



**Southwest Colorado Resource Advisory Council**  
**Meeting Minutes: August 8, 2024**  
**BLM Uncompahgre Field Office**  
**2465 S. Townsend Ave. Montrose, Colorado 81401**

**Designated Federal Officer:** Stephanie McCormick, Southwest District Manager

**RAC Chair:** Lynn Padgett

**Southwest RAC members attending:**

***In person:*** Matt Thorpe, James Dietrich, Tif Rodriguez, Lynn Padgett, Gary Crisp, Victoria Atkins, Mark Roeber, Grady Ham, Jon Holst, Linda Gann, and Justin Musser

***Remotely:*** Steve Garchar and Roger Cesario (PM only)

**BLM employees attending:**

***In person:*** Stephanie McCormick, Maggie Magee (RAC Coordinator), Derek Padilla, Dan Ben-Horin, Julie Potts, David Gauthier, Edd Franz, Jon Kaminsky, James Ruff, Ray O'Neil, Rob Potts, Angela Losasso (PM only), and Charley Morgan (PM only)

**Public in attendance:**

***In person:*** Delaney Ruby, Western Watersheds Project; Terry Myers, Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society; Andrew Roth, and Bom McCready, NWF Western Wildlife Conservation

***Remotely:*** Andrew Roth, Chris Rackens, Western Slope Conservation Center; Robbie LeValley, Delta County Administrator (PM only), and Keeley Meehan, Colorado Wildlands (PM only).

The Southwest RAC was pleased to have a quorum, with 11 members attending in person and 2 attending remotely. DFO Stephanie McCormick conducted the meeting, with assistance from RAC Chair Lynn Padgett and RAC Coordinator Maggie Magee.

The meeting was available to attend remotely via Zoom (which required registration), with 360° conference camera, mic, and speaker support from a Meeting Owl. SWD Administrative Assistant Julie Potts took the meeting notes.

## **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The meeting began at 9:00 a.m. with introductions including the new SWD Deputy DM Rob Potts and Uncompahgre Field Manager Dan Ben-Horin. Maggie reminded the group that the public comment period was at 2:00 p.m. and that anyone wishing to comment must sign up.

## **OPENING REMARKS**

Lynn Padgett referenced the field trip and asked that the handouts be sent electronically to the online attendees. Stephanie noted that the BLM is in the process of preparing the draft Uncompahgre Resource Management Plan (RMP) Amendment to release for public comment, making now a good time to explain what an ACEC (area of critical environmental concern) is and discuss the opportunity and range of options. She then

opened the floor to RAC members for questions or comments regarding the previous day's field trip.

RAC members shared their perspectives on the suitability of the areas visited during the fieldtrip to be designated as ACECs; questioned if the designations are needed for BLM to know how to manage the resources; and sought clarification on whether more ACECs than what was visited were recommended.

Stephanie explained that resource management planning focuses on the big picture. ACEC designations go one step further on what can or cannot be done within an area. RMPs are revised every 20 to 30 years.

Stephanie stated that the settlement agreement that required BLM to revisit the UFO RMP decision opened the door for further considerations.

Lynn summarized the field trip:

At the first stop, Adobe Badlands, the group discussed habitat fragmentation and degradation from past grazing, weeds, and utility corridors, along with significant populations of clay loving buckwheat. Lynn noted that Angela Losasso made a distinction between proposed and existing ACECs. At the second stop along 25 Mesa Rd., the group discussed the differences between areas designated through the planning process versus congressional designations. Invasive species and the public lands with wilderness characteristics and ACECs; there is similar management in the canyon bottom, but the mesa top had lesser management prescription. She talked about the BLM having the ability to monitor and manage on the ground and asked whether anyone in the group had additional observations.

### **SESSION 1: Updates on Escalante Ranch**

Dan Ben-Horin stated that The Conservation Fund is leasing most of the Ranch to an individual that is in agriculture, and the timeline is looking promising to acquire the Ranch in Summer 2025. The BLM has had opportunities to begin surveying the property. He wants to engage the public and stakeholders in the future of the area.

Stephanie stated that the US Forest Service was not able to secure the additional 4,000 acres, which is back on the market again. The BLM is excited about the opportunity to acquire the lower portion of the historical ranch.

Steve Garcher asked whether the fields at the ranch will have cattle put back on them. The legislation for the NCA allow for grazing. The agriculture fields will be a different consideration. Stephanie mentioned that the BLM is looking into the potential. The BLM will want to hear back from the public on their vision for the fields. She pointed out that at the last RAC meeting a sub-RAC was proposed to work on the vision.

Victoria inquired about whether tribes have been brought in yet to survey the property.

