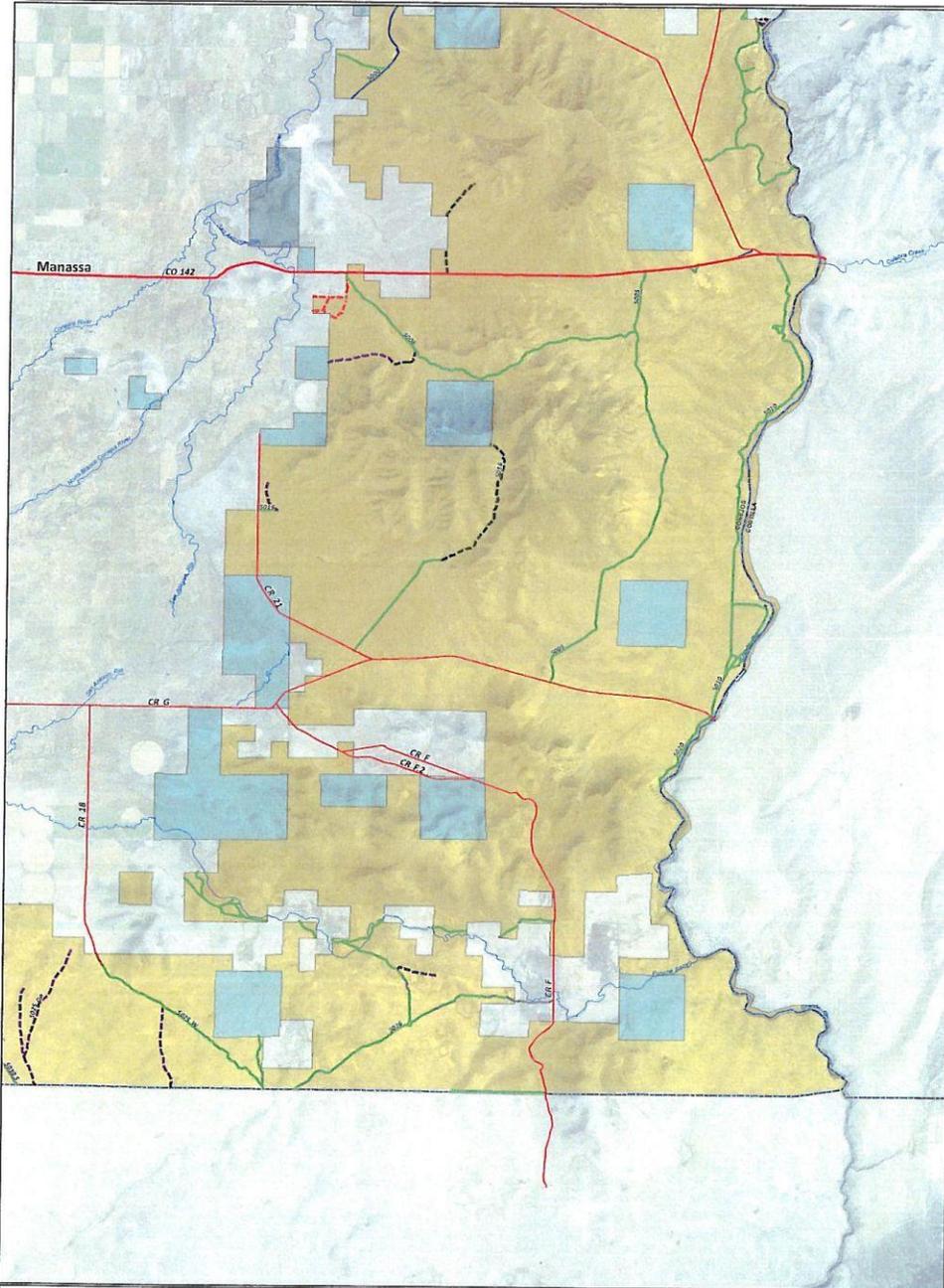
Map Scale
 1:42,000
 1 inch equals 0.66 miles





**Public Access Map
Map T**

**San Luis Valley Bureau of Land Management
Travel Management Plan - Route Designations**



Map Scale
1:86,339
1 inch = 1.4 miles

Map Disclaimer - Although the data presented within this map, and the map itself, have been processed successfully on computers of BLM, no warranty, expressed or implied, is made by BLM regarding the use of this map or the data represented. Our offices bear no responsibility for any errors or omissions or for any such warranty.

