

Upper Rio Grande Corridor and Adjacent BLM Public Lands Potential National Conservation Area (NCA)

Opening Statement

This paper is intended to provide information and serve as a reference in discussing the benefits and focus of a National Conservation Area designation (NCA) for Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in Conejos County, adjacent to the Rio Grande Natural Area, currently protecting the Rio Grande river corridor; and to consider these approximately 66,000 acres of BLM public lands for potential designation. Advantages and benefits of the NCA are extensive, (being part of the National Conservation Lands system) and are designed to ---

- Fund the implementation of coordinated and responsive management plans to the BLM
- Promote public understanding of NCA geologic, cultural, historic, and natural resource amenities
- Establish a sustainable range model to preserve family ranching and traditions
- Employ national NCA status to charge up and release a new wave of business opportunity
- Create job and income opportunities for county residents
- Motivate leadership, educators, and residents to envision a renewed community vitality for future generations

We are fortunate to have precious natural resources on federal land.

For the last 40 years or so, the canyons and gorges along the Rio Grande in Conejos County as it winds its way southward from Alamosa to New Mexico, has attracted considerable attention to its wild and remote character and is a special place worthy of natural area study and protection. Fortunately, a large part of the area under BLM management preserved much of the corridor's natural state, but the landscapes are fragile and require careful management and additional resources to maintain.

It deserves our respect and protection, but can we afford it?

This spectacular place eventually attracted the interest of a myriad of water users and conservation groups to provide an alternative to Wild and Scenic Designation and federal reserved water rights, but still elevate the significance of the surrounding landscapes. This is why there is a newly established Rio Grande Natural Area, and a Rio Grande Corridor Recreation Area, none of which have a consistent source of funding to address the increasing visitor impacts and environmental concerns. During years of neglect, the incredible cultural significance and history of the place has often been overshadowed by minimal resources to manage feral horses and illegal grazing, for example.

Congress can support us by declaring a National Conservation Area

Other Colorado locations faced with a similar situation of inadequate funding for a precious natural resource decided to share their resources with a wider public, and successfully obtained NCA designation to secure appropriate status for the resource and ability to attract and open up a new revenue stream. This required an act of Congress to carry out, but the sheer scope and value of the Conejos County "resources at risk" demand our utmost consideration, and what this ongoing discussion is all about.

Power of the NCA as an economic driver

Three areas in Colorado are NCA designated with a fourth in the planning stages. Gunnison Gorge, Dominguez-Escalante, and McInnis Canyons on the Utah border all have their own operating budgets ranging from \$829,000 at Gunnison Gorge to over a million at Dominguez. This would be in addition to revenues generated by potential businesses located outside the resource area itself, along the Hwy 285 corridor, *(this includes Towns of La Jara, Romeo, Antonito, also, towns along Hwy 142, Sanford and Manassa would benefit, because communities are closer to the resource)* including lodging, restaurants, transportation, recreation, and shops of all types.

Could Conejos County also benefit from an NCA?

Looking at the county now from the perspective of a drive along Hwy 285 through town centers, we see boarded-up buildings, business closures, dilapidated structures, and empty lots where business hubs once stood. Based on this observation, there appears to be business decay and economic deterioration in what must be an added burden for citizens to drive to Alamosa for jobs, shopping, and medical care. It is clear that additional economic drivers deserve consideration, and an NCA discussion is warranted.

The three NCAs in Colorado range in size from 63,000 acres in the Gunnison Gorge to 210,000 on the Dominguez-Escalante. Imagine the budget enhancement that could be supported with the approximately 66,000 acres now estimated for (BLM) Conejos County's potential NCA.

