

Rio Grande Natural Area Commission

RIO GRANDE NATURAL AREA – A COOPERATIVE PLAN FOR NON-FEDERAL LANDS



NATURAL AREA COMMISSION FIELD VISIT, OCTOBER 2011

DISCUSSION DRAFT

MARCH 14, 2012

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THE RIO GRANDE NATURAL AREA COMMISSION

Section 4 of the Rio Grande Natural Area Act established a nine-member commission of local citizens, state government, and Federal government officials to advise the Secretary of the Interior with respect to the Natural Area and to prepare a management plan related to non-Federal land in the Natural Area.

Members

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

Paul Robertson, Citizen of the Local Region

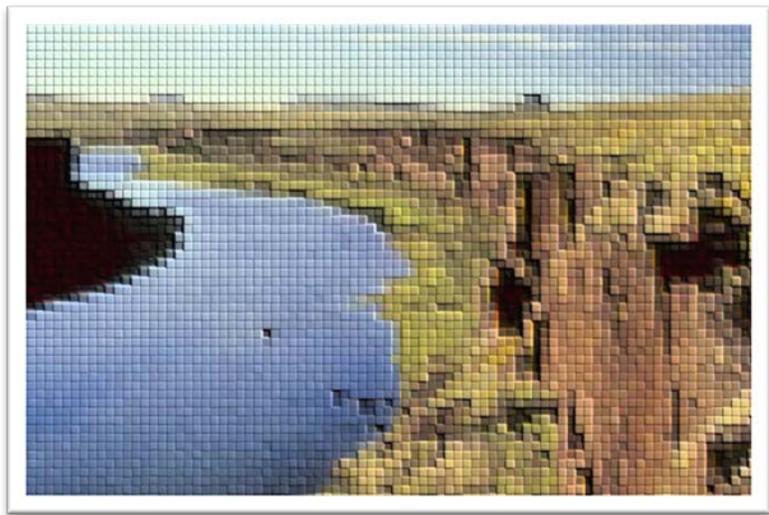
Steve Vandiver, Rio Grande Water Conservation District

Rio de la Vista, Citizen of the Local Region

Michael Willet, Citizen of the Local Region

INTRODUCTION & STATEMENT OF WORK

The Rio Grande Natural Area Act, signed into law on October 12, 2006, designated the Rio Grande Natural Area (RGNA) 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. The purpose of the legislation is to conserve, restore, and protect the natural, historic, cultural, scientific, scenic, wildlife, and recreational resources of the Natural Area.