Map Created 09/10/2009 by D. Simon

Inventory of Resources and Recommendation of Policies

Recommendations Common to All Resource Areas

- Recommendations pertaining to the RGNA as a whole and will be common to all resources areas.

List of Resource Studies and Links

- **List of property**

- Conejos County Comprehensive Land Use Plan

Digital copy not available

- Costilla County Comprehensive Land Use Plan

www.costillacounty-co.gov/documents/pz_comphresensiveplan.pdf

- San Luis Resource Area Plan

http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/slvfo/Travel_Management.html

- Rio Grande Corridor Final Plan

http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/nm/field_offices/taos/taos_planning/docs.Par.80725.File.dat/rio_grande_plan_all.pdf

Natural Resources

An Inventory of Resources

Much of the RGNA's natural environment remains unimpaired, providing natural resources, including water, plants and fertile soils, needed to support human beings throughout their existence in the area.

The Rio Grande is North America's second largest river, starting in the San Juan Mountains and traveling for 1,885 miles before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. Along its way, it gives life to the RGNA and to the many other areas entitled to its water. The Rio Grande Compact, an agreement between Colorado, New Mexico and Texas, sets a framework for an equitable allocation and use of the river's water annually for the three states, and the Closed Basin Project was designed to help the Rio Grande meet compact obligations.

North of Las Sauces, the Rio Grande has a heavily meandering streambed with oxbows, side channels and riparian vegetation that consists of dense willow thickets and clump, cottonwood groves and large irrigated meadows. The majority of the RGNA between the southern end of the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge and Las Sauces is privately owned cattle ranches dispersed between scattered BLM-managed parcels.

South of Las Sauces, the river is less meandering and the terrain in the RGNA intensifies between the Brownie Hills on the east side of the river and Flat Top Mountain on the west side. In this section of the river, relatively unimpeded access to the river channel for livestock has left the potential riparian zone in poor condition.

South of the State Highway 142 Bridge, the terrain on either side of the river opens slightly and there is considerable opportunity for river access from the BLM-managed side to the east. The remnants of a failed dam attempt, including pylons on either side of the river and large rocks forming the base of the dam, remain about halfway between State Highway 142 and the Lobatos Bridge.

On the east side of the river, the Upper Box extends for 1.3 miles beginning about a mile below the State Highway 142 Bridge. Within the Upper Box, vertical rock walls of up to 100 feet create an enclosed landscape. Other places within the section between Highway 142 and the Lobatos Bridge include sparsely vegetated hills on either side of the river rising anywhere from 500 to 900 feet.

Below the Lobatos Bridge, the Rio Grande deepens into a more dramatic channel, the Lower Box. From the riverbed, the canyon walls reach over 200 feet at the Colorado/New Mexico state border, creating an enclosed setting that conveys an intense feeling of isolation and remoteness. While the cliffs confine the riparian zone in this area, there is ample raptor habitat in the rock walls.

There are some questions as to the Rio Grande's official meander line, an important determination because of the BLM land located on the river's eastern bank. Some consider the Rio Grande's east bank to mark the meander line, and others consider it the river's center.

Natural resources challenges within the RGNA include abandoned/feral horses and cattle trespassing. These animals create an unnecessary competition with managed grazing and wildlife for natural resources, while stressing the overall environment's carrying capacity and threatening motorist safety.

