

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Gunnison Field Office
DOI-BLM-COS060-2011-0004-EA**

**FONSI
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

INTRODUCTION:

The BLM is proposing to amend the 1993 Gunnison Resource Area Resource Management Plan (RMP) to designate the Hartman Rocks recreation area as a Special Recreation Management Area and to update the 2006 Hartman Rocks Recreation Area Management Plan. An Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared to analyze the effects of the proposed action and plan amendment.

Hartman Rocks Recreation Area is a popular urban interface recreation area a few miles southwest of Gunnison, Colorado. Its proximity to Gunnison makes it easy to access for local residents for a recreation experience. It is a destination location for mountain biking, rock climbing and single track motorized enthusiasts. It is estimated that Hartman Rocks receives approximately 40,000 visits each year. Visitors enjoy a variety of recreation activities including mountain biking, motorcycling, ATV riding, 4-wheeling, rock climbing, bouldering, camping, trail running, horseback riding, cross country skiing, snowmobiling, dog sledding, social gathering, target shooting, hunting and more. The area also has other resource values that must be considered when contemplating recreation management actions. These include livestock grazing, cultural sites, wildlife habitat and rare plants. The total planning area boundary is 14,423 acres.

The focused recreation use in this area has led to both some benefits and problems. The benefits are that many visitors use the roads, trails and rocks in this area regularly for a variety of recreational pursuits. Hartman Rocks also benefits the public as a destination for people outside of the Gunnison area. Hartman Rocks provides economic benefits to the local community: visitors buy food, fuel, stay in motels, purchase supplies, utilize guide services and rent equipment such as mountain bikes. Some of the concerns that arise from this focused recreation use include human use impacts to soils and vegetation, potential impacts to cultural sites (vandalism, removal of artifacts), impacts to wildlife, conflicts between recreationists and livestock operations, trespass on adjacent private lands and conflicts between different recreation groups, such as motorized use and non-motorized use, recreational target shooters and trail users.

The 2006 Recreation Area Management Plan (RAMP) for Hartman Rocks provides sound general guidance and specific management decisions, many of which have been accomplished. Due to issues with sensitive species, increased visitor use and other changed conditions this plan needs additional direction to reduce human use impacts and conflicts in this area. The 2006 RAMP included site specific direction for trail and road management but lacked direction and vision to address human use impacts on public lands. The 2006 RAMP focuses on local use and does not consider use from a larger geographic area. It does not allow for geographic expansion

based on user demands and does not define management for large southern area, including the Aberdeen Loop Trail.

The 1993 Gunnison Resource Area Approved Resource Management Plan (RMP) mentions Hartman Rocks as part of the Gunnison Extensive Recreation Management Area which will be managed for a diversity of recreation opportunities. Potential recreation projects will be considered, and if proposed for development these projects will be addressed in Recreation Project Plans. Given the focused and varied recreation use of the Hartman Rocks area, management as part of the Extensive Recreation Management Area (ERMA) for the BLM Gunnison Field Office is no longer appropriate.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT DETERMINATION:

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the referenced environmental assessment, and considering the significance criteria in 40 CFR 1508.27, I have determined that the action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, preparation of an environmental impact statement is not necessary.

RATIONALE:

Context: Under the proposed action the Resource Management Plan for the Gunnison Resource Area dated February 1993 will be amended to designate Hartman Rocks Recreation Area as a Special Recreation Management Area. This will provide for the appropriate increased level of management actions within the 14,423-acre Hartman Rocks area.

The proposed action will take an adaptive management approach to recreation planning at Hartman Rocks Recreation Area and to update some guidance decisions made in the 2006 RAMP accordingly. An updated RAMP will: provide guidance and direction toward managing recreation in a manner that maintains or improves the condition and health of the unique landscape and its natural resources; while creating a sustainable recreation environment to promote a diversity of high quality recreation opportunities; and provide for the health and safety of visitors. An updated Recreation Area Management Plan is needed due to issues with sensitive species, site specific decisions which are no longer valid, increased visitor use and other changed conditions. The 2006 RAMP is no longer sufficient and needs more direction to reduce human use impacts and conflicts in this area.

Intensity: Project design guidelines have been identified in the EA to minimize any adverse impacts that may result from the proposed action. However, the primary goal of this is to provide guidance and direction toward managing recreation in a manner that maintains or improves the condition and health of the unique landscape and natural resources while creating a sustainable recreation environment to promote a diversity of high quality recreation opportunities and provide for the health and safety of visitors.

Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse: Currently, with limited winter recreation in the area, the Hartman Rocks area provides quality winter habitat with little disturbance. Under

the proposed action, ski trails in the area will increase by 13 miles and may have increased impacts on wintering grouse and big game, especially along the South Beaver drainage and along/south of the powerline road. Impacts include increased disturbance from grooming, use of the trails and impacts associated from recreation such as pets, increased noise, and direct disturbance. However, providing groomed ski trails in a concentrated area provides needed recreation facilities as use increases at Hartman Rocks Recreation Area. Increased ski trails in Hartman helps concentrate use to this specific area and may reduce dispersed winter recreation in other areas of the field office.

