

# Rio Grande Natural Area Management Plan Executive Summary

## Overview

The Rio Grande Natural Area (RGNA) is located in the southern portion of the San Luis Valley (SLV) in south central Colorado and was established in 2006 by the U.S. Congress through Public Law 109-337, the Rio Grande Natural Area Act (Act). The RGNA includes the Rio Grande river corridor from the southern boundary of the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to the Colorado/New Mexico State line, extending ¼ mile on either side of the bank of the river.

The RGNA encompasses approximately 8,800 acres, of which 5,900 acres (67%) are private lands and 2,900 acres (34%) are federal lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), San Luis Valley Field Office. The RGNA includes a 33-mile reach of the Rio Grande, which is also the boundary line between Conejos County to the west and Costilla County to the east.

The Rio Grande Natural Area Act provides the overall direction for the development and management of the RGNA. The purpose of the RGNA, as stated in the Act, is to “conserve, restore and protect the natural, historic, cultural, scientific, scenic, wildlife and recreational resources of the Natural Area.” In addition to the purpose, the Act also outlines and describes the following requirements:

- Prepare a Map and Legal Description
- Establishment of a nine-member Commission
- Cooperative Agreements
- Management Plan (Plan). **The Plan for non-Federal lands is considered non-binding unless a private landowner agrees in writing to be bound by the management plan.**
- Administration of Natural Area

The Plan is written to cover the 5,900 acres of private land that fall within the designated boundary of the Natural Area. It is the intent to use the Plan to provide input to the BLM for its corresponding RGNA Management Plan for the public lands and to guide future RGNA land management objectives. The plan is intended to be an informative document that provides current information regarding resource conditions. **The Plan shall apply to private lands within the RGNA only to the extent that any private landowner agrees in writing to be bound by the management plan as specified in Section 8 of the Act. A private landowner may choose to voluntarily implement the recommendations in order to achieve the purposes of the Act.**

## Management Concerns

Field visits by the Natural Area Commission found the condition of the riparian zones within the RGNA vary widely. Generally, conditions range from healthy and productive in the northern reaches to heavily impacted and degraded in the downstream reaches.

Currently, according to the BLM, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), and other organizations, the two primary natural resource challenges within the RGNA are the overall number of abandoned and feral horses and trespass livestock grazing. Both of these have tremendous impact on both the riparian and upland vegetation. CPW has estimated that there have been more than 500 horses within the Rio Grande corridor in recent history. The over-grazing of these vegetative resources by feral horses competes with managed private grazing, permitted public land grazing and numerous wildlife species for natural resources. All of this pressure stresses the overall environment beyond its capacity to sustain itself. The severe impacts to willow stands within the RGNA have degraded habitat that could be otherwise available for the Federally endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and threatened western yellow-billed cuckoo.

Riparian fencing and specific grazing management prescriptions are two key tools that would greatly benefit the system. The Commission believes that removal of the feral horses and trespass cattle will contribute greatly to improving conditions throughout the RGNA. If riparian fences can be built and maintained in strategic locations, these could help protect the stream bank, while allowing livestock access to water. Well-managed livestock grazing that is done within the capacity of the system would be good for the long-term condition of the area. Additionally, re-establishing a willow community along the river would allow the banks to stabilize and restore the riparian area and associated habitats. This would also provide shade and have the potential to lower water temperatures and reduce evaporation, which would be beneficial to fish and other aquatic species.

The RGNA is very important wildlife habitat, as many large and small mammals, bird species, reptiles, amphibians and fish utilize the river, the riparian zone and the upland area as habitat. A section of the RGNA is also designated as critical habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher and is proposed critical habitat for the yellow-billed cuckoo.

### **Management Plan Summary**

Desired future conditions is a term used by many different land management agencies and can be defined simply as planning goals that describe the conditions that land managers are attempting to achieve over a specified period of time in a given geographic area. In some cases, the land may already be in a desired condition and land managers would focus on maintaining those conditions. If the specific area is not currently in the desired condition, managers may take actions to encourage a different pattern of change over time in order to reach the desired conditions.

In terms of the RGNA, the RGNA Commission has identified the following desired future conditions:

- Protection and enhancement of natural resources
  - Restore and maintain proper functioning riparian areas
  - Reduce feral horse populations and trespass cattle impacts in order to improve riparian conditions

- Protection and enhancement of scenic resources
  - Maintain/enhance high scenic quality
- Maintain and improve recreational opportunities
  - Increase opportunities and improve access for public use in appropriate locations
  - Manage recreational use to improve user experience.
- Protection and management of historic and archaeological resources
  - Identify, document, stabilize, and interpret historic and archaeological sites to provide appropriate level of protection
- Encourage adequate federal, state, and local government personnel on the ground to enhance public safety and customer service to maintain and manage appropriate grazing.

The Management Plan is written to not only meet the requirements of the Act but to also to recommend management practices within the RGNA that will “conserve, restore and protect the natural, historic, cultural, scientific, scenic, wildlife and recreational resources of the RGNA,” thus achieving the identified desired future conditions. Recommendations within the Management Plan are broken up into the following sections:

- Natural Resource
- Access
- Historical and Cultural
- Social and Economic
- BLM Specific

The Management Plan also includes Policies for Resource Management, which are recommendations that (i) protect the resources of the Natural Area; and (ii) provide for solitude, quiet use, and pristine natural values of the Natural Area. In order to achieve these goals, the Commission has recommended the following policies:

- Continuation and recognition of the Commission past the original end date of October 12, 2016.
- New funding to the BLM for the management and protection of the RGNA.
- New funding for implementation of the RGNA management plan and priorities set forth in the CRGHRF Lower Rio Grande study.