The Secretary of the Interior is encouraged to negotiate with the State of Colorado, the Rio Grande Water Conservation District and affected water users in the State to determine if changes in the streamflow that are beneficial to the RGNA may be accommodated.

The RGNA does not authorize the imposition of any mandatory streamflow requirements.

List of Resource Studies and Links

- LiDAR

<http://lidar.cr.usgs.gov/>

- Rio Grande Compact

<http://water.state.co.us/DIVISIONSOFFICES/DIV3RIOGRANDERIVERBASIN/Pages/Div3RioGrandeRB.aspx>

- Closed Basin Project

<http://www.rgwcd.org/page21.html>

- Soil surveys

http://soils.usda.gov/survey/online_surveys/colorado/

- Colorado Natural Heritage Program county resource profiles

<http://www.cnhp.colostate.edu/wetlandinventory/profile.asp?GeoUnitID=104>

<http://www.cnhp.colostate.edu/wetlandinventory/profile.asp?GeoUnitID=114>

<http://www.cnhp.colostate.edu/wetlandinventory/profile.asp?GeoUnitID=115>

- Memorandum regarding the Western Boundary of the Sangre de Cristo Grant, Malcolm Ebright

Recommendations For Policies

- Supporting a river restoration study focusing on sediment influx and riparian habitat where appropriate
- Supporting consideration of the RGNA in future subdistrict development
- Supporting abandoned/feral horse education for landowners and access to land management tools
- Addressing and solving trespass cattle problems
- Supporting mobile exclosures in appropriate areas to improve habitat without disturbance
- Supporting grants to aid and enable natural resource conservation projects within the RGNA
- Supporting grazing management education for landowners
- Encouraging landowners to enter into land conservation easements
- Prohibiting the construction of water storage facilities in the RGNA

Wildlife Resources

An Inventory of Resources

Wildlife populations within the RGNA are highly dependent on its resources for survival, especially its riparian zones, permanent water that lies between a water source and upland habitat, and critical wetland areas.

RGNA riparian zones are in varying conditions. Not all stream or shore zones develop into riparian areas. This is primarily true in the last eight miles of the RGNA where the shorelines are primarily rock. It is believed trespass grazing and other use-related factors limit the creation and maintenance of productive riparian areas.

In addition to native and introduced species of fish like carp, northern pike and trout, many species of waterfowl are evident along the river. The San Luis Valley is one of the most southernmost major water bird production area in the Central Flyway, and is also considered the most important water bird production area in the state of Colorado because a significant portion of water bird populations migrate through the Rio Grande corridor.

RGNA nesting waterfowl include Canada goose, mallard, gadwall and cinnamon teal. There are also significant concentrations of nesting raptors, including bald and golden eagles, prairie falcons, owls and hawks.

In January 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated critical habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher, listed as an Endangered Species in 1995, along 23 miles of the Rio Grande and a 2.9-mile stretch of the Conejos River. The small bird found along the RGNA riparian habitats lives among dense groves of willows, arrowweed, buttonbrush, box elder and alder. In 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) designated critical habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher, but it did not include the San Luis Valley, citing progress towards a community-based Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). While there are significant stands of willows in the RGNA, the BLM has only identified breeding pairs near the confluence of the Rio Grande and Conejos rivers and the McIntire-Simpson parcel, which lies west of the RGNA and further upriver along the Rio Grande.

Large ungulates in or adjacent to the RGNA include mule deer and pronghorn antelope.

There are significant populations of abandoned/feral horses on the eastern side of the river that are presently unmanaged, depleting riparian habitat crucial for wildlife survival.