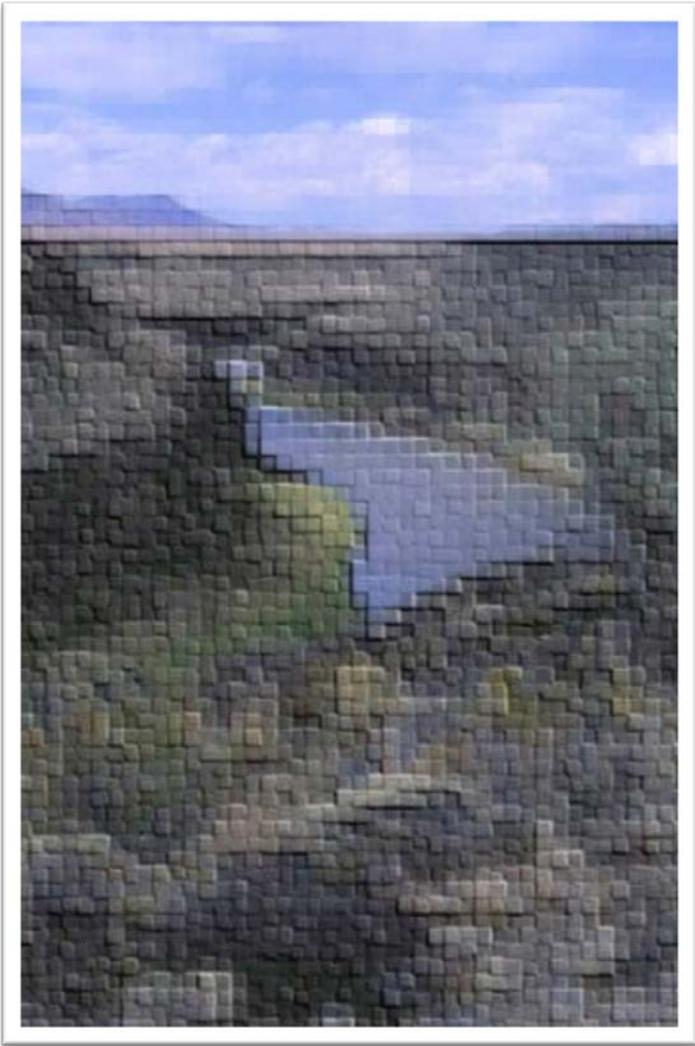
THE UPPER BOX CANYON, RIO GRANDE NATURAL AREA

The RGNA includes a 33-mile stretch of river and encompasses approximately 5,900 acres of private land and 2,900 acres of public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This portion of the Rio Grande divides Conejos County to the west and Costilla County to the east. All of the land on the Costilla County side is privately owned, while the Conejos side is split 75/25 between BLM and private ownership.

The legislation also established the Rio Grande Natural Area Commission, a nine-member group that advises the Secretary of the Interior on matters related to the management of the RGNA, and is responsible for drafting a non-binding management plan for the non-Federal land in the Natural Area.

[The inventory of resources in this discussion draft of the management plan for non-Federal lands is derived from a number of existing documents that discuss the resources of this area or nearby areas. The recommendations for policy remain blank pending further discussion and guidance from the Commission members].

INVENTORY OF RESOURCES & RECOMMENDATION OF POLICIES



THE LOWER BOX CANYON, RIO GRANDE NATURAL AREA

Recommendations Common to All Resource Areas

- [This section of the management plan for non-Federal lands anticipates that some recommendations will pertain to the Natural Area as a whole and will be common to all resources areas].

Natural Resources

AN INVENTORY OF RESOURCES

While there are many components to the natural resources of a place, it is clear standing within the Rio Grande Natural Area – whether west of the river on the Fairy Hills, or south of the Lobatos Bridge overlooking the lower box canyon – that a great deal of the natural environment remains unimpaired, offering solitude, quiet use, and enjoyment for visitors to the Natural Area.

North of La Sauses, the Rio Grande has a heavily meandering streambed with oxbows, side channels, and riparian vegetation that consists of dense willow thickets and clumps and groves of cottonwood. There are also large expanses of irrigated meadows. Most of the Natural Area between the southern end of the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge and La Sauses is privately owned, cattle ranches, with some scattered BLM-managed parcels.

Below La Sauses, the river is less meandering and the terrain in the Natural Area picks up 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 access to the river from the BLM-managed side of the river. The remnants of a failed attempt to dam the river, including pylons on either side of the river and large rocks that formed 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 that rise anywhere from 500 to 900 feet above the river.

Below the Lobatos Bridge, the Rio Grande deepens into a more dramatic channel into the section known as the lower box. From the river bed, the canyon walls – which reach over 200 feet at the Colorado/New Mexico state border – create an enclosed setting that helps convey an intense feeling of isolation and remoteness. While the riparian zone in this section is confined by the cliffs, there is ample raptor habitat in the rock walls.

LIST OF RESOURCE STUDIES & LINKS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICIES

Historic Resources

AN INVENTORY OF RESOURCES

The Rio Grande is an important paleontological, cultural, and historical resource corridor. As one of the largest river systems in the American Southwest, the Rio Grande has provided the natural resources, including water, animals, plants and fertile soils needed to support human beings throughout our existence in the area. The cultural resources and related sites along the Rio Grande, both on public and private lands, are a key component to the importance of the river to the residents of the San Luis Valley and those who have considered it home throughout the centuries. The story of human use of this area provides an excellent opportunity for public outreach, interpretation, and research.

In the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge north of the Rio Grande Natural Area, the Hansen Bluff has significance for its large number of special vertebrate and invertebrate fossils. Sites dating to the Paleo-Indian period (9500-5500 BC) are well-documented in other parts of the San Luis Valley.

