



Northwest Colorado Resource Advisory Council (RAC) Meeting Minutes

September 15, 2022

Location: Glenwood Springs Community Center

8:02 a.m. Meeting called to Order by Greg Larson, Upper Colorado River District Manager and Designated Federal Official, and Carl Connor, Northwest Colorado RAC Chair.

Attendees:

Resource Advisory Council Members:

John Justman, Category 3	Shawn Brennan, Category 1	Jeff Comstock, Category 1
Carl Connor, Category 2	Tom Jankovsky, Category 3	Scott Braden, Category 3

Not present: Mike Pritchard, Roy Karo, Katie Steele, Shannon Chollett, Scott Robertson, Joe O’Malley, Anthony Vagneur

BLM Staff:

Greg Larson	Erin Jones
Bruce Sillitoe	Patty Luby
Bill Mills	Doug Vilsack
Elijah Waters	Greg Wolfgang
Ryan Kay	Heather Sauls
Hilary Boyd	Robert Hampson
Andrew Mcelwee	John Monkouski
Alan Bittner	Amanda Watkins

Congressional Staff:

Janeth Stancle	Sen. Hickenlooper Staff
McKenna Farley	Rep. Boebert Staff
Raven Finegan	Rep. Boebert Staff
Hilary Henry	Sen. Bennet Staff
Matthew Kireker	Sen. Bennet Staff

Public/Other:

Visitor:	Representing:	City:
Adam Ortega	Colorado Dept. of Agriculture	Broomfield
Ginny Love	Rio Blanco County Commissioner	Meeker
Heather Sackett	Aspen Journalism	Aspen
Robyn Blackwood	Landowner	Meeker
Deirdra Macnab	Landowner	Meeker
Danielle Hannes		
Gary Wockner	Save the Colorado	Fort Collins
Matt Rice	American Rivers	

Steve Jamieson		
Wade Haerle		
Debra Frazier		

8:04 a.m. Housekeeping and Introductions

8:10 a.m. Opening Remarks

Doug Vilsack - New state director leadership will bring a multitude of perspectives from the Department of Natural Resources. The main priority at the state level is collaboration. Emphasized the effectiveness of in-person meetings.

Carl Connor – The field trip was well-organized and informative. The range program at Colorado River Valley Field Office was impressive to see.

8:30 a.m. Field Trip Overview and Discuss Applications of Virtual Fencing in Grazing Management

Hilary Boyd – The purpose of the field trip was to provide an overview of how virtual fencing is used across landscapes to improve wildlife habitat and range and fuels conditions. We are seeing improvements in soil and vegetation condition, as well as livestock distribution. We are incorporating these practices in with traditional vegetation treatments. Shrublands can be restored using prescribed fires. Kristy Wallner led a soil school to study differences in soil moisture and microbial activity. The group visited Vence [virtual fence] towers and water catchments designed to benefit wildlife and provide different ways to graze the allotments. It was remarkable to see the excellent condition of vegetation that reflects what the BLM has been doing.

Shawn Brennan – The application of geofencing is an excellent tool that Colorado Parks and Wildlife would be interested in utilizing, in conjunction with fence removal and hydro axing. This tool would also be helpful for locating livestock.

Hilary Boyd – Colorado Parks and Wildlife has helped with matching funds for these efforts. This is a huge financial benefit for producers.

John Justman – Asked if this is a pilot project.

Hilary Boyd – Other field offices have jumped on the project and purchased towers. The program is growing and there will be more field trips in the future.

Carl Connor – We can do more if/when Starlink gets involved. There are lots of applications for other activities, such as recreation.

Scott Braden – Approaches the topic with a conservation lens. This technology gives us the ability to target and exclude specific areas. This is revolutionary and fencing on public lands could become obsolete, moving the landscapes towards natural appearance.

Jeff Comstock – Struggles with seeing the day when fences are obsolete. Agrees with BLM owning the base infrastructure. Burdens should not be in the tenant, but on the BLM. This technology could become obsolete. Treatments for countering fire impacts should be at the landscape-scale.

Greg Larson – As this frontier gets bigger, we are asking questions about the ownership and accountability of technology and networks.

Jeff Comstock – Boundary fences should not go away in the near future. Cringes at the idea of pulling fences for reasons other than for livestock. Redundancy of technology will fail at times. Asking for no hard switch until technology is proven. Private industry could outcompete BLM.