List of Resource Studies and Links

- Colorado Natural Heritage Program county tracked element inventories

<http://www.cnhp.colostate.edu/wetlandinventory/elementsList.asp?GeoUnitID=104>

<http://www.cnhp.colostate.edu/wetlandinventory/profile.asp?GeoUnitID=114>

<http://www.cnhp.colostate.edu/wetlandinventory/profile.asp?GeoUnitID=115>

- San Luis Valley Regional Habitat Conservation Plan

www.slvhcp.com/Planning_docs.html

- Survey of Critical Wetlands and Riparian Areas in Southern Alamosa and Costilla Counties, San Luis Valley, Colorado, CSU

[www.cnhp.colostate.edu/download/documents/2004/Southern Alamosa and Costilla Wetlands.pdf](http://www.cnhp.colostate.edu/download/documents/2004/Southern_Alamosa_and_Costilla_Wetlands.pdf)

- Biological Inventory of Rio Grande and Conejos Counties (CSU)

[www.cnhp.colostate.edu/download/documents/2000/Rio Grande and Conejos Counties Vo11.pdf](http://www.cnhp.colostate.edu/download/documents/2000/Rio_Grande_and_Conejos_Counties_Vo11.pdf)

Recommendations For Policies

- NEPA?

- Addressing and offering solutions for trespass cattle problems

Historic/Cultural Resources

An Inventory of Resources

The Rio Grande is an important paleontological, cultural and historical resource corridor because it is one of the largest river systems in the American Southwest. The story of human use in this area spans hundreds of years and provides an excellent opportunity for public outreach, interpretation and research.

North of the RGNA, within the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge is the Hansen Bluff, which is significant for its large number of special vertebrate and invertebrate fossils.

The BLM has recorded cultural resource phenomena within the RGNA, including prehistoric, historic and isolated finds. Only a very small percentage of the total cultural resources in the planning area, however, are recorded because most have not been inventoried. Pre-historic sites include locales of stone tool manufacture, open-air and sheltered camps and rock art panels.

Historic sites range from building foundations to the location of the storied 1694 crossing of the Rio Grande by Don Diego de Vargas, to petroglyphs and natural dwellings.

The Lobatos Bridge, which crosses the Rio Grande at Conejos County Road G, is the one historic structure in the RGNA listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Other historical themes include aboriginal riverine use and occupation, water development, transportation/travel corridors and early turquoise and uranium mining

RGNA sites warranting interpretation and protection include:

- 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
- Rio Grande cave paleoindian site

List of Resource Studies and Links

- **List of references to publicly known sites**

- Map(s)

- Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area

www.sdcnha.org

- Los Caminos Antiguos Historic/Scenic Byway

www.coloradodot.info/travel/scenic-byways/south-central/los-caminos

- CSU Natural Heritage Program Document Library

www.cnhp.colostate.edu/download/reports.aspx

- San Luis Valley Rock Art, Kessler, 2000

- Wild and Scenic Rio Grande, DeVries and Maurer, 1994

Recommendations For Policies

- Supporting enhanced historical experiences through interpretive signs

- Supporting marketing and public outreach

- Encouraging tribal input on the Rio Grande's history and RGNA natural resource uses

Scientific Resources

An Inventory of Resources

The RGNA's abundant resources provide numerous scientific exploration opportunities for professional, amateur or academic purposes.

At the professional level, the natural resources, wildlife and water resource managers of the BLM and the State of Colorado have developed a long-term understanding of biological processes, animal use and migration habit and the management and delivery of water through the Rio Grande.

On an amateur level, visitors come to the RGNA to engage their own curiosity about the remarkable natural world and its geology, flora and fauna. The RGNA's isolated character provides a sense of solitude, heightening scientific understanding, providing a clearer lens on the natural world. At night, the RGNA, an open eye and a telescope brings awareness to the universe in a way unachievable in a more populated, well-lit place.

Finally, the RGNA also represents a living laboratory. The San Luis Valley's elementary students visit the Rio Grande to understand the scientific method in practice, and high school and college students conduct experiments and train to become professional scientists in their own right. The RGNA represents an incubator of not only scientific understanding of the natural processes that have shaped the San Luis Valley for millions of years, but also a place where students can develop the skills, talent and desire to increase knowledge of the RGNA and all its aspects in the future.