Area	Size	Designated	Annual Budget	Staff	Livestock Grazing	Hunting /Fishing	Motorized Recreation
San Luis Valley BLM Field Office	Potential area approximately 66,000 acres	N/A			Yes	Yes	Yes
Gunnison Gorge NCA	63,150 acres	1999	\$829,359 (2020)	7 FTEs 2 Seasonal	Yes	Yes	Yes
McInnis Canyons NCA	123,715 acres	2000	\$941,000 (2019)		Yes	Yes	Yes
Dominguez-Escalante NCA	210,172 acres	2009	\$1,042,000 (2020)		Yes	Yes	Yes

Conejos County's Adjacent Lands

Preliminary Map of Proposed NCA Area

While the canyons and gorges in the river corridor of the Rio Grande are the main attraction, the area for potential NCA designation include many more attractions and places mostly (but not all) under BLM management, and located within about an hour's travel distance from the gorge rim itself. They provide a full accounting of what constitutes the focus area and its many points of interest and sites crucial to explain its cultural and historical value.

A few selected places as indicated on the map are listed below ----

- San Luis Hills WSA (Wilderness Study Area)
- Sego Springs SWA (State Wildlife Area)
- South Piñon Hills
- Punche Valley

- Flattop ACEC (Area of Critical and Environmental Concern)
- Cumbres & Toltec RR ACEC
- Rio Grande ACEC
- South Branch Rio San Antonio
- Lobatos Bridge
- Kiowa Hill (not on map but a place of significant importance)

Conejos County: A Special Place in Colorado's San Luis Valley

People, Place, and Challenges

Conejos County represents a multicultural tapestry first occupied by indigenous tribes for millennia, and is now sustained by Hispanic settlements, and a variety of Mormon and other Anglo communities that ranch, farm, mine, and recreate here. In addition to the human and cultural history centered in the county, the greater SLV region proudly boasts the most extensive wetland system in the southern Rocky Mountains providing a vital migratory habitat for cranes and shorebirds, and a year-round habitat for fish and mammal species.

However, the county and region are facing unprecedented challenges from drought, increasing temperatures, business decline, potential energy development, and catastrophic wildfire. New residents and increased visitation present opportunities, but also challenges. As a result, the social fabric, cultural heritage, natural resources, and public lands that were once the area's greatest strength, are now being threatened.

This situation calls for a better look at NCA designation which was designed to create the economic impact and management directives needed to —

- Provide opportunity to improve land and wildlife management
- Protect traditional uses
- Support local business
- Safeguard cultural landmarks and heritage
- Ensure necessary resourcing to maintain livestock production
- Grow responsible recreation
- Ensure deeper connections of residents and the place they've called home for generations

The NCA can enable the BLM to achieve greater levels of performance and services, in coordination with the county. Short on funding now, the NCA can provide for the BLM to maintain greater management flexibility to address an increasing workload. More importantly it leverages, directs, and channels critical resources and tools to improve management actions, and also implements the needs and vision of local stakeholders.

Livestock Production

Cattle and sheep production is not only essential to Conejos County's economy, but also the core of its social and cultural fabric. While ranching has been a critical component of the county's identity and way of life for hundreds of years, it faces numerous economic, and social challenges that threaten the ability of residents to continue in family business. While the NCA cannot solve all these challenges, it can direct resources to protect grazing opportunities and improve range conditions. It can also direct funds to ---

- Build new stock tanks and water infrastructure

- Combat invasive species and noxious weeds
- Maintain and improve fencing
- Implement new technologies to assist producers to help secure the future of ranching in Conejos County
- Provide long term management solutions to illegal grazing and feral horses by funding a program specific to the needs of addressing this critical issue.
- Improve signage to protect permittees from random recreation incursion and educate visitors about timing of grazing and seasonal periods to avoid permittee areas.
- Improve law enforcement, to protect property
- Prioritize research of alternative water source to augment some of the Rio Grande river usage
- Prioritize permittee consultation with state and federal agencies regarding species reintroduction

What are other NCA's in Colorado doing to support their county and community with Specific Projects, Activities, and Programs?

Cultural Heritage and Connections

Thousands of years of human history are written on the land. And for this, the NCA would honor the rich heritage of Native, Hispano, and Mormon habitation they reflect. And since time immemorial, indigenous people managed and stewarded the area. As new generations came to inhabit the area, the inheritance of the Rio Grande Valley was handed over to them to care and nurture. But as the traffic from visitor's increases, it now presents risks to the preservation of these significant historical sites and areas of archaeological interest, including Paleolithic campsites and rock art panels.