John Justman – Concerned with terrain issues affecting signals.

Hilary Boyd – Preliminary monitoring with Vence [virtual fence] shows a need for higher density of towers in areas of steeper terrain. If Vence moves to satellite, there will be better coverage.

Doug Vilsack – Inquired about cost savings for repairing fences vs. utilizing Vence [virtual fence]. Requested to see the numbers.

Hilary Boyd – There is a need to compile more data on cost savings comparisons.

Greg Larson – Asked how we can promote this idea and help people make decisions, and if we can anticipate a greater need for water.

Shawn Brennan – Emphasized the importance of using liaisons between the BLM and ranchers to ensure the systems are robust and up to date.

Hilary Boyd – The placement of water catchments is important, and we are working on NEPA for 8 additional small catchments within the allotments. Having ponds between allotments can give more flexibility for smaller pastures. It is possible to use contractors to construct the catchment ponds and producers are willing to help pay for the maintenance. Maintenance and water costs will depend on the allotment. BLM is currently receiving a high amount of catchment requests.

Carl Connor – Emphasized the need for BLM to lead funding efforts and that offices need to collaborate with other agencies to obtain funding. Private corporations could provide funding.

Bill Mills – Mentioned there is an enormous amount of interest in virtual fence. We are limited based on range capacity and funding.

Tom Jankovsky – This technology is a way to the future for land issues and keeps livestock from grazing public lands.

John Justman – Change can be difficult for older ranchers. It could be challenging to promote change in the ranching community. Improvement in technology the key to change.

Doug Vilsack – This could be a great opportunity for graduate-level research projects.

Bill Mills – The information from Colorado River Valley Field Office in 2021 led to improved confidence in the project. There is concern over staffing availability to work with permittees. We could anticipate the need to change staffing models.

Bruce Sillitoe – Demand is needed before we initiate programs. Permittees do a better job at maintaining the above-ground infrastructure than the BLM.

Hilary Boyd – Colorado River Valley Field Office is hoping to hire a range intern next year to assist

with Vence [virtual fence] monitoring.

Greg Larson – Emphasized the need for staff training.

Greg Wolfgang - There are opportunities to work with permittees in the Pine Gulch Fire burn area and lower elevation allotments. Some permittees have financial backing from investors.

Ryan Kay – Virtual fence technology and availability will grow exponentially.

Greg Larson – Virtual fence could help with big horn and native sheep interactions.

Jeff Comstock – Virtual fence could help manage wolf and livestock interactions.

Shawn Brennan - Virtual fence could improve interactions between livestock and oil/gas operations.

Greg Larson – Smaller pastures can be rested instead of larger pastures. There is a need for fuels treatments and fuel breaks, as well as interdisciplinary habitat treatments.

Shawn Brennan – Surrounding forests appear to be getting too thick. We can hydro axe the fuel buildup to help the landscape, not necessarily remove the excess fuels.

Carl Connor – Funding seems to be reactive versus proactive. More funding is needed for fuels management.

Tom Jankovsky – Pleased to see fuel management activities on BLM forests. A better way to manage our forests is through fuels collaboratives. Would like to see forest products removed versus burning in prescribed fires.

Greg Larson – This is not a viable option in many offices due to low amounts of timber on BLM lands and lack of industry demand.

Hilary Boyd – BLM has had a lot of challenges in bidding for fuel reduction contracts. We are seeing significant improvements in soil condition in goat-grazed woodlands. Goats are an excellent way to re-treat areas.

Shawn Brennan – Biomass fuel could be an effective way to utilize removed fuels.

Ryan Kay – There is currently not a significant demand for Pinyon/Juniper biomass/biochar.

9:15 a.m. Break

10:00 a.m. Managing Low-Elevation Grazing

(Presented by Greg Wolfgang, Grand Junction Field Office, see attachment)

Carl Connor – Asked if ranchers can be paid for not grazing certain areas, and how cheat grass is removed.

Greg Wolfgang – There is no magic bullet for removing cheat grass. We have used targeted grazing and reseeded.

Shawn Brennan – BLM seed mixes generally do well on reclaimed oil and gas sites.

Greg Larson – The purpose of this presentation is to inform the RAC that the BLM has difficult permit renewals coming up based on drought conditions. We are looking for feedback on creating new renewal objectives.

Scott Braden – Asked if NCA's add complexity or constraints to grazing.

