

Southwest Colorado Resource Advisory Council
Meeting Minutes: November 14, 2024
Tres Rios Field Office, 29211 State Highway CO-184, Dolores, CO 81401

Designated Federal Officer: Stephanie McCormick, Southwest District Manager
Chair: Steve Garchar, Vice Chair

RAC Members present:

James Dietrich, Mark Roeber, Grady Ham, Tif Rodriguez, Victoria Atkins, Steve Garchar, Justin Musser, and Matt Thorpe; Ben Katz and Starr Jamison (via Zoom)

BLM Employees

Stephanie McCormick, Jon Kaminsky, Edd Franz, Derek Padilla, Maggie Magee, Ray O'Neil, Dan Ben-Horin, Rob Potts, Brian Yaquinto, presenter, Randi Lupardus, presenter (AM), Caroline Kilbane (AM), Tyler Fouss (AM), David Gauthier (Zoom AM), and Doug Vilsack (Zoom AM)

Members of the public (remotely via Zoom)

Emily Paul, Colorado Dept of Agriculture, Federal Land Management Specialist; Chris Rackens, Western Slope Conservation Center; Mykala Fernandes; Mark Pearson.

No members of the public requested to speak during the public comment period.

The Southwest RAC was pleased to have a quorum, with 8 members attending in person and 2 attending remotely. DFO Stephanie McCormick conducted the meeting, with assistance from 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 Deputy District Manager Rob Potts took the meeting notes.

Opening remarks and introductions

Steph reminded the group about nominations for the next term: Four openings, 2 in Category 2 and two in Category 3, and to work with Maggie if interested. The nominations close November 15, 2024.

Review of previous day's field tour to view areas being analyzed in the Tres Rios Field Office TAP2

Tres Rios Field Manager Derek Padilla reviewed the previous day's field tour of two locations along the proposed Yellowcake route that will interpret the area's uranium-vanadium mining history.

The main point was to look at the area with regard to TAP2. Initiated in 2015-16 and then again in 2020. Extensive inventory was completed using students. Significant personnel changes temporarily stopped the project. Kick-started again in 2020, however not a lot of progress was made. This is the third try.

Tres Rios NEPA Coordinator Randi Lupardus gave a PowerPoint presentation and answered questions on the route inventory process and current environmental assessment for the Tres Rios Transportation and Access Plan for Travel Area 2.

The 2015 RMP identified areas as open, closed and limited. These area designations remain valid for the TAP. Maps of priority areas were published in the RMP. Silverton is no longer in TRFO so is not included in the TAP. Priority Area 4 (TAP2) is the current focus and covers Dolores, San Miguel, and Montrose counties.

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TRFO is looking at linear features to determine what is a route, what is a fence, etc. Phase 1 is complete and phase 2 is incomplete. Signage will be done after TAP2 is approved.

Map was posted online in 2017. The 2024 inventory updated the information to include more linear features. While the RMP looked at areas, TAP2 looks at individual routes. TAP2 will be updated annually, but never amended. TAP2 does not propose new routes or ground disturbance.

Randi shared the purpose and need:

- Better manage and reduce impacts
- Increase access
- Improve user experience
- Distinguish between routes and linear disturbances
- Ensure safety.

Internal review of alternatives ends November 18. BLM staff is looking at every single route. Tribal and cooperator review of alternatives and issues will happen in February 2025; and public scoping in March/April. TAP2 should wrap up by October 2025. Route density considerations should be of interest to Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

Victoria wondered how the strike team did their work, whether through desk audit or in the field, and Randi responded that both methods were used. Victoria then asked whether the BLM had existing cultural inventories. Brian indicated that they would continue to go out after TAP2 is completed and that routes can be closed/changed after designation if cultural resources are found following designation.

Starr sought to ensure that the BLM is taking the time to incorporate ACECs, big game and new NEPA being completed. The BLM has included Dry Creek ACEC (due to Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment), impacts of solar, and rights-of-way. Randi noted that all new disturbances will be covered by NEPA. No solar is currently proposed.

