



Rocky Mountain Resource Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

Glenwood Springs, Colo. - March 30, 2023

Members Present

Category 1: None

Category 2: John Sztukowski* (Environmental); Loretta Mitson* (Archaeology and History); Mick Daniel* (Environmental)

Category 3: Kent Wood* (Public at Large)

BLM Employees Present

Cathy Cook* (District Manager); Levi Spellman (District Public Affairs); Matt Norden* (District Fire Management Officer); Keith Berger* (RGFO Manager); Dario Archuleta* (SLVFO Acting Manager); Ray Ogle* (RGFO AFM); Kalem Lenard* (RGFO AFM); Katie Singleton* (SLVFO Acting AFM); Sean Noonan* (SLVFO AFM)

Public Present

Clarice Navarro (Staffer – Lauren Boebert); Arthur Koepsell* (CO State); Adam Ortega* (CO State)

* Denotes virtual attendance.

0900: Welcome, Introductions, and Housekeeping

Cathy Cook discussed the state of RAC membership (no quorum), anticipated approval date of new nominations (unknown), and the date of the next RAC meeting (June 22, 2023).

Updates from District Office

Cook highlighted some statistics for the district regarding geography, political identity, and tribal/ethnic breakdown. She addressed current staffing challenges, noting that key positions have been added. The SLVFO still needs a field manager and a fire management officer. She discussed the national vacancy issue and the mandate that we get below 15 percent vacancy. She shared that the BLM Colorado state director had questioned the possibility of hiring a recruiter. The new associate state director was hired (Gordon Toeves), as was a state budget officer. These positions will help us fill other positions.

Matt Norden provided a fire update. He discussed the national fuels review that had happened in February. No official word had been handed down. But, he got great verbal feedback and commendation for his staff. He discussed upcoming prescribed burns and pile burns, noting the lack of snow over the winter had created some difficulties. But, after breaking down the schedule for burns and the number of acres scheduled, he showed the office was ahead of schedule. But, his office is facing staffing shortages. Hiring a fuels technician from inside the office has left a vital engine captain vacancy. The assistant engine captain vacancy is still unfilled. Seasonal employees are ready to start, and number more than in previous years. Below-average snowpack has been an issue in the district. But, they don't expect an exceptionally dry fire season, and think it will hover around the upper part of neutral.

- (Q) Kent Wood: Does the BLM work with other fire departments?
- (A) Norden: The BLM works and trains with other fire units.

- (Q) Loretta Mitson: Has there been any push back on prescribed fires?

- (A) Norden: It affected other federal agencies more than the BLM. The Forest Service nearly stopped burning. The BLM implemented more stringent guidelines, but kept burning.

Cook updated the RAC on big game planning efforts, which focus on priority habitat, winter range, and habitat connectivity. Alternative plans will soon be published for public comment.

Cook updated the RAC on the Gunnison Sage Grouse. There are very few on district-managed lands. But, there are some. She presented a timeline and some of the issues presented. She explained that there is no Greater Sage Grouse in the district. But, there is a possibility that updates to the management of the Gunnison Sage Grouse could apply to both.

Cook updated the RAC on the solar programmatic environmental impact statement. She said notification of any updates to the PEIS will be shared via letter so they can get feedback. She anticipates that proposed amendments will be developed by June 2024, and they won't disrupt any current or currently developing solar energy projects. The intent is to identify new areas for potential solar development. She then shared updated details on the upcoming solar lease sale for the De Tilla Gulch Solar Energy Zone.

- (Q) Mitson: Does the RAC have any influence on this process?
- (A) Cook: There are opportunities to get involved before the issue is settled.
- (Q) Mitson: Has concerns with carving up public lands for inefficient solar production and mentioned barriers to energy transmission out of the Valley.
- (A) Cook: There are opportunities to speak about the issue at in-person events.

- (Q) Mick Daniel: Is this the site outside of Saguache?
- (A) Cook: Yes. It is in the De Tilla Gulch area and has minimal resource conflict.

- (Q) Wood: Is transmission a problem and will it be specified in the lease agreement?
- (A) Cook: Transmission will not be specified in the lease. We only lease the land. The company will be responsible for all matters related to getting their product to market.

Updates from Field Offices

Royal Gorge Field Office – Keith Berger, Manager

Berger discussed the Eastern Colorado Resource Management Plan and presented slides on the proposal. He anticipates a final proposed plan and EIS in mid-May with a final record decision in early fall, if all goes smoothly. A separate, state-wide big-game management plan is in the works, which will then amend that portion of the ECRMP.