List of Resource Studies and Links



Recommendations For Policies

- Supporting experiential learning opportunities for students through “Youth Days”
- Supporting employment opportunities

Scenic Resources

An Inventory of Resources

The RGNA is a scenic resource in itself.

With the exception of the box canyons, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and the San Juan Mountains are visible from most of the area. Depending on the segment of the river, visitors can experience remarkable vistas of the Brownie Hills, Flat Top Mountain, the San Luis Hills Wilderness Study Area, the Las Sauces farming and ranching community and the Rio Grande's Upper and Lower Box Canyons.

The RGNA's northern half is more developed, including the town of Las Sauces and physical farming and ranching structures.

South of Las Sauces, the land within the RGNA remains mostly undeveloped with a few exceptions for buildings along the east side of the Rio Grande below the State Highway 142 Bridge.

Additionally, several subdivision roads, county roads and BLM designated routes are visible within the RGNA.

List of Resource Studies and Links

- Map(s)

Recommendations For Policies

- Encouraging landowners to enter into land conservation easements
- Recommending a BLM Visual Resource Management Class II rating - **to** retain the existing character of the landscape – and offering landowners tools to maintain a singular landscape

Recreation Resources

An Inventory of Resources

Most recreational activities within the RGNA take place on public land.

River access is available on public land at the confluence of the Conejos and Rio Grande, State Highway 142, and the Lobatos Bridge.

Boaters enjoy Class II water on the Rio Grande, depending on seasonal stream flows, and bait, lure and fly fishers angle for brown trout, rainbow trout and northern pike, all game species introduced in the 1930s.

Hunting within the RGNA occurs on a limited basis. Waterfowl are hunted along the river to a limited extent, and there is deer, antelope and small game hunting potential. No areas are closed to firearm use or hunting in the RGNA, except as posted by private landowners.

Trespassing on private lands, however, does occur, and is a concern for a number of the RGNA's resources in addition to landowners.

On the BLM-managed land within the RGNA, there is motorized access to the Rio Grande in several locations north of State Highway 142, and along the river between State Highway 142 and the Lobatos Bridge, which is one of the BLM's preferred boating access areas. Due to the steep walls of the Lower Box Canyon, there is no motorized access to the river past the Lobatos Bridge. The open motorized roads on the BLM-managed land provide access of other dispersed recreation activities, such as hiking, biking, picnicking and wildlife viewing.

The only available public access on the private lands within the RGNA is located in the subdivided portions of Costilla County between State Highway 142 and the Lobatos Bridge. The subdivided parcels in this area bordering the river contain a right of way for pedestrian access along their western boundary, though the easement does not appear well known or well used. There is a Costilla County owned parcel just below the State Highway 142 Bridge that is in the planning stages for a recreational site.

List of Resource Studies and Links

- Costilla County Trails, Recreation and Open Space Plan

<http://www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/CNTY-Costilla/CBON/1251595143234>

- SLV Trails and Recreation Master Plan

www.slvgo.com

- Map(s)

Recommendations For Policies

- Supporting historic routes preservation, including the road to the New Mexico boarder, to discourage trespassing
- Supporting road work where appropriate to protect the natural resources and provide safe, reliable access for recreational enthusiasts
- Constituting a set of rules including vehicle access limits and vehicle type regulations, including the removal of roads and a prohibition against motorized use on federal land in the area on the western side of the Rio Grande from Lobatos Bridge south to the New Mexico state line
- Encouraging Costilla County to preserve and develop its recreation traditions
- Supporting travel management plans for the east side of the Rio Grande
- Supporting existing Rio Grande boating access in Costilla County, and encouraging the identification of new locations
- Supporting disbursed campsite and parking area development where appropriate
- Supporting existing trail enhancements
- Supporting enhanced recreational experiences through interpretive signs, primarily for education, not advertisement
- Supporting RGNA social media sites