Starr mentioned that the last time TAP2 was open, San Miguel County had asked the BLM to attend one of the board of county commission meetings and answer questions from the community. Derek noted that the BLM will hold public meetings in Egnar or wherever San Miguel County decides is most appropriate. Steve wondered whether Canyons of the Ancients NM is included in this round and was told it would be in the next round.

Updates on Uncompahgre Field Office RMP Amendment and Recreation Business Plan

Uncompahgre Field Office RMP Amendment

Uncompahgre Field Manager Dan Ben-Horin provided an update on the RMP amendment, which requires the BLM to reconsider decisions related to oil and gas, ACECs, and lands with wild characteristics. UFO has been working with headquarters under a tight schedule (due to the settlement agreement). UFO will schedule a briefing with HQ soon and a cooperating agency meeting in December to provide an update. The Draft EIS will go out for public comment soon, but the exact timeline has yet to be determined.

Uncompahgre Recreation Business Plan to charge new recreation amenity fees

Outdoor Recreation Planner Caroline Kilbane discussed the draft business plan to charge amenity fees at developed campgrounds and day use areas, which went out for public comment that closed September 16. The plan proposes fees for overnight camping of \$12 per night; day use fees of \$4 for each vehicle; and an annual pass for \$20. The UFO received about 100 comments on the business

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plan, with 90% of comments in support of charging camping fees, while 70% were opposed to day use fees.

The current Federal Register notice establishing the fees will publish, but day use fees, which received considerable public opposition, will be discussed further prior to implementation. The SWRAC had previously advocated for the UFO to charge recreation fees.

BLM Colorado State Director Doug Vilsack noted the need for additional resources to address growing recreational demand on BLM lands.

Day use fees were proposed for non-motorized sites, where the UFO receives no allocated funding (motorized sites receive fees) and for river rafting sites (other than Gunnison which already charges fees). There are concerns about how people will know where they will and will not have to pay a fee, making it clunky and confusing, as well as concerns about economic inequalities and wanting to ensure continued access.

Dan requested input from the SWRAC. The UFO recommends immediate implementation of overnight camping fees and holding off on day use fees. There has been a lot of talk in the community about alternative funding sources that would make day use fees unnecessary.

Justin asked how the BLM would roll back day use fees if an alternative strategy was identified and Dan responded that to implement day use fees, the BLM would have to provide amenities such as trash collection; an upfront cost for fee collection tubes and infrastructure.

Caroline noted that, because there currently are no fees in the field office, the UFO had to go through the Federal Register process; although they would be able to work through the SWRAC to update the business plan and change fee amount in the future.

Steve noted that the government has created coalitions, such as the Montelores Coalition (Dolores and Montezuma counties), with a \$13 million budget, and wondered whether the BLM could access those funds. Matt responded that the money for regional partnerships is to convene groups, hold discussions, and formulate a plan and is not for implementation.

Tif wondered whether there might be a way to do something, such as a day use pass, statewide and Dan responded that it would require a coordinated or statewide business plan. Derek noted that something similar to the Keep Colorado Wild pass could be implemented for day use.

Ben wondered how messaging would work for passing, but not implementing, all of the business plan, and Dan responded that UFO would message and outreach through the Federal Register and with partners.

Doug expressed his excitement at seeing the Federal Register notice in his inbox, as FRNs typically take a long time to make it up the chain and said that approval of the business plan would offer an opportunity to implement overnight camping this coming spring and start to generate revenue. He noted the critical need to get more resources in the door for recreation; \$3.7 for recreation on over 8 million acres is minimal and going in the wrong direction. Fee proposals are the BLM's best option to generate funds for recreation and are going to become the norm. No other resources coming in the door, but the BLM does have a lot of great partners.

Other fees (such as Keep CO Wild) convenient provision that provides for cooperative agreements. Doug wrote the plan for Keep CO Wild. Next one would be to continue conversations around state trails program for non-motorized. We have an excellent world class program for motorized. This is an ongoing conversation.

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Victoria noted that the America the Beautiful senior pass can be used for a reduced rate for camping and covers day use, however fees go back to the BLM CO SWD only if the pass is purchased at a BLM site.