Winter recreation is a concern to big game in the area. The expansion of ski trails to the west of existing trails under this action will continue to push wintering game out of the area. Currently, there is a buffer between heavy winter use and where the concentration of game is along South Beaver Creek. The new trails will decrease the buffer and cause disturbance to animals already at low body reserves and will displace animals to other areas. However, sufficient snow depth to support groomed ski trails in the proposed area does not occur every year. Authorization to groom ski trails proposed in this alternative is a discretionary action for BLM. If BLM determined disturbance of wildlife rose to a significant level in any given year, authorization to groom ski trails may be restricted. Conversely, providing groomed ski trails in a concentrated area provides needed recreation facilities as use increases at Hartman Rocks Recreation Area. Increased ski trails in Hartman helps concentrate use to this specific area and may reduce dispersed winter recreation in other areas of the field office. In the past during years of high snowfall, land management agencies closed all public lands in lower elevations to human use except Hartman Rocks Recreation Area to help deer and elk and concentrate recreation use.

Currently, fragmentation from recreation is a significant threat to skiff milkvetch in the Hartman Rocks planning area (USFWS 2010). Under the proposed action, closed trails will be revegetated to ensure use on them does not continue. Future routes and re-alignments will require full field clearances to ensure trails, parking lots, and other recreation infrastructure will not impact known populations and suitable habitat within the planning area.

Public health and safety: The proposed action will provide guidance and direction toward managing recreation in a manner that maintains or improves the condition and health of the unique landscape and natural resources while creating a sustainable recreation environment to promote a diversity of high quality recreation opportunities and provide for the health and safety of visitors. Improving visitor safety is an important aspect of the planning effort by making improvements related to human waste, recreational target shooting, and visitor interaction.

Unique characteristics of the geographic area: There are no prime or unique farmlands, wild or scenic rivers, designated wilderness or wilderness study areas. South Beaver Creek Area of Critical Environmental Concern is in the analysis area and mitigation measures are in place to protect the integrity of the designated area. The Hartman Rocks area does include known cultural resources. Cultural resources would be protected by completing site specific cultural inventories prior to proposed ground disturbing projects within the analysis area. Results would be evaluated and mitigated so that effects and impacts of the undertaking would be minimized.

Degree to which effects are likely to be highly controversial: Some actions in this EA are controversial at different levels. The recreational shooting closure was anticipated to be controversial but the BLM did not receive any negative comments during scoping concerning this issue. The BLM intends to conduct further education and outreach regarding the proposed closure.

Expanding winter cross country ski trail grooming is also of controversy due to anticipated impacts to wintering wildlife. However, grooming will only be expanded in years of adequate snowfall and is a discretionary action determined in coordination with BLM's partners.

Degree to which effects are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks: It is uncertain as to the degree of displacement groomed cross country ski trails will have on wintering wildlife. It is also uncertain as to how people will react to the recreational shooting closure and what other locations outside the closure area will see impacts from displaced users. However, the BLM has worked with partners to identify a dispersed shooting area in close proximity to the proposed closure. It is predictable that displaced users will make use of this area given its close proximity.

Consideration of whether the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant impacts: The proposed action will not result in setting precedents for future recreation use. The BLM manages recreation impacts by monitoring use, public safety, and resource concerns which help BLM determine whether an action should be taken to correct the issue. The BLM is also being proactive in approaching recreation management at Hartman Rocks through the RAMP by providing some site specific management direction but also providing flexibility through adaptive management.

Consideration of whether the action is related to other actions with cumulatively significant impacts: The Hartman Rocks Plan will not result in any significant cumulative effects.

Scientific, cultural, or historical resources, including those listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places: Known cultural resources within the analysis area include a diverse array of prehistoric archaeological sites that make up a unique cultural landscape. Prehistoric site types include open lithic, open camp, and rock art sites. Historic site types are few but include the Aberdeen Quarry where granite was quarried for use in the Colorado State Capitol as well as small homesteads, prospecting/mining pits, and historic roads and trails. Currently there are no known paleontological resources in the analysis area. The potential for paleontological sites within the resource area is low, but does exist.

The analysis area contains historic resources protected under the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, E.O. 13007, and other statutes and executive orders. The BLM will not approve any ground disturbing activities that may affect cultural properties eligible to the NRHP until it completes its obligations under applicable requirements of the NHPA and other authorities. Once a project specific proposal is submitted, an additional Section 106 cultural resource assessment will be completed to identify any cultural resource concerns. If significant resources are located, the BLM will require modification to the project specific

proposal to protect such properties, or disapprove any activity that is likely to result in adverse effects that cannot be successfully avoided, minimized or mitigated.

Threatened or endangered species and their critical habitat: Of the plant and animal species occupying the Gunnison Field Office area that are federal or state listed threatened, endangered, or candidate species, or BLM sensitive species, those that warrant discussion under this proposed action are the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), Gunnison Sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*), Gunnison's prairie dog (*Cynomys gunnisoni*), skiff milkvetch (*Astragalus microcymbus*), Gunnison milkvetch (*Astragalus anisus*), and Crandall's rock-cress (*Boechera crandallii*). The Gunnison Sage-grouse, Gunnison's prairie dog, and skiff milkvetch are candidate species for listing under the Federal Endangered Species Act; the bald eagle and Crandall's rock-cress are BLM sensitive species.