- (Q) Wood: Does the ECRMP address fracking?
- (A) Berger: It identifies what is open and closed to leasing, as well as what restrictions will be in place. It doesn't specify how minerals are extracted. Any winning bidder on a lease sale must then submit a proposal to be reviewed by the BLM. This would include extraction methods, which are then evaluated.

Berger addressed camping in Chaffee County, commending his staff and the community on working together.

Kalem Lenard discussed the camping in more detail. He said changes were made based on public comments. The changes were well-received by critics of the original plan. He added details about new application of travel management plan principles to areas previously not affected. He explained the move to designated sites and designated trails and the addition of monitoring and adaptive management with a heavy education component. If that doesn't work, and more management is needed, the BLM may need to move toward fee site status.

- (Q) Cook: Is the Forest Service making similar changes so campers don't just hike up the hill to continue bad behavior?

- (A) Lenard: The Forest Service is pursuing a similar approach. Not identical. But, the BLM is coordinating with them. They are just about a year behind.
- (Q) Wood: Is staffing sufficient to monitor and enforce these new directives?
- (A) Lenard: It will be a challenge. But, the changes are simple and new monitoring technology will make it easier to enforce. Additionally, Chaffee County has funded two seasonal positions to help monitor sites during the 9-month busy season.

Berger then said a new travel management plan was in development for the three peaks area in Fremont County. The public has been asked to help identify routes as part of a cataloging effort. There is some confusion and conflict because some of these routes on public land originate on private land. While inaccessible to the public, the public can still see them.

Berger discussed Penrose Commons and the rapid changes in its use. He detailed a massive increase in off-highway vehicle use – specifically motorcycles. The trails can't keep up with the use and its publicization on social media. It is at the point where it is creating its own momentum. The field office is seeking support from the community in peer-to-peer messaging. They are hoping to have some draft messaging ready by the June meeting.

1030 – 1045: Break

Cook brings the meeting back into session, introducing Katie Singleton and Dario Archuleta, as well as the new issue of the focal landscape initiative – a restoration-focused effort funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act. The intent of the focal landscapes initiative is to implement large-scale, multi-programmatic, transformational efforts for landscapes, resilient climates, watersheds, ecosystems, and habitats. States nominated landscapes for funding. Two of Colorado's nominations were accepted, and the Blanca Wetland nomination was one of them. Now,

it has substantial funding to move forward with important projects. The BLM is working to get projects moving and proper staffing to achieve them. Funding could last up to eight years. Will be presenting more at June meeting.

- (Q) Mitson: Will the June meeting be soon enough to offer input?
- (A) Cook: The projects identified were those already planned and ready to go. We will need input on ideas for the next round of projects and beyond.

San Luis Valley Field Office – Katie Singleton, Acting Assistant Field Manager

Singleton and Archuleta are joined by Sean Noonan. Singleton details current land acquisition efforts. The Land and Water Conservation Fund is being used to facilitate the La Jara land acquisition. Another tract of land north of the Blanca Wetlands, erroneously believed to be BLM land, is being acquired as part of a strategy to shore up water rights for the wetlands. Another state-owned parcel adjacent to the north tract is also in discussions for acquisition.

Singleton discusses chronic livestock trespass and the impact on riparian and critical species in the area over the last 40 years, as well as the impact on permitted grazing leaseholders and cultural resources. She explains the focus on monitoring the trespass and the automation of geolocated reports as the basis for definitive future action. The BLM is considering pursuing administrative action as a more effective alternative than criminal citation.

Singleton provided an update on the Rio Grande survey currently under way. River boundary definitions are being brought into line with other states, placing the boundary at the center of a river, rather than a particular bank. This will impact public and private land boundaries. Current surveys will be suspended and new surveys will correct the issue. This may impact how the BLM manages particular pieces of land once the new boundaries are set.

Singleton then provides some background on the dark sky reserve designation efforts, saying the next steps will be developing a plan, applying for certification status, and public outreach.

Noonan discusses the Lobatos Bridge project and its history. He details how it is managed by the BLM to ensure boating and river access to the public. But, the site needs further development to ensure it meets several management plan obligations. He showed design concepts for the area and discussed partner funding, local political support, and a timeline.

Archuleta closes out with a summary, adding that socioeconomic factors are an important dimension for how management is being considered in the Valley.