Starr mentioned that with past and ongoing involvement of local volunteers in performing trail maintenance, they would not anticipate being charged day use fees. Dan acknowledged that the BLM can't do the planning, construction, and maintenance work without partners. Steph noted that other work and fees are needed to pump toilets and remove trash. Dan added that the BLM can develop assistance agreements to share fee funds with UFO partners. Edd noted that volunteerism is uneven, with lots of volunteers in some places and few in others.

Doug noted that the BLM has more work to do on day use fees, but approving the business plan is the starting point. Opens the door for further conversations about statewide approaches. Moving forward allows us to start collecting the overnight fees and continue the conversation on day use fees.

Steph asked the SWRAC whether they wished to make a motion on the issue. Justin made a motion recommending that the UFO move forward with approving the recreation business plan and Victoria seconded the motion. All SWRAC members present concurred and the recommendation was passed.

FIELD MANAGER UPDATES

Dan Ben-Horin, Uncompahgre Field Office

UFO RMP Amendment is being shepherded by Planning and Environmental Specialist Angela Losasso. Moving forward with the Draft EIS and will keep the SWRAC posted.

UFO is doing well with staffing; recently filled a vacant Rangeland Management Specialist position and hired a permanent position dedicated to trails; the first time having a dedicated staff member for motorized and non motorized use. Advertising a Realty Specialist position; constantly have proposals that require significant NEPA work.

Edd Franz will be retiring in December from his position as Gunnison Gorge NCA Manager.

Conducting a complicated high-profile grazing permit renewal of Crawford area allotments that overlap Gunnison sage-grouse and bighorn sheep areas. BLM staff have collected land health data and will complete a Land Health Assessment report and begin the permit renewal process this winter.

Working with permittees to implement a conversion from sheep to cattle in Cactus Park and Lower Escalante allotments. Have concerns about disease transmission. Installing water development for cattle. Sheep can use snow for water; cattle require greater infrastructure.

The wildlife team is working with a grad student on population estimates of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in Gunnison Gorge; the partnership has been going for three years.

An archeologist funded through DRUM is working to collect Abandoned Mine Lands data to support reclamation work on the west end of Montrose County.

Continuing work on Escalante Ranch. Ownership has changed from longtime private owners to The Conservation Fund; will remain in agricultural operations. Will conduct a public visioning process.

Steve mentioned that state law requires measuring devices on water diversions and there are currently none at Escalante Ranch. He wondered what the cost would be to upgrade. Dan responded that Roy is working on the matter and the BLM will be in compliance. Steph noted that the BLM is working with The Conservation Fund and would ensure that Steve's comment is addressed.

Edd Franz, UFO Recreation and Gunnison Gorge NCA

Edd noted that, while the Ouray Regional Recreation and Conservation Alliance (ORRCA) is primarily focused on US Forest Service projects, the BLM is involved with the alliance. The West Slope Outdoor Alliance includes Mesa, Delta, and Montrose counties and involves significant BLM lands. They are in the process of hiring a coordinator. The first meeting was last Tuesday and was well attended by diverse partners. The alliance is pursuing “low hanging fruit” easy-win projects early on.

Moving forward with implementing the Jumbo Mountain Travel Management Plan. Youth corps trail crew has been amazing, installing seven new lockable metal gates for closing to mechanized and non-mechanized use seasonally.

Caroline is working with Nucla and Naturita to build new trails to support the economic interests of communities on the west end of Montrose County. Kiosk work is currently being done, but new trail will need to go through NEPA.

BLM staff held a wonderful 25th anniversary celebration for Gunnison Gorge NCA in October, with a number of familiar faces in attendance.

The UFO just conducted its 16th annual Cottonwood Days outdoor education program, with sixth graders from Delta County and Olathe schools. Delta County has been a great partner, maintaining the dirt road prior to the event. Edd also thanked Colorado Canyons Association for their support.

Jon Kaminsky, Gunnison Field Office

The protest report for the sheep grazing EIS is under review at the BLM CO state office.