The BLM has recorded cultural resource phenomena within the Rio Grande Natural Area, including prehistoric, historic, and isolated finds. However, only a very small percentage of the total cultural resources in the planning area are recorded, because most have not been inventoried. Pre-historic site types 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.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICIES

Scientific Resources

AN INVENTORY OF RESOURCES

Whether the undertaken for professional, amateur, or academic purposes, the abundant resources of the Rio Grande Natural Area provide numerous opportunities for scientific exploration and understanding.

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 habits, and the management and delivery of water through the Rio Grande. This understanding improves with additional monitoring, data collection, and analysis.

On an amateur level, visitors come to the Rio Grande Natural Area to engage their own curiosity about the natural world and the geology, flora, and fauna that make the Natural Area remarkable. The isolated character of many parts of the Natural Area provide a sense of solitude that heightens scientific understanding, providing a clearer lens on the natural world. At night, the isolated Natural Area, an open eye, and a telescope heighten our awareness of the universe in a way unachievable in a more populated, well-lit place.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Natural Area represents a living laboratory to the educational institutions of the San Luis Valley. Elementary-aged school children visit the Rio Grande to understand the scientific method in practice; high school and college students conduct experiments and train to become professional scientists in their own right. The Natural Area represents an incubator of not only scientific understanding of the processes that have shaped the San Luis Valley for millions of years, but also an incubator of the skills, talent, and curiosity of the students who will add to our understanding of the Natural Area in the future.

LIST OF RESOURCE STUDIES & LINKS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICIES

Scenic Resources

AN INVENTORY OF RESOURCES

The scenic resources of the Rio Grande Natural Area are as broad and expansive as the San Luis Valley in which it lies. With the exception of the box canyons, the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range and the San Juan Mountains are visible from much of the Natural 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 farming and ranching community of La Sauses, and the upper and lower box canyons.

The northern half of the Natural Area has more development, including the town of La Sauses and physical structures outside of the town related to farming and ranching operations. South of La Sauses, the land within the Rio Grande Natural Area 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 can be seen from within the Natural Area.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICIES

Wildlife Resources

AN INVENTORY OF RESOURCES

Just as the Rio Grande has provided an important source of natural resources for human use, wildlife populations have come to depend on the river for survival as well. Within the Natural Area, the most productive habitat for wildlife is the riparian zone – those lands influenced by permanent water that lie between a water source and upland habitat.

Field visits by the Natural Area Commission found the riparian zones within the Natural Area in varying condition. Not all stream or shore zones develop into riparian areas – this is primarily true in the last eight miles of the Natural Area, where shorelines are primarily rock – but the Commission found that 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 such as carp, northern pike, and trout, many species of waterfowl are evident along the river. The San Luis Valley has been described as the southernmost major water bird production area in the Central Flyway and is also the most important water bird production area in the state of Colorado. A significant portion of these populations migrate through the Rio Grande corridor.

Nesting waterfowl in the Natural Area 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. Large ungulates in the Natural Area – or adjacent to it – include mule deer and pronghorn antelope. There are significant populations of abandoned/feral horses on the eastern side of the river that water on the river.

The southwestern willow flycatcher, listed as an Endangered Species in 1995, is found along riparian habitats of the desert southwest where dense groves of willows, arrowweed, buttonbrush, box elder, and alder are present, often with a scattered overstory of cottonwood. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated critical habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher in 2005, but that designation 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 Natural Area, 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 Natural Area and further upriver along the Rio Grande.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICIES

Recreation Resources

AN INVENTORY OF RESOURCES

Recreational visitors to the Rio Grande Natural Area come to the area likely without ever knowing they are enjoying a place designated by Congress as an area of significance. This lack of awareness about the designation, however, does not get in the way of the hiking, boating, fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, and many other recreational activities that take place within the Natural Area.

Most recreational activities within the Natural Area take place on public land, and access to the river is available on BLM-managed 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 – game species that were introduced in the river in the 1930s. Hunting within the Natural Area 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, as no areas are closed to firearm use or hunting in the Natural Area, except as posted by private landowners.

On the BLM-managed land within the Natural Area, there is motorized access to the river in a handful of locations north of State Highway 142 and along the river between State Highway 142 and the Lobatos Bridge. 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 Natural Area occurs 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 currently in the planning stages for a recreational site.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICIES