



Rocky Mountain Resource Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

10 a.m., June 20, 2024

(All notes and conversations are paraphrased for clarity and brevity)

Members Present

Category 1

In-Person	Virtual
Preston Larimer	
Josh Gillespie	

Category 2

In-Person	Virtual
Loretta Mitson	
	Irene Shonle
Mick Daniel	

Category 3

In-Person	Virtual
	Kent Wood
	Lawrence Pacheco
April Estep	

BLM Employees Present

In-Person	Virtual
	Chris Ziegler
	Levi Spellman
Dale Culver	
	Kalem Lenard
Sean Noonan	
Scotty Nilson	

Public Present

In-Person	Virtual
Lori McCullough	
	Sarah Graham
Erin Minks	
Cathy Garcia	
Anna Vargas	

Welcome, Introductions, and Housekeeping

Levi Spellman, RAC Coordinator, introduced himself and called roll. He then provided a brief review on virtual meeting procedure and the day's agenda.

Agenda Item 1: District Updates

Chris Ziegler, the acting Designated Federal Officer, provided district updates. He briefed on the personnel changes at the district and field office levels. He announced the upcoming revision of the San Luis Valley Field Office's resource management plan. He then explained that budget and staffing will be persistent issues moving forward on account of recent changes that effectively reduce the budget by 15 percent. He said there will be a constant need to evaluate and adjust for that moving forward.

Dale Culver, the SLVFO manager, restated a question from the meeting room, asking if it was necessary to wait until the public comment period for questions or comments from members of the public present in the room. Spellman said that would be acceptable if it posed no issue for the participants. Culver said it would not be an issue for him. Mick Daniel, the RAC chair, said it would not be an issue for the RAC.

Erin Minks, staffer for Sen. Michael Bennett, then asked Ziegler what he meant when saying the new resource management plan for the Valley was coming soon.

Ziegler: A request has been submitted to the state office to allocate the funding necessary to hire a project manager to shepherd the revision. Requests have been submitted to the national office as well. Ziegler then asked Culver if that was the latest information.

Culver: After confirming, Culver then explained the amount of advanced preparation work his office had completed puts them on track to begin in FY25.

Ziegler: While complete funding for the revision may not be entirely in place in FY25, he believes it should be in full swing by FY26.

Minks: That advanced work is older, correct?

Culver: Yes. It's serving as a skeleton and we're adding anything we may have missed or new needs that have come up.

Larimer: What is the longevity of an RMP and how much time usually passes between revisions?

Culver: I don't think there's a time. They tend to be 15-20 year documents. Is that right, Chris?

Ziegler: I think they're supposed to be a lot shorter than that. But I've never seen one shorter than that. We prefer to have lifecycles of 5-10 years on most of our guiding documents. I can't recall if that applies to an RMP. But Dale's right. For those, we tend to see revisions happening on the longer end of that range.

Larimer: With the budget cuts making the BLM barely able to keep up with what's required by law, how much more of a cut can you take and still function? More of a comment than a question.

Ziegler: We're evaluating that. The state director and associate state director have been clear on that. We've been a bit of a role model of the "do more with less" mentality. Our federal employee viewpoint survey is really starting to reflect that with frustration and morale issues. So, we are looking to evaluate what is realistic. We started to do a little bit of that last year. We can expect that to be a major focus moving forward.

Larimer: Last meeting we spoke about a letter in support of getting the BLM the support it needs. Where are we at on that?

Daniel: We took a pause because, by asking for one thing we are asking them to take away from something else. We don't want to do that without careful consideration. If it's a direction the RAC wants to take, we'll need a quorum and then we'll have to think it through.

Larimer: That's a conversation that needs to happen. What's possible.

Daniel: The other conversation that needs to happen is trying to figure out how to get money to our region. I know that involves the state. And also why those budget cuts are occurring for a federal agency that's already strapped.

Mitson: Is that 15 percent nation-wide?

Ziegler: Not necessarily, and the 15 percent... it's kind of complicated. There was a 5 percent pay raise for federal employees, but not additional funding allocated by

congress to support that. Then, the remaining 10 percent is an average from our different program areas that have seen various reductions. But we have to look at this budget from a district perspective. What does it mean to recommend money or staffing for the San Luis Valley? That's going to have a direct impact on the Royal Gorge, because it's all district funding. Then, if we manage to do that, what impact does that have on the other districts? The implications of these decisions means it's wise to consider this from a wider perspective. I come from a background in different land management agencies. My wife is DoD. We're hearing this across the board. If you don't follow federal deficit news, we are now at \$1.9T. We now spend more just on the interest of the deficit than we do on all discretionary spending in the federal government. So, we are in the same boat as any agency funded by discretionary spending. Also, public lands tend to be predominantly in the west and other less-populated areas. So, public lands don't have as much representation in the U.S. House of Representatives – the government entity that controls federal spending. This is why there's a budget cut.

Larimer: We do see examples where the BLM is losing money and that could be converted to fee areas. Are there any other areas where measures like that can be taken.