The three Ute Tribes have been to the ranch on the public roads. Stephanie said that the property just transferred to partner hands three weeks ago and we did not have access prior to that. She stated that the goal is to get the tribes out there and working on it with them and the cultural team liaison will be involved.

Dan mentioned that the property is still private land and that while there is public interest in gaining access, the messaging for now is that it is private land.

Tif noted that there should not be any rush to get people recreating out there. She asked if the upper section was sold, but put back on the market. The answer was yes. Tif stated that this was a perfect example as to why the BLM purchasing the land was a good decision and said that the property could have been sub-divided.

Grady Ham asked whether there is a model to work with and if it had been done before.

Stephanie noted that the Nature Conservancy has had experience in acquiring ranch land, but this is a large example for us.

Justin Musser asked whether the BLM would be opening the flood gates in 2025.

Stephanie answered that the BLM would be cautious in how it will be opened to the public and make sure that the BLM is ready to manage it.

Stephanie stated that the public obviously thinks some of the ranch is already BLM in the way they are already using it. She asked whether we want to open a gate with structures and irrigation? Probably not. We want to be cautious with that. Other areas that already represent BLM can possibly be opened earlier.

Justin stated that this is far outside the norm and there is a lot of opportunity for conflict and 2025 is coming up fast. It is complicated and hard to know what issues to expect.

Lynn asked if there was any place in the country that has a working landscape/ranch that we could compare to as it goes through the NEPA process. (Some examples were given, such as Capitol Reef.) Perhaps, multi beneficial projects with irrigation and river projects, where its privately owned with C.F. and extends to DOI ownership, exploring with landowners a multi-benefit project, organizing ditch owners, organizing a grant writer, multi funding, doing ditch improvements, beaver and wetland habitat and restoration. Just a question as going through EIS if BLM, as landowner, will it qualify for a multi benefit?

Stephanie asked if there were any further comments. Nothing further was brought up.

## **SESSION II: Sheep Grazing**

Jon Kaminsky said that the BLM is engaged in the final chapter of the Sheep Grazing EIS proposals. The BLM received protests on the proposed decision in 2021.

The BLM brought the issue to the RAC, which worked on it for over six months and gave their recommendations to the BLM on how to move forward, incorporating RAC recommendations along with what was already in the EIS.

At the same time, the Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment has been a long, heavy lift and GFO staff have done an amazing job under enormous pressure.

Tif asked whether Jon knew of any interactions between bighorn and domestic sheep.

Jon responded that none had been confirmed.

Tif asked whether there were any big issues with bighorn sheep.

Matt Thorpe responded that CPW has not heard of any issues.

Jon noted that it's complicated on the corridor cutoff and asked if there were any other sheep questions.

### **SESSION III: Field Office Reports**

The three SWD field offices provided highlights of their activities, issues, and accomplishments from their respective Field Manager reports and responded to RAC member questions (those reports are available online).

#### **Gunnison Field Office, Field Manager Jon Kaminsky**

Jon Kaminsky stated that GFO continues to have hiring issues, noting that housing is problematic. Brian Brown is the new Assistant Field Manager. GFO has five vacancies overall.

Jon Holst asked whether staffing is a problem.

Stephanie responded that there is not a lot of desire to move or work remotely.

Jon Kaminsky explained that the GS scale and locality pay adjustments and high cost of housing are deterrents.

Jon brought up the North Powderhorn Fuels project, noting that the BLM is proposing treatments within wilderness, which is controversial under the Wilderness Act. The project area has extreme fuel loading and the BLM would like to manage that landscape using a variety of treatments.

Jon Kaminsky referenced Mark Roeber's point that we have to look closely at available tools to see what is important for grazing in the RMP. One other ACEC that was nominated through the Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment was Sugar Creek. Instead of going the ACEC route, given Sugar Creek's proximity to Gunnison, no roads, habitat, primitive backcountry experience, and livestock grazing, the area was brought forward as a Backcountry Conservation Area in the Proposed RMP Amendment. CPW was supportive of this. He noted that, to Mark's point, an area does not need to be designated to be managed.

Jon mentioned that another issue has been e-bikes on Signal Point and noted that the BLM is allowing use for folks with a stated disability but does not want to cause problems with private landowners.

Matt Thorpe asked whether there is guidance and mentioned that CPW requires a doctor's note. He expressed concern for potential abuse if no proof is needed.

Jon Kaminsky responded that the BLM asks for "where, when, and why" verification.

Tif asked what type of device qualifies and what about enforcement.

Dan noted that the requests UFO is receiving are from notable outdoor enthusiasts. He added that the enforcement side is tough and must rely on community support and enforcement.

Tif stated she's coming from a horses on trails perspective and is concerned with the impact of e-bikes with people on horses.

Jon Kaminsky said he is concerned with the sight lines on some trails with e-bikes and horses and is considering opening the issue to the public for suggestions and collecting data on the type of user requesting an exception.