The designation of an NCA/TCP (Traditional Cultural Properties) would present a valuable opportunity to preserve cultural assets for future generations, and provide support for signage and programming to support their interpretation.

- In 2022, Gunnison Gorge NCA received the final interpretive plan developed by History Associates Incorporated to help guide the story of Eagle Rock Shelter, one of the oldest known human occupied sites in North America.
- The friends group of the Gunnison Gorge NCA took nearly every 9th grader in Delta County on an education float trip on the Gunnison River.
- The friends group for the Dominguez-Escalante NCA established a Junior Ranger program that offers incentives for local youth to connect with the NCA.

Traditional Cultural Properties (TCP)

Information concerning the TCP and the added layer of protection that could be provided is available through BLM consultation. This does not impose federal laws on private landowners, but offers landowners a tax break on property taxes if they choose to register a site on their property.

Land and Wildlife Management

The biggest threat facing most wildlife species, especially big game and endangered species, is loss and fragmentation of habitat. Much of this is due to residential and commercial development which is encroaching on the habitat margins. Other stressors include drought, and higher temperatures. Wildlife also need open space and wetlands that allow them to complete daily and seasonal movements. In addition to ensuring lands remain open, an NCA designation will allow the BLM and other partners to prioritize and fund a variety of conservation actions to improve the quality and quantity of available habitat.

- Gunnison Gorge NCA partnered with Colorado Parks and Wildlife and Trout Unlimited (TU) to recover Rainbow Trout threatened by disease in the Gunnison River.

- In 2022, Dominguez-Escalante NCA partnered with OHV clubs to reroute an ATV trail to avoid sensitive riparian habitat, and build buck-and-rail fencing to limit use of undersigned social trails.
- At McInnis Canyons NCA, BLM partnered with local volunteers to remove unneeded barbed wire fences that were impeding wildlife movement.
- Through its volunteer ranger program, McInnis Canyons NCA was able to increase noxious weed removal projects.

Recreation Management

Outdoor recreation presents both opportunity and threat to Conejos County and the SLV region. Visitors who come to enjoy our region’s hiking, biking, fishing, hunting, climbing, and other outdoor pursuits bring valuable economic potential by spending at local restaurants, grocery stores, and hotels. But this increased traffic brings with it challenges in the form of damage to sensitive resources, disruption of wildlife movement patterns, and reduced user experience.

To address these challenges, the NCA designation incentivizes recreation and at the same time brings resources and tools to limit use when necessary.

- In 2021, Gunnison Gorge NCA completed environmental planning for three important recreation sites, and in 2022, completed multiple projects that improved access in the form of parking areas, campsites, and roads.
- In 2022, McInnis Canyons NCA was able to hire an additional ranger to staff boat ramps and initiate a Volunteer River Ranger to help assist and educate boaters.
- Also in 2022 McInnis Canyons added fire rings to all designated campsites, instigated a permit program for its most popular campground, and limited dispersed camping to protect natural and cultural resources.
- The city of Delta, Colorado holds an ultra-marathon and fun run that attracts hundreds of visitors to the community.

Local Business and Financial Health

A full economic analysis for Conejos County is not the focus of this summary. However, a very brief look at some of the data reports prepared by the Colorado Demography Office (SDO) does confirm a view of county population decline.

Here are a few facts ---

- County population at 2022 of 7,570 has been dropping about 15-20 persons per year and is projected to keep on doing so through 2030
- According to the American Community Survey, over 15 percent of the population is living in poverty
- According to the Survey, Median Household Income is \$44,000, one of the lowest in the state
- Net Migration reported by the SDO for Conejos County dropped by 85.4 percent from 2021 to 2022, meaning nobody is moving in

Potential Components of Legislation Language

Federal land designations serve to protect and manage designated sites to help meet the management needs of an area’s key features and local priorities. Land management provisions may vary, even among sites with the same designation, based on how the bill language is written for a particular site. National Conservation Areas (NCAs) are designated by Congress through a legislative

process that typically begins with robust stakeholder input. The creation of an NCA is a significant step in preserving and managing lands with unique natural, cultural, or recreational values.