BLM staff is preparing to implement the first 45-acre chunk (of a total 250-acre project area) in the Powderhorn fuels reduction project in spring 2025.

Impacts to the built environment along the Alpine Loop are difficult to keep up with. GFO can build restroom facilities but needs to find a way to maintain them. Working with a vendor to build a pumping truck. A tandem pumper requires additional staff; one to drive the big truck and one to drive the little truck. On a recent field trip with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Jon had a good discussion about partnering to address impacts to infrastructure and wildlife.

Steph noted that the BLM may ask for SWRAC input on issues related to the Alpine Loop, although the issue is not yet ripe. The BLM anticipates over 500,000 visitors in the near future, which creates a dilemma the BLM and others will need to solve before the challenges get worse. New SWD Supervisory Law Enforcement Officer Tyler Fouss must grapple with how the BLM patrols the loop.

GFO staffing is an ongoing challenge, with 8 of 20 positions vacant. Vacancies include two Rangeland Management Specialists; Wildlife Biologist; Forester; Administrative Assistant; and Hydrologist. GFO doesn't have a full interdisciplinary team (IDT) necessary for conducting NEPA work. Entered into an agreement with TRFO and the Montrose Public Lands Center to work with San Juan Mountains Association to provide front desk support; two people are now in place.

Over the winter, prioritizing work to address how GFO can accomplish the significant workload, which includes implementing the GUSG RMP Amendment. There is a critical need to revise the 1993 RMP.

Jon showed a video highlighting a partnership funded by Colorado Parks and Wildlife and produced by a crew member taking a video class at Western. He noted that the field office can't keep building to meet public use, but must decide when enough is enough. Toilet pumping alone cost \$75K this year; must be pumped once or twice a year.

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Tif asked how the e-bike issue is going and Jon responded that, when the Signal Peak trail system was being developed, people weren't thinking about e-bikes, but now their use has become popular. At the time, e-bikes were considered motorized. Each field office needs to address and evaluate. GFO has had a lot of community involvement, both for and against; hoping to make a decision this winter.

Tif wondered about permits/waivers. Jon noted that people can ask for reasonable accommodation, without providing medical records. GFO has processed 25 waivers for Signal Peak, adding that it is not a blanket waiver. Derek wondered whether the waiver is site and time specific and what type of accommodation is being requested. Dan noted that UFO has issued 5-7 waivers and Derek added that TRFO has received 5-7 requests and granted 3.

Victoria wondered whether there is an opportunity to educate people about trail etiquette. Jon responded that GFO has moved beyond arguments over the impacts of bikes versus e-bikes and is focused on where user conflicts are likely to occur, making signage and etiquette important. Tif noted that safety is another important aspect.

Ray O'Neil, Canyons of the Ancients NM

CANM Visitor Center is open Wed to Sat 10 am-6 pm in winter. CANM staff is excited to hold a luminaria event on December 6, 7-9 pm, for the first time in five years or so.

The CANM RMP was completed in 2010. The supplementary rule published in the Federal Register today, 14 years after being initiated, implementing low-level rules related to public use that enable the BLM to protect the Monument.

Ray plans to sign the Yellow Jacket-Flodine Programmatic Agreement with SHPO next week, which allows the BLM to look at alternative ways to address impacts. It is seen as a significant victory for managing for multiple use in a national monument.

CANM has been having great conversations regarding trespass horses coming from Ute Mountain Ute lands. The UMU received money through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the BLM is working to add money to remove UMU horses from Monument lands. Ray hopes this will make a significant dent in the trespass horse situation.

New NAGPRA rules promulgated under the current administration. Considering CANM holds collections containing over three million objects, it will be important to revitalize conversations. The new rules may lead to increased claims by Tribes, mostly related to funerary items. No claims have been made related to the Chappell Collection.