Lynn asked whether the e-bike topic could be added as a future agenda item.

Stephanie responded that the SWD leadership team would consider it.

Jon Holst stated that hunters and anglers push hard for guidance and appreciate this particular designation, as they need areas that are not subject to mechanized vehicles.

### **Tres Rios Field Office, Field Manager Derek Padilla**

Derek Padilla mentioned their transportation and access plan, noting that there are more routes on the ground than what was inventoried. He said that BLM staff inventoried the all routes and plan to have a proposed action in late fall/early winter to share with the public and agencies for feedback.

Derek discussed the Grassy Mountain Project and that they are working with the Forest Service and State of Colorado for wildfire risk reduction. He said the National Forest Foundation is collecting funds from different agencies and put contracts together, but no bids have been received. He is concerned with the two-season limitation to complete the project, and does not feel it is enough time, especially with issues related to access (i.e. subdivisions).

Derek indicated that the project has support from the Metro District to access locations, but that landowner access has been denied for one large parcel that would offer the best access. He stated there's a lack of any other option for the BLM section that would allow access for treatment and prescription. The landowner is in support of the work, but not of accessing the project area from his property. State of Colorado will meet with him to request access.

Derek went on to discuss the Durango area wildlife closures, noting that language in the RMP on timing restrictions was conflicting, in some places saying areas are closed until 4/30. but could open sooner if conditions allow, while other language reads that areas will open on 4/15, but could remain closed until 4/30 if conditions warrant. All will now say 4/30, unless conditions allow the BLM to open earlier. This is in line with CPW language.

Matt stated that he appreciates the BLM making the adjustment. He explained the reasoning for closing trails until 4/30; snowpack could be different based on trail incline and animal habitat not yet stabilized.

Derek stated that the closure area is monitored with game cameras and in April they saw significant reduction in violations with gate and signage.

The Road 41 parking area has been constructed, with some opposition by local landowners. BLM staff worked with the landowners and made modifications based on

their concerns.

Crews finished the main parking area for the Aqueduct trail system, along with a shade structure.

Residents have expressed concern on developing the Chutes and Ladders site. Funding is available to provide a small parking area to increase public use of that trail system.

Paradox Resources has gone through bankruptcy and was sold to American Helium. Tres Rios has a pending meeting scheduled with them to address issues.

Kinder Morgan DW1 mentioned putting well pad on west side of Dolores River. CO2 reserves on that side flow downhill and are accessible without development on the east side of the river. The BLM received comments, but no protests.

Cancelled an Environmental Assessment until they have developed a definitive plan. State order in effect that they reclaim the Topaz Mine by the end of 2025.

Completed the EA for the disappointment-gravel pit and didn't receive any protest.

### **Canyons of the Ancients NM, Monument Manager Ray O'Neil**

Ray O'Neil mentioned that on Sept. 6 astronomers and indigenous speakers would be coming to Canyons of the Ancients Visitor Center to present a night sky program.

They are working on programmatic agreement for Yellow Jacket. They did not receive a large number of comments, and are hoping to sign final documents soon.

Ray noted the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe is receiving a grant to remove domestic horses and looking into the possibility of working with them to remove domestic horses on the NM.

New regulations came out to give more voice to Indigenous groups to make claims on funerary objects. He noted that a great deal of consultation is needed with the Tribes.

CANM is in the last phase of working to complete ADA trails and with the contractor to install interpretive signs later this summer.

Tiff stated that Spring Creek Basin is a model for a successful herd management area; with 3 babies born and 2 adult horses lost due to age. There has been no need for a round-up since 2011. The partnerships with the BLM is a large credit for the success.

Derek mentioned that they received funding to update the HMA signage and the materials have been ordered and should be ready for installation this fall.

Stephanie noted that wild horses are protected under the Wild Horse and Burro Act. Domestic animals are subject to removal. Tribes claim that the horses on the NM are domestic.

Steve Garchar is anticipating gravel pits for the benefit of the community and hopes that Kinder Morgan explores CO2 reserves.

Jon Holst asked about the trail inventory. He has arranged to meet with the Forest Manager regarding illegal trails and asked Derek whether existing trails identified during

inventory become valid.

Derek responded that the BLM evaluates routes and designates which route make sense in terms of access, wildlife security, watershed, and cultural resource, and does not authorize the rest. Field work conducted over the summer is validating the routes and the rest will be eliminated. A lot of that area is used for hunting and the BLM wants to provide access to those areas that need it. The route inventory was done in 2015, but BLM staff is going back out to validate that inventory and will work with cooperating agencies (like CPW) to develop a proposal.