- (Q) Cook: What can you tell us about the energy transmission situation in the Valley?
- (A) Archuleta: It's a roadblock. Transmission hasn't been able to be established. We're actively communicating with state and private agencies to try to find a way forward.
- (Q) Mitson: I have concerns over the lack of long-term archaeological staff and how well researched the archaeology has been in the solar energy zones.
- (A) Archuleta: We are continuously assessing the area. I believe we're in good shape. Filling that vacancy is a priority. Currently, the impact is minimal. But, we want to prevent impacts in the future.
- (A) Cook: We've hired a contractor to cover the shortage in staff.
- (Q) Cook: Where are we at on the dark skies initiative?
- (A) Daniel: SLV Go! Is working on it. We've been asked to look at an expanded area and are currently doing lighting surveys. The International Dark-Sky Association may not be the right partner for the current phase of this project.

- (A) Wood: I'm an astronomer and would be happy to help with whatever you need.
- (A) Berger: The Friends of Brown's Canyon are discussing the possibilities for a dark skies designation in Chaffee County.

1155 – 1315: Break

Cook announces the date of the next RAC meeting: June 22, 2023. She then asks for potential agenda topics.

- (A) Cook: Fred Henderson wants to take a look at geothermal energy potential on BLM Lands. We also have the Brown's Canyon Ethnography Study, Penrose Commons, and our focal landscape areas.
- (A) Daniel: I'd like to hear more about the money coming in for those focal landscapes.
- (A) Cook: We also have the resource management plan for the San Luis Valley.
- (A) Lenard: If we can put together a business plan for the campsite fees, I'd like to put it to a vote at the next meeting. We should also discuss the Penrose Commons recreation area management plan and some of the grazing permit issues there. Possibly vote if we have a quorum.
- (A) Cook: Let's also revisit the dark skies.
- (A) Berger: I'd like to discuss designating new trails and how those could lead to even more unauthorized trails branching off the ones we designate. I think we need to look at the cause and effect, gather some data, and consider closing trails if we add new ones. I'd like to get some RAC input on that.
- (Q) Wood: What's the jurisdictional handshake look like in Brown's Canyon? Is the BLM really in charge?
- (A) Berger: The use of the monument is split fairly evenly between BLM and Forest Service lands. But, the Arkansas Headwater Recreation Area runs

through the middle of it and that's a complicating factor, because Colorado Parks and Wildlife manages the water through the AHRA.

- (Q) Wood: Do we use trail cameras to document the abuses of Penrose Commons?
- (A) Berger: It's one part of how we're trying to deal with the issue.
- (Q) Wood: Are they permanently mounted?
- (A) Cook: They are. But, there's no substitute for human interaction. These are just a supplemental resource.
- (A) Lenard: Our law enforcement officers use cameras. But, it's a challenge. Cameras get stolen. They don't always capture the information you need to take action.
- (A) Cook: It's not perfect.

- (Q) Will we be discussing illegal grazing and trespass in June? I've witnessed it. Are cameras being used? I've reported and called it in and have not seen a law enforcement officer show up.
- (A) Berger: Trail cameras are being used to some degree. But, it's not a substitute for law enforcement intervention. The SLVFO has increased their use of cameras for monitoring. But it's not a complete solution. You often can't see a brand on a trail cam.
- (A) Cook: It will be on the agenda.
- (A) Singleton: It's all part of looking into a way to develop an effective solution.
- (A) Berger: I'd like to see the RAC involved so they can help articulate that this is a priority for the BLM.
- (A) Cook: The goal is to eliminate this completely.

- (Q) Wood: Can we get an overview on the trespass issue, what's being done, what the goals are, and what the RAC can do?
- (A) Berger: We can explain the trespass process, its complications, and bring the RAC up to speed on what happens and why.

- (A) Mitson: I'm concerned about grazing allotments along Highway 142 to the state line. I'd like to see significant consequences for violations and abuse.
- (A) Berger: I agree. We should provide some detail at the June meeting and make sure we're all on the same page.

- (A) Cook: We're also working with the state to develop solutions and sanctuary for feral and abandoned horses.

- (A) Mitson: There's a piece of land with significant archaeological resources north of the Lobatos Bridge. I'd like to see if the BLM can acquire that land.

Public Comment Period

- None presented.

Closing Remarks

Cook thanked everyone for participating and closed the meeting.