Derek Padilla, Tres Rios Field Office

Completed a number of units in the Dawson research project area, resulting in several hundred slash piles that will be burned this winter and next. Plan to issue a Determination of NEPA Adequacy for the Rabbit Mountain prescribed burn area between Durango and Bayfield to conduct retreatments next spring or fall. They also plan to conduct work at Summit Point, a 1,200-acre project area to improve habitat for pinyon jays, which could eventually be listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Range Program is getting staffed back up, with one employee onboarded in October and another arriving in December; new to BLM so will have a high learning curve.

TRFO continues working with volunteer TJ Holmes on Spring Creek Basin Herd Management Area. The HMA is within the appropriate management level thanks to the efforts of volunteers. Due to the success of the fertility control program, no gathers have been necessary since 2011.

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Recreation staff participated in the Southwest Colorado Conservation and Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (SCCORR). Montelores Coalition covers the west end of the field office. San Miguel County is starting to explore an RPI. We have folks participating in their rec roundtable as well.

A lot of good rain this year has resulted in numerous dirt roads and trails being washed out and created a big workload. TRFO entered into a new cooperative agreement with the USFS to provide road maintenance support for major washouts. We have a large road system out there and hope that TAP2 will reduce it by some, resulting in a more manageable workload.

American Helium now owns Paradox mineral assets but notified TRFO that they are having financial issues and are unsure of the company's future. Issued an updated bond request of \$540K; American Helium secured a surety bond and is operating some assets. The BLM will continue to monitor and remediate issues to avoid an orphan well situation. The operator has been given a 12/28 deadline to comply and the State will issue penalties if no action is taken.

Sunday Mine Plan of Operations has been canceled. While plans exist for 4 of 5 mines, Topaz does not have a plan. TRFO notified the lease holder that the NEPA action would be canceled and have received no response, so it is currently paused.

TRFO hired and is negotiating an onboarding date for a Natural Resource Specialist, who will perform critical oil and gas and solid mineral inspections. Realty Specialist position has been a challenge to fill; TRFO has flown the position four times, which is out now as a GS-5/7/9/11 with multiple duty locations.

Tri-state is doing heavy maintenance on right-of-way corridors from Hesperus west toward Dolores related to wildfire issues the company experienced in CA and NM. Steph noted that the BLM is coordinating a meeting with Tri-State this winter as it impacts all three field offices.

Grady wondered whether they would need to reclaim and if there is a timeline. Derek responded that they are pretty good about reclaiming within a month of disturbance and are working under a notice, so typically reclaim as they go and have a 5-acre limit.

Steve mentioned that mudslides had closed roads near Snyder Ranch and Derek noted that a second rockslide had not yet been cleared near the bighorn sheep closure gate.

BREAK FOR LUNCH

PowerPoint presentation: National Register of Historic Place listings of sites along the proposed Yellowcake route, Tres Rios Archaeologist Brian Yaquinto

Victoria asked whether the BLM has site stewards for Burrow Mine. Brian responded that, although none have been assigned yet, with the largest site steward program in Colorado, it shouldn't be difficult to find stewards.

Victoria asked whether TRFO has had a chance to inventory the existing routes in TAP2. Brian responded that they've done one survey so far, but have paused the process and will wait until TAP is complete, then inventory everything that is open. Staff have worked with the State Historical Preservation Office to develop a predictive model that will likely identify 90%.

Victoria wondered whether any of the roads are bladed and Brian responded that they are not BLM roads. TRFO has a Programmatic Agreement in place with SHPO. The BLM will have to complete surveys before ground disturbance can occur. 200 revisits are prioritized before new surveys. Will

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probably complete the surveys over the next 20-years. A ballpark estimate of about 10,000 acres to complete.

Open Discussion

Steph noted that the change in administration would result in a new SWRAC charter being issued by a new Secretary of the Interior.

Steph noted that the e-bike topic has been raised by the SWRAC in the recent past, but is not yet ripe for discussion. Although the BLM needs to let it play out before tackling, she wondered what aspects of the topic SWRAC members most want to discuss.