Jeff Comstock – Recreation is increasing in Colorado and there appears to be pressure on the BLM to decrease grazing. Grazing is a tool that the BLM uses to maintain range health. Hopes the BLM will resist these pressures and continue to provide flexibility to ranchers.

Greg Wolfgang – Grand Junction is the only field office in the state that has year-round grazing. The terms and conditions of the old permit will not always align with the renewals.

Greg Larson – We are not looking to take livestock out entirely. We are looking to modify the objectives in newly renewed permits.

Greg Wolfgang – We are not reseeding in low elevation allotments. Our primary focus for reseeding is in burned areas.

Carl Connor – Activities implemented in the 1930's by the CCC could be helpful in these situations.

Greg Wolfgang – We are using a multidisciplinary approach that integrates wildlife and fuels management to maintain the native grasses. This is a primer to help us understand the challenges we are facing in the lower allotments.

10:00 a.m. North Sand Hills Draft Fee Proposal and Business Plan
(Presented by Andrew Mcelwee and John Monkouski, Kremmling FO, see attachment)

Tom Jankovsky – Asked if the fees go back to the project.

Andrew Mcelwee – All fees are used to fund site management activities, such as law enforcement.

Tom Jankovsky – Bringing in state partners would help with managing the area. The fees are too low based on current rate of inflation.

Jeff Comstock – Agreed that the fees are too low. It seems challenging to manage sites that can accommodate 30 people.

Andrew Mcelwee – The start-up money will be used for site development, staffing, and trash removal.

Doug Vilsack – Asked about the proportion of visitors from Wyoming vs. Colorado.

John Monkouski – Approx. 60 percent of visitors are from Wyoming.

Doug Vilsack – There are opportunities to obtain Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) funds from the State of Colorado to develop OHV destinations. Suggested use of the Colorado Wild Pass to access these sites.

Andrew Mcelwee – The site is on BLM land in conjunction with the State Land Board. There will be a trail to the state land. It is possible to accept the Colorado Wild Pass and use that revenue to help manage the area.

Elijah Waters – We have consensus that the fees are too low. Group site development needs some work.

Andrew Mcelwee – Most camp sites will be developed, and we are working on designating a dispersed area. There is a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the state and Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

John Monkouski – The single, double, and triple sites are determined by size and number of vehicles permitted.

Tom Jankovsky – There appears to be an EMS [Emergency Medical Services] access issue.

Ryan Kay – There is ongoing coordination between county emergency services, and we plan to construct two helipads.

John Justman – There is a delicate balance between high and low fees. High fees could cause visitors to disperse into more pristine areas.

10:25 a.m. Upper Colorado River Management
(Presented by John Monkouski, Kremmling Field Office, see attachment)

Elijah Waters – We are planning a field trip next summer. We are asking the RAC for feedback on the fee structure and the best location and time to visit.

Jeff Comstock – Expressed a high level of support for this recreation area. Please explain the deferred fee.

John Monkouski – A fee is approved ahead of time and established once the site is developed.

Jeff Comstock – The fee structure is sufficient, but hesitant to approve if it was implemented two years or more in the future.

Tom Jankovsky – Concurred that the fees are too low.

John Monkouski – 1.7 million dollars was used to purchase the land at State Bridge. Eagle County funds were used for the boat launch.

Shawn Brennan – Impressed with the reservation system at Maroon Bells and Hanging Lake.

Ryan Kay – The reservation system will be used to maintain adequate carrying capacity for the river while providing quality recreation experiences.

Greg Larson – Clarified that fees are not used to discourage use.

John Monkouski – We plan to use *recreation.gov* to implement fees and reservations. It is difficult to bring in additional staff and campground hosts. The public wants a river campsite permit system similar to Ruby Horsethief.

Doug Vilsack – It is possible to generate funds from the Keep Colorado Wild pass. The U.S. Forest Service seems to bring in very little in fee revenue in some areas.

Hilary Boyd – Suggested collaborating with Colorado River Valley Field Office on a single permit system. Colorado River Valley Field Office is interested in collecting data for river carrying capacity. Heavy use from the Kremmling Field Office section is trickling down to Colorado River Valley Field Office.

10:52 a.m. Introduction to Wolf Creek Reservoir Proposal
(Presented by Heather Sauls. White River Field Office, see attachment)

Shawn Brennan – There were no environmental groups listed in the presentation.