Gunnison Sage-Grouse: The entire Hartman Rocks Recreation Area is within Gunnison Sage-grouse (GUSG) occupied habitat. There are two active sage grouse leks within the recreation area and one active lek exists within about two miles of its boundary; another 3 inactive leks are about two miles from the recreation area. The Gunnison Sage-Grouse Rangewide Conservation Plan [RCP] (Gunnison Sage-Grouse Rangewide Steering Committee 2005) designates areas within a 4-mile radius of a lek as non-lek breeding habitat and summer-fall habitat. This is based upon studies of GUSG which indicate that 85% of all GUSG nests and 81% of all GUSG breeding and summer-fall seasonal locations are within four miles of the lek of capture. Almost the entire Hartman Rocks recreation area is within 4 miles of a lek, and therefore within non-lek breeding habitat and summer-fall habitat. The recreation area includes nesting/early brood-rearing habitat and winter habitat within stands of sagebrush, and brood-rearing habitat along riparian areas. Currently, with limited winter recreation in the area, the Hartman Rocks area provides quality winter habitat with little disturbance. Under this alternative, ski trails in the area will increase by 13 miles and may have increased impacts on wintering grouse, especially along the South Beaver drainage and along/south of the powerline road. Impacts include increased disturbance from grooming, use of the trails and impacts associated from recreation such as pets, increased noise, and direct disturbance. However, sufficient snow depth to support groomed ski trails in the proposed area does not occur every year. Authorization to groom ski trails proposed in this alternative is a discretionary action for BLM. If BLM determined disturbance of wildlife rose to a significant level in any given year, authorization to groom ski trails may be restricted.

The proposed action in the Hartman Rocks RAMP EA is consistent with the direction provided in the Candidate Conservation Agreement for the Gunnison sage-grouse, *Centrocercus minimus*, Gunnison Basin population (CCA). Beginning in January 2010, federal land management agencies and the Gunnison Basin Sage-Grouse Strategic Committee developed the CCA to promote conservation of the Gunnison Basin population of Gunnison sage-grouse. The CCA addresses three categories of threats to sage-grouse habitat on federal public lands in the Gunnison Basin, as identified in the 2010 FWS status review: development, recreation, and grazing. A conference opinion was signed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on July 30, 2013 in accordance with section 7 of the Endangered Species Act regarding the CCA and its covered actions.

Skiff milkvetch: In the Gunnison Field Office RMP (1993), the South Beaver Creek Area of Critical Environment Concern (ACEC) was designated to protect the skiff milkvetch. The species occurs as small, scattered colonies throughout the ACEC and surrounding areas, which is the only place in the world this plant is known to occur. The plant grows in dry, sandy to gravelly soils in open sagebrush or juniper-sagebrush dominated communities on relatively steep slopes and at elevations between 7,600 and 8,400 feet (Denver Botanic Gardens 2004). Colonies are typically on SE to SW exposures, although surveys from the past several years have found them on flats near existing colonies. Currently, fragmentation from recreation is a significant threat to skiff milkvetch in the Hartman Rocks planning area (USFWS 2010). Under the proposed action, closed trails will be revegetated to ensure use on them does not continue. Future routes and re-alignments will require full field clearances to ensure trails, parking lots, and other recreation infrastructure will not impact known populations and suitable habitat within the planning area.

Migratory Birds: Birds on the list for the Southern Rockies/Colorado Plateau region which may breed within Hartman Rocks recreation area are the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), prairie falcon (*Falco mexicanus*), Lewis woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*), and sage sparrow (*Amphispiza belli*). Golden eagles, peregrine falcons, and prairie falcons all nest on cliffs such as those found in the Hartman Rocks area. Lewis woodpeckers breed primarily in riparian habitats where they nest in mature cottonwoods (Kuenning 1998). They typically choose snags, trees weakened by fire, and natural cavities for nesting sites. Sage sparrows nest within sizable (>30 acres), low-elevation (<8400 ft) stands of big sagebrush or mixed big sagebrush and greasewood. They construct cup nests, usually at mid-bush level with sufficient foliage above to conceal the nest (Lambeth 1998). The proposed action protects areas where rock-climbing may adversely impact cliff-nesting birds, including eagles and falcons, by instituting rock-climbing closures around their nests during the breeding season (May 15 through July 15). Designated climbing crags will be monitored each spring to determine if there are active nests in the area. These mitigation measures should eliminate the risk of taking cliff nesting birds or their nests. To avoid take of migratory birds or their nests, construction of trails, parking lots, and other infrastructure where vegetation will be cleared should occur outside the passerine breeding season of May 15 through July 15. If done within this time period, nest surveys will be conducted before work is initiated.

Any effects that threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment: The proposed project does not violate any known federal, state, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. State, local and tribal interests were given the opportunity to participate in the environmental analysis process. The project is consistent with applicable BLM land management plans, policies, and programs.

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL:


Field Manager

DATE SIGNED:

7/28/14