



U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management

# Field Manager Report

February 2024

## Gunnison Field Office (GFO)

**Note:** Topics below are labeled either “**Status Update**” or “**New Update**” to help identify items that have changed from the previous report.

### ***Gunnison’s New Field Office Location - Update***

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On March 17, 2023, The Gunnison Field Office completed its move into new quarters located just east of the City of Gunnison in the new “Gunnison Rising” development. The new facility is over nine years in the making after the previous office was consumed in an arson-caused fire in 2013.

Final preparations are underway for the addition of a hazardous materials storage unit where the field office can house its herbicides, as well as fuels, paints, solvents, etc., needed for the maintenance of GFO amenities.



## ***Natural and Cultural Resources***

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### **Domestic Sheep Grazing EIS Proposed Decisions - Status Update**

On August 27, 2021, the BLM Southwest District Office released two proposed decisions for the final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Domestic Sheep Grazing Permit Renewals. Both decisions were protested by multiple groups and individuals for a variety of reasons. The project area is located in Gunnison, Hinsdale, and Ouray counties and includes nine grazing allotments on 65,710 acres of public land.

In accordance with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 and the Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972, the Southwest Resource Advisory Council (RAC) voted on September 8, 2022 to create a subcommittee to analyze domestic sheep grazing in bighorn sheep habitat on BLM-managed high alpine allotments outside of Silverton, Colorado. The Sheep Grazing Subcommittee held six public meetings at the Uncompahgre Field Office from March through August 2023, and presented their recommendations to BLM on October 11, 2024. Staff are considering those recommendations in light of the protests received and working with the new SWD planner, Katerina Hardegen, to identify a path forward.

### **North Powderhorn Fuels Reduction Project - Status Update**

GFO is currently evaluating a programmatic hazardous fuels reduction project on public lands managed by the BLM near Powderhorn, CO. The total project area consists of 90,725 acres and includes 53,877 acres within the Powderhorn Wilderness and Wilderness Study Area (WSA). GFO would implement the project over 15 years, with a total treatment target of 20,000 acres, targeting bark beetle outbreaks, including numerous portions of the project area suffering 100% spruce mortality. Site-specific NEPA would follow for individual projects within the project area.

The North Powderhorn project planning effort is nearing completion. The GFO wildlife biologist has started formal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for Canada lynx in the project area. On September 8, the project was presented to USFWS. The expected timeline for completing the Biological Assessment and receiving the Biological Order from USFWS is spring 2024.

### **Gunnison Weeds Treatment Project - Status Update**

GFO is preparing an environmental assessment (EA) to consider using integrated noxious and invasive plant management within the Gunnison Resource Area to reduce adverse impacts associated with increases in noxious and invasive plants. The EA will tier to the "Biological Assessment for Vegetation Treatments Using Aminopyralid, Fluroxypr, Rimsulfuron on BLM Lands in 17 Western States Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement" (PEIS)(BLM 2015), which analyzed the impacts of using Aminopyralid, Fluroxypr, Rimsulfuron herbicides (chemical control methods) to treat terrestrial noxious and invasive plants on public lands.

The GFO Weeds EA is nearing completion. The BLM has started consultation with the USFWS on the Biological Assessment (BA) for Gunnison sage grouse. By February 2024, we estimate we will have the letter of concurrence from the USFWS, adding additional herbicides in critical Gunnison sage grouse habitat.

The BLM completed a [final programmatic environmental impact statement](#) analyzing seven herbicide active ingredients that could be used for vegetation treatments to control noxious weeds and invasive species on America's public lands. The [Notice of Availability](#) was published in the *Federal Register* on Friday, Dec. 29, 2023. The BLM anticipates releasing a Record of Decision in January 2024. This will add flexibility and additional effectiveness in BLM's vegetation treatment program to combat the rapid expansion of noxious and invasive weeds.

### **Lake San Cristobal Fuels EA - New Update**

The performance period for this contract EA was recently extended to March 2024. The BLM ID Team is currently working with the contractor, EMPSi, to refine treatment areas, alternatives, and issues for analysis. The GFO wildlife biologist, members of the fuels staff, and students from WCU are currently conducting snowshoe hare studies.

This past winter, BLM recreation and fuels staff members spent field time in the project area to determine the feasibility of incorporating backcountry ski runs as potential fuels treatments. The areas identified for joint fuels-recreation treatments are viable for backcountry skiing. The BLM received the drafts of chapters 1, 2 and 3 and recently completed internal reviews. The GFO is scheduled to have the Lake San Cristobal EA completed by March 2024.

## ***Recreation***

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### **Alpine Loop - Status Update**

GFO saw significant increases in visitor use on the Alpine Loop in the past year, particularly in July and August. Since 2018, there has been over 20% increase in visitation, with close to 400,000 people visiting the Alpine Loop annually. This has led to parking congestion at popular trailheads and stress on existing campsites and facilities. GFO is working closely with Hinsdale and San Juan counties to address these issues. We have financial agreements in place with both counties to provide law enforcement support and we piloted a wag-bag station at American Basin.