### **Uncompahgre Field Office, Field Manager Dan Ben-Horin**

Dan Ben-Horin said that the Draft EIS RMP Amendment will be out this December, followed by incorporating public comments, then working to develop a Proposed RMP Amendment and Final EIS.

Dan noted that the UFO has vacancies, but not quite as significant as other areas.

In grazing news, data has been collected for a land health assessment of grazing allotments in GGNCA. A lot of big game pressure is adding complexity to the land health issue.

The BLM has been involved in ecology and vegetation programs through the Dolores River Restoration Partnership, working to remove tamarisk and invasive weeds along the Dolores River.

Lynn asked what the BLM position is with respect to the proposed Dolores National Monument.

Dan responded that, if it's designated, the BLM will manage it, but the BLM is not part of the decision making for monument designation.

Stephanie stated BLM's role is to provide data as requested by legislators and if a designation occurs, the BLM would develop a resource management plan.

Dan stated that, if a new area is designated, it is likely that no new funding would be provided to manage it.

### **Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area, NCA Manager Edd Franz**

Edd Franz stated that the trailhead built on Highway 90 with skills course and hub for Rimrocker trail is also the trailhead for Electric Hills and is single track trail.

Regional Partnership initiatives, ORCO and Western Slope Outdoor alliance. That group is gaining momentum and hiring a coordinator. Once hired, with 200k from CPW, address challenge of how to maintain community character while offering recreation and other public uses.

Edd mentioned that the Jumbo Mountain signed an EA last fall for the trail system and maintenance. Thus far implementing the seasonal closure has not worked well. He noted that gates are key to enforcing and there is a plan for gates and to work with the community to help enforce the closure. He hopes that outreach will lead to greater

success, but it has been a struggle to get traction.

Public comment on the UFO Business Plan for new amenity fees begins Monday.

Edd said that an environmental assessment along the Gunnison River had been completed and will be implemented beginning summer 2025.

Gunnison Gorge NCA celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. Anniversary events are being planned for October 18 and 19, probably in Delta. The former UFO lead archeologist will lead guided tours to Eagle Rock Shelter, followed by a celebration at Pleasure Park.

There has been a report of graffiti on rock art at Eagle Rock Shelter.

GGNCA will be recognized as a certified International Dark Sky; he will be meeting with the International Dark Sky Association.

The 16<sup>th</sup> annual Cottonwood Days sixth grade kids' education program will take place the last week of September.

**11:32 a.m. Meeting adjourned for lunch**

**12:45 p.m. Meeting reconvened**

#### **SESSION IV: Uncompahgre RMP Amendment, Project Manager Angela Losasso**

Angela Losasso gave a PowerPoint presentation, which reviewed the handout given on the field trip and led a discussion on each of the ACECs being considered for designation through the RMP amendment process. Afterwards, discussion was open to the group.

Dan noted that the Gunnison Gorge is not part of the Uncompahgre FO planning area.

Justin asked for an explanation of how the Big Game RMP Amendment intersects with the Uncompahgre RMP Amendment.

Angela stated that the preferred alternative from Big Game is in one of our alternatives.

Justin asked what the possibility was of the ACEC boundaries being changed in the process.

Angela stated that the BLM plans to maintain the existing boundaries and does not believe changing boundaries or nomination.

Angela stated that the RMP gives management prescriptions, but also consider that this action is happening within an ACEC, so it does provide a specific design to protect the value of the ACEC.

Stephanie mentioned that the next RAC meeting is November 13 and 14 at Tres Rios Field Office.

#### **SESSION V: PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD**

Terry Myers, Executive Director of Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society, stated that he is



was hoping to hear an update on the short-term recommendations made by the Sheep Grazing Sub-Committee regarding: 1) annual date and implementation review and strategies; 2) GPS collars for domestic sheep; 3) Strengthening communication and implementing technology that would enhance communication speed; 4) Tabletop exercises. Guard dogs have been attacking hikers and there was a llama incident; the same permittee that grazes in that allotment. Terry was hoping to hear a plan on how this would be addressed. He also noted that he had heard that there might be a proposal to build a trail from the Sunshine Trail and is concerned for the bighorn sheep in that area.

Delaney Ruby, from Western Watersheds Project, said that she appreciated the process and being able to witness the discussions between the RAC and BLM.

### **FINAL COMMENTS**

Jon Holst complimented the field manager reports.

Justin Musser complimented Angela on her presentation.

Linda Gann requested a list of acronyms, which was provided.

Tif Rodriguez said she would appreciate follow-up on any recommendations that are made.

Jon Kaminsky recommended reviewing the ePlanning site.

Jon Holst would like to know more about the BLM's plan to address e-bikes.

Lynn Padgett said she is grateful to be part of the SWRAC and appreciates having great discussions and going to great places.

**Meeting was adjourned at 2:16 p.m.**