Tif responded that, as a horseperson in a horse group, they are keeping an eye on e-bikes. User conflicts are occurring, so looking for thoughtful discussion on where e-bikes will be allowed. Jon noted that he would appreciate any best management practices Tif has to offer, particularly pertaining to e-bike etiquette around horses. Tif agreed that it is about education and that, with the amount of education available, she is amazed there is so much conflict. Edd wondered what kinds of conflicts horse riders have with e-bikes that they don't have with mountain bikes and Tif mentioned line-of-sight and encounters with mountain bikes where not expected.

Grady asked Tif about appropriate trail etiquette and Tif responded that everybody is supposed to yield to horses; mountain bikers should stop and get off; hikers should move to the low side of the trail; and bike riders should yield to hikers. It is a safety thing, not an entitlement thing, requiring consistent education across all user groups.

Justin noted that he struggles with what appear to be circumstances that reward bad behavior. Jon mentioned that GFO needs to identify how to better facilitate such discussions. Tif noted that use of the yield-to triangle is effective and wondered whether an e-bike could be added to the triangle.

Derek noted that TRFO had discussions during TAP with the USFS and people suggested scheduling alternate days of use. Jon wondered whether that would work and Dan noted that UFO probably does not have enough demand at this point to warrant. Justin was favorable to a licensure process that creates a revenue stream or an education/testing process before a license is issued, making it a long-term, upstream solution.

Jon asked Mark whether he had noted a scarcity of rangeland management specialists. Mark noted that housing is an issue for both the BLM and USFS and added that folks didn't want to deal with Range cons, but recognizes that Range cons don't administer the program.

Jon wondered whether hiring Range Techs with no degree requirement or Natural Resource Specialists instead of RMS might be solutions. Mark observed that the BLM hiring process is turning people away and that it is a west-wide problem for Rangeland Management Specialist positions and a national problem for hiring in other fields.

Steph noted that Range is a hiring priority for SWD in order to implement the Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment and conduct permit renewals.

Maggie noted that they envision a statewide RAC in April, followed by a June meeting in Gunnison now that the bridge is open; then back to TRFO for late summer/early fall; followed by a late fall/early winter meeting at UFO. No decision has been made yet on where the statewide meeting will be held.

Matt asked whether members stay on until they are replaced and Maggie responded that members are done when their term is up. Ben, Matt, Starr, and John Holst's terms will expire on April 13, 2025.

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Ben noted that the Rocky Mountain RAC holds one virtual meeting and one field trip per year.

James asked why the recreation budget for the state is so small and Steph responded that inflation has caused rising prices, but there has not been corresponding growth in the budget. Edd added that the return on investment for recreation in Colorado is the highest in the nation; every \$1 spent generates \$180; BLM Colorado spends \$0.37 per person on recreation.

A number of SWRAC members noted that they appreciate the in-person meetings and field trips, which offer opportunities to build relationships and trust, allowing them to discuss contentious issues in a civil manner. Victoria remarked that she is honored to be part of the SWRAC and is proud of the work the RAC and the BLM do. Tif added that she values that the BLM mission is multiple use, with recreation, mining, and grazing. Ben noted that his organization has advocated for many years for more funding from Congress for the BLM.

Recommendations and Action Items

FORMAL RECOMMENDATION: The SWRAC approved a motion in support of moving the current version of the Uncompahgre Business Plan forward, with camping fees being implemented as stated and day use fees being approved but implementation tabled pending further discussion.

RECOMMENDATION: SWRAC members recommended that, if possible, the next Statewide RAC be held prior to the expiring terms of four Southwest RAC members on April 13, 2025.

RECOMMENDATION: Spring Creek Basin HMA was recommended as a potential future SWRAC field trip.

RECOMMENDATION: SWRAC members recommended making e-bikes an agenda item for a future SWRAC meeting.

DECISIONS: No formal decisions were made.

ACTION: The UFO will circle back to the SWRAC when the UFO RMP Amendment Draft EIS is released for review.

ACTION: Steph will ensure that Steve's comment on the requirement for a water diversion measuring device at Escalante Ranch is shared and addressed.

ACTION: Maggie will send out Doodle polls for SWRAC members to identify best 2025 meeting dates.

SWRAC Vice Chair Steve Garchar adjourned the meeting at 2:19 p.m.