2024 will see continued work toward improving and designating dispersed campsites, modernizing the Mill Creek Campground, adding additional toilets, working with partner groups on outreach and education, and working with the counties to supplement and define parking areas. The BLM will install signage and metal fire rings at approximately 250 dispersed campsites along the Alpine Loop as described in the 2010 RAMP. GFO is working with partners to adopt and improve an existing route from the Mill Creek campground to access Sunshine Peak, a 14'er on BLM-managed lands in Hinsdale County.

The BLM is also evaluating the acquisition of up to 30 patented mining claims in Hinsdale County. These private lands are adjacent to, or within the boundaries of wilderness study areas and these acquisitions would improve access to public lands and reduce the potential for development in and about our treasured lands on the Alpine Loop.

### **Fee Campgrounds - Status Update**

Now that the necessary consultation and analysis has been completed, GFO plans to make all campsites in the Oh-Be-Joyful Campground and a percentage of the Mill Creek campsites reservable

through Recreation.gov. GFO analyzed existing campground use fees in the Gunnison area for consistency with criteria found in the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act. This analysis led to the preparation of a business plan recommending a fee adjustment. The business plan was presented at the Southwest RAC meeting in Gunnison on October 11, 2023. The GFO expects the changes will be rolled out before the spring thaw.

## ***Lands and Minerals***

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### **Mineral Point Water Right Purchase - Status Update**

The purpose of the acquisition of the Mineral Point Ditch is to return the historically diverted water to Burrows Creek to maintain instream flows on Burrows Creek and the upper Animas River. The BLM's acquisition of the property rights associated with Mineral Point Ditch would benefit Burrows Creek by maintaining water supplies for wetlands adjacent to Burrows Creek, diluting heavy metals in Burrows Creek, and facilitating successful implementation of remediation actions taken by BLM's Abandoned Mine Land (AML) program within the Burrows Creek watershed. The appraisal has been completed and offers to the two holders have been accepted. Work in conjunction with partners will begin soon to monitor the effects on the environment from the reintroduction of this water.

### **Bonita Peak Mining District - Status Update**

The Bonita Peak Mining District (BPMD) consists of historic mines and mining-related sources where ongoing releases of metal-laden water and sediments are occurring within the Mineral Creek, Cement Creek, and Upper Animas River drainages in San Juan County, Colorado. Many of these historic mines within BPMD are located on public lands managed by the BLM, and 80% of the watershed is managed by the BLM.

The BLM, USFS, and EPA signed a joint memorandum of understanding (MOU) in July 2022 clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each agency. The goal of the MOU is improved cooperation between the agencies with respect to obligations of the EPA under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) and BLM obligations under NEPA. The EPA is the lead agency for response actions on the private sites and the BLM is the lead for response actions on BLM-managed public lands.

Cleanup actions within the mining district are ongoing by multiple agencies. BLM priority actions continue to focus on remediation, characterization of sites for remedy development, and operations and maintenance throughout BPMD. The majority of these sites are in the Cement Creek drainage and the Upper Animas River near its headwaters. The BLM completed work on the Wynona and the Joe and John mine sites this summer. Work on the Lark Mine in Prospect Gulch is ongoing and will likely need to be completed in the 2024 field season.

EPA is working to install three monitoring wells in the Sunnyside Gold mine workings in the Lake Emma area. Each of the three wells will target narrow mine workings approximately 800 to 1,000 feet below the ground surface. This drilling effort is estimated to take all summer and into the fall. As part of the mobilization, EPA will need to temporarily close County Road 25 while the drill rig is driven up to Lake Emma.

These characterization activities are important to EPA's understanding of water quality and movement of groundwater within the workings and throughout the BPMD groundwater system. Specifically, they will help determine hydraulic gradient, flow direction, potential surface expression of the groundwater. The EPA is also constructing a site-wide repository located on top of the large historic tailings piles north of the town of Silverton. They plan to complete work by the end of the 2024 field season and use the repository to store solid waste material derived from the water treatment plant.

### **Proposed Recreation and Public Purposes (R&PP) Conveyance for Kendall Mountain Recreation Area - Status Update**

The Town of Silverton applied to the BLM to acquire public lands managed as part of the Kendall Mountain Recreation Area, under authority of the Recreation and Public Purposes Act of June 14, 1926 (44 Stat. 741), as amended and supplemented (43 U.S.C. 869 et seq) (R&PP Act). The purpose of the R&PP Act is to authorize acquisition or use of public lands by States, counties, municipalities, or nonprofit organizations for recreational or other public purposes.

The BLM portion of the Kendall Mountain Recreation Area, located on public lands just east of Silverton, has been operated as a community ski area and recreation area under a BLM R&PP lease since 2001. The Kendall Mountain Recreation Area includes the BLM land and the adjacent town-owned Kendall Mountain Placer and Lackawanna Placer. In March 2001, the BLM classified and withdrew the subject public lands for lease and conveyance under the R&PP Act. The purpose of the classification and application for R&PP lease and potential conveyance was to allow construction and operation of the Kendall Mountain Recreation Area.

GFO accepted and approved a Plan of Development from the Town of Silverton in summer 2020. The proposed action is to convey approximately 93 acres of public lands to the Town of Silverton.

Currently, the BLM is awaiting concurrence on potential impacts to Canada lynx habitat, and expects this to be received before Spring 2024. Once that is received and snow has melted off, a Phase I Environmental Site Assessment will be completed. Because an Environmental Site Assessment report is only good for six months before an update is required, timing is essential.