Scott Braden – There will be an enormous response from the environmental community. All of the Colorado Basin will be paying attention to this project.

Heather Sauls – We are early in the process in deciding what will happen with Taylor Draw dam.

Jeff Comstock – Emphasized the importance of public comment strategies and is requesting public involvement before the public intent. Inquired about how the Go/No Go process works.

Heather Sauls – This proposal is non-concurrent with the Resource Management Plan (RMP). We are looking at amending the RMP. BLM and Army Corps of Engineers will do a Go/No Go protocol on the range of alternatives. Early findings and/or fatal flaws in concurrence with this being taxpayer-driven will drive the Go/No Go process.

Jeff Comstock – Asked why the BLM does not have a decision after the first scoping phase.

Tom Jankovsky – The looming issue is the need to provide drinking water to the town of Rangely.

Tom Jankovsky – Asked if there was a benefit to endangered fish.

Heather Sauls – That will be determined by the quantity of water needed for endangered fish.

Tom Jankovsky – Asked if Kenney Reservoir will be drained.

Heather Sauls – Kenney Reservoir has not been analyzed yet. Many of the surrounding areas have general sage grouse habitat.

Matt Rice – Is there a plan for hydropower at Wolf Creek Reservoir?

Heather Sauls- Currently there is not a proposal for hydropower.

Carl Connor – Lower Colorado basin could put an injunction in later.

Greg Larson – We are asking for RAC input on the best ways to engage the public.

Heather Sauls – Asked if we want to do pre-NOI public engagement.

Jeff Comstock – Asked if revising the RMP was more important than the purpose and need. Taking 2,000 acres away from grazing would generate concerns.

Heather Sauls – Three grazing allotments would be affected. It is too early for that analysis. We will need to decide later how the surrounding land will be used for hunting, camping, flatwater recreation, etc. We are working closely with U.S. Army Corps on this project. BLM will direct all public involvement.

Tom Jankovsky – Asked if this proposal was the only option for Rangely drinking water.

Heather Sauls – We will be looking into other ways to provide water to Rangely.

Robert Hampson – Kenney Reservoir has approximately 10 years of drinking water left.

Heather Sauls – The NEPA process will consider the human environment as well as other protections.

11:51 a.m. Field Manager Updates

White River Field Office

Bill Mills – The RAC had previously passed a resolution supporting the removal of wild horses from the Piceance-East Douglas Herd Management Area (PEDHMA). We completed a gather this summer and removed 770 horses from the PEDHMA. We have an active oil and gas program with 4,000 active wells. This year was an anomaly for fires.

Little Snake Field Office

Bruce Sillitoe – There are plans in place for new Special Recreation Management Areas with facilities and fee sites. We want to work more on land conveyances, and we are conducting research on how to manage archaeological sites in open areas.

Kremmling Field Office

Ryan Kay: Currently utilizing bipartisan infrastructure funds to increase acres planned for fuel breaks. There is a need to provide mosaics for the prevention of large fires. We are working across boundaries with the state and U.S. Forest Service to perform hazard tree analysis for firefighter safety. East Troublesome fire recovery: Seeding and mulching is completed, and we are now working on stream point projects [e.g. beaver dam analogs and zesting structures]. We are close to spending \$6 million on the project and \$15 million with other agencies. This does not include suppression costs. The final EIS for Blue Valley Land Exchange was released on July 1. We are anticipating protests.

Grand Junction Field Office

Greg Wolfgang - North Fruita Desert trails master plan includes 30 miles of new trails and allows Class 1 ebikes. We are working with partners to improve visitor awareness based on the Palisade Plunge fatality. McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area is transitioning from dispersed to designated camping. Fee implementation through recreation.gov is planned for next year. Currently working on the business plan for Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area. We had a low intensity fire started by lightning in this area and seeing good results based on the fire burning in a pre-treated area.

Jeff Comstock – Asked why the County Road 200 roads are still closed.

Greg Wolfgang – Those roads were administrative access only in the original management plan. The roads will open once the appeal is finalized. Eleven wells were plugged last year in Grand Junction.

Bill Mills – Working closely with Colorado River Valley Field Office and utilizing their staff has been extremely helpful.

Colorado River Valley Field Office

Hilary Boyd – Colorado River Valley recently issued a non-compliance order with Rocky Mountain Industrials [Mid-Continent Quarry].