Ziegler: There may be areas where we can take a second look and try to find appropriate ways to generate fees. But FLREA has very specific rules about how those fees can be spent. So, it won't solve the issue. It will mostly help that program area. We need to keep an eye on the core issue and be realistic about what that means and what's coming down that pipeline.

Daniel: Is that the same for all fees? Like grazing fees?

Ziegler: All fees have stipulations on how they can be utilized and that is a major topic of conversation we have in BLM Colorado. But typically, as a general rule, any specialized money collected needs to be spent to support and aid that program.

Minks: The reason I asked about the Valley's RMP is because I was a planner with the Forest Service and we were finishing our plan in 2015, and the BLM was supposed to be right behind us. At the old RAC meetings I've been to, this was a constant conversation and I just want to make sure everyone here sees that the RMP

conversation and staffing need to be seen in a slightly different light because of the roles they play for the field office.

Agenda Item 2: SLVFO Updates

Culver discussed the onset of field season. A few items on the horizon, some of which touch on fee projects. Sean Noonan, our outdoor recreation planner, will be talking about the Middle Creek acquisition a little later and some of the other projects he's working on.

Recreation

There's the expansion of the Zapata Falls campground, which would increase some fee revenue there. But we're still a little way off from that.

One of the big things we're proud of here is the La Jara acquisition. We're working with the Forest Service and Colorado Parks and Wildlife to acquire state trust land in the La Jara area. The South Santa Monica Project is what it's actually referred to. We're close on our funding. We and the Forest Service are about \$5M short. We've both put in for land and water conservation funds. We've heard through the grapevine that we're the number one priority project this year. We think we're going to get that money and the Forest Service has the same feeling. The funding from other agencies seems to be in place. We think it's going to be a great acquisition, making sure that land will be held in public trust.

TMP Revision

We're working on revisions to our travel management plan. Our staff is still working on that.

Sztukowski: Does that cover the whole field office?

Noonan: There are routes throughout the whole field office. But it's not a comprehensive, start-to-finish, every single route... it's just a modification of the existing travel management plan.

Sztukowski: Are there any areas in the field office that don't have a travel management plan? In the Royal Gorge field office, there are still a lot of areas that don't have any travel management planning.

Noonan: Ours is completely covered.

Range Management

Culver: As Chris mentioned regarding vacancies, one of the vacancies we currently have is our range management specialist who retired. We're working on that. While that departure is waiting to be filled, we've taken time to review our Valley wide range program. Looking for efficiencies. Not just doing more with less, but doing better with less. There are a couple different ways we're approaching things in the Valley and we're looking for a way to streamline and standardize operations.

Trespass Livestock

It wouldn't be a RAC meeting without talking about trespass livestock. As of this morning, we have not seen any trespass cattle since last fall. Our main offender was actually the individual discussed by our guest from Costilla County at the last meeting. So, we're hoping what Costilla County has done is helping to make an impact, along with the things our field offices is doing.

Mitson: What caused the perpetrator to... was it Costilla County's new regulations?

Culver: We're thinking that. It may have caused them to move their cattle away from that area. That's just speculation. Still working through process of dealing with feral horses.

Those are our big updates from the Valley.

Sztukowski: I wanted to follow up on the RMP revision. What was the anticipated date for that? 2025?

Culver: Correct.

Agenda Item 3: Lobatos Bridge (Guest Speaker – Lori McCullough)

Lori McCullough, founder and CEO of the Great Outdoors Fund, shared a presentation on Lobatos Bridge Outdoor Classroom and Recreation Enhancement Project and some of the work her organization has done to help bring it to completion.

McCullough provided a background on her organization and its involvement with outdoors projects and its public/private partnership with the BLM. She provided background on the Lobatos Bridge area and its historical significance. She provided details on the projects goals and the progress made so far. McCullough pointed out that one of the primary functions of the partnership with the BLM is to leverage what limited funding exists to tap into greater funding pools for specific projects, with the current ratio for the Lobatos Bridge project standing at about 2:1. She then asked Sean Noonan to discuss the BLM's side of the project.

Noonan explained the project's roots began in the 1970s with a proposal by the local landowner to sell or trade the land to the BLM on account of the importance of its ability to provide river access. It is located at the mouth of the Rio Grande gorge. The BLM acquired the land. The project is in line with several of the BLM's priorities and management goals. Its unique properties resulted in designation as a Natural Area, which has implications as to how it is managed. Noonan then discussed the design for the proposed project at the Lobato Bridge site and some of the funding mechanisms being used to ensure its completion.

McCullough then elaborated on her organization's fundraising efforts and the support they've encountered in the community and with government organizations. She provided a status update on the content and messaging being developed for the site, and the partnerships with local high schools and universities in developing some of that.

She then presented information on current funding totals, donors, grants, and awards. McCullough then offered a projected completion of the project in the fall of 2025 and opened the floor for questions.

Mitson: Are you anticipating enough grant funding that you don't need to pursue smaller amounts?

McCullough: We're open to any thing. But we've had to pick and