Below is a brief guide outlining the general process:

Identifying Potential Areas

The process often begins with the identification of areas that possess significant ecological, cultural, or recreational value. This may involve input from government agencies, environmental organizations, local communities, and experts in relevant fields. The areas differ in landscape and size, and may contain other protected areas such as areas of critical environmental concern, wilderness, or wild/scenic rivers.

Community Planning

- The local community participates in discussions about the current assets, uses and values of the land, and how the proposal aligns with the desired management approach. Uses such as camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, and grazing are detailed in the community proposal to introduce legislation.
- Details about ongoing and future land uses in a national conservation area would be refined in a Resource Management Plan which invites community input and expertise. These plans can include wildlife conservation, protecting existing water rights, and grazing.
- An agency may propose an area for a certain management or protection in its area resource management plan.

Drafting Legislation

- Members of Congress, often in collaboration with relevant committees and agencies, draft legislation proposing the designation of a specific area as a national conservation area. This legislation outlines the purpose, boundaries, and management guidelines for the designated area. Congress may decide to allow, limit, or prohibit particular uses in an individual area through site-specific laws; however, community review and consultation is key to achieve a plan that protects community priorities in the long-term.
- Land designations may authorize new funding for management of an NCA, but do not always do so.
- This legislation would be introduced for consideration by the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Senator John W. Hickenlooper is a member.

Public Consultation

Public input and consultation are crucial components of the process. Town hall meetings, hearings, and public comment periods provide opportunities for local communities, stakeholders, and interested parties to express their opinions, concerns, and support.

Legislative Process

- *Committee Review* - The proposed legislation goes through committee review in the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and the House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources.
- *Floor Debate and Voting* - Once the legislation clears committee review, it moves to the floor of both the House and the Senate for a vote. A simple majority is generally required for the legislation to pass.
- *Presidential Approval* - If the legislation passes both chambers of Congress, it is sent to the President for approval. The President may sign the bill into law, allowing the designated area to become a national conservation area.

Implementation and Management

Once designated, the NCA is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) using management plans specifically developed to ensure the preservation of the area's values while allowing for compatible uses.

- In addition, an ongoing local advisory committee could be established.

It's important to note that the specific process may vary depending on the type of designation and the legislative nuances involved. Public involvement and collaboration between various stakeholders are key elements in the successful designation of national conservation areas.

Purpose

The legislation will feature a list of purposes describing the reason for the establishment of the NCA. These may include items such as:

- cultural and archeological resources
- wildlife conservation
- endangered species/plants
- protection of traditional uses

Management Plan

- There will be a management plan developed that will only allow uses that are consistent with the Purposes of the NCA's establishment
- Members of the Advisory council, local governments, the public and the State will be consulted

Advisory Council

- There is an advisory council established to advise in the preparation, implementation, and monitoring of a management plan
- The Advisory Council will include 11 members:
 - 3 members representing agriculture, including one permittee within the NCA
 - 2 members representing conservation, including expertise in wildlife, soils, or restoration practices
 - 2 members representing recreation
 - 1 landowner whose land borders the NCA

- 1 representative of Conejos County
- 1 representative of a tribal government
- 1 representative representing Indigenous values (from other tribes connected to the Area)
- 1 representative from CPW

Withdrawal

- Excluding existing leases or claims, no lands in the NCA would be subject to leasing for hard rock mining, fossil fuel development or other forms of energy including geothermal, wind, and solar energy

Water Rights

- Nothing in the legislation will constitute an express or implied reservation of water for any purpose or affect any water rights in existence prior to the date of the enactment
- Any new water right deemed necessary for the purposes of the NCA shall be established in accordance with the laws of Colorado

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