12:10 p.m. Lunch

1:30 p.m. Big Game Planning

Presented by Alan Bittner, Deputy State Director for Resources and Planning (see attachment)

Shawn Brennan – Frustrated that that Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission (COGCC) asked BLM to assist with rulemaking in the past, but BLM did not appear to engage. Industry will run into issues where the rules do not mesh.

Jeff Comstock – Concerned over apparent overlap of rules and feels that this has already been done before. Confused as to what additional help this project will lend. Hoped that an open process before the NOI would have been implemented in the same manner as discussed for Wolf Creek Reservoir.

Tom Jankovsky – Asked if there were other states doing a similar EIS. The is a threat to production and could result in shrinking the amount of land available for oil and gas leasing.

Alan Bittner – This is currently the only EIS of its kind. All field offices will be asked to map their connectivity for big game movement across the landscape.

Tom Jankovsky – Asked when the big game corridor maps will be available.

Alan Bittner – There are regional maps available, updated every four years.

Greg Larson – We strive to stay consistent with other land use management plans. We are under a settlement agreement.

Alan Bittner – BLM was sued by entities including the state. The agreement was that Uncompahgre Field Office would do a state-wide Gunnison Sage Grouse plan amendment and a Big Game plan considering how to consider consistency with COGCC rules.

2:00 p.m. Public Comment Period

Ginny Love – Bill Mills and Bruce Sillitoe have done a tremendous job on the wild horse issues. The hope is to keep the wild horse population as it is or lower, and that the BLM regenerates grasslands in that area. Wolf Creek Reservoir will allow the town of Rangely to hold water in drier years. As a rancher, purchasing the virtual collars and towers would have bankrupted us. The grants for virtual fence could go away, so it is possible that the ranchers will be financially responsible in the future. The catchment ponds could alter the ‘return-to-river’ drainage systems. Limiting out-of-state licenses by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife could be detrimental to local ranchers and outfitters. Rio Blanco county is concerned how the big game corridor planning could affect the energy sector. The Cattlemen’s Association wants to be more involved in decisions. 66 percent of Rio Blanco county’s land is public.

Deirdra Macnab – Thanked Bill Mills and Elijah Waters for their support of the Piceance-East Douglas wild horse gather. This decision will improve state of rangelands in those areas. Stated that her Audubon-certified ranch property is adjacent to the Wolf Creek Reservoir proposed site. Opposes Wolf Creek Reservoir due to potential negative impacts on the large elk herd in Winter Valley. Opposes the nature of the purpose and need, and emphasized the importance of identifying alternate solutions, including up-river water sources with a lower evaporation rate. There is a need to identify potential below-ground water sources. Opposes the reservoir due potential high levels of evaporative loss in a hot and dry climate. Advocated for dredging Kenney Reservoir

rather than constructing a new reservoir in a hot and dry location. Emphasized the utilization and improvement of existing infrastructure over investing in expensive alternatives.

Matt Rice – Concurred with Deirdra Macnab that evaporative losses could be a serious consequence of the construction of Wolf Creek Res. Suggested a pre-scoping process for the BLM to identify potential fatal flaws.

Gary Wockner – Advocates for no new dams or diversions. Wolf Creek Reservoir will be a very expensive and complex process. The project will take a long time to complete and will be highly controversial.

2:30 p.m. Dates for Future Meetings

To be determined.

2:32 p.m. Closing Remarks and Open Discussion

Jeff Comstock – Urged the BLM to be consistent with the big game plans in place for the NW portion of the state.

Tom Jankovsky – The drinking water need for the town of Rangely is an urgent issue.

John Justman – There were big game regulations for oil and gas implemented in the past. Questioned why the BLM continues to add regulations. Recreation seems to have a significant impact on big game.

Alan Bittner – The EIS has not been opened to making rules for recreation, but it does include looking at the comprehensive effects of high-density activities on big game.

Carl Connor – Oil and gas facilities appear to be quiet after they are built. A major impediment to wildlife corridors is I-70. Money should be spent on wildlife bridges.

Elijah Waters- The BLM appreciates RAC support for fee proposals. The in-person meeting and dinner was a great way to connect and build relationships.

Greg Larson – We covered a lot of ground and thanks to everyone for your valuable feedback.

John Justman – Emphasized the need for tougher law enforcement for squatting on public lands.

Carl Connor – The state director contributed valuable information to the group.

2:56 p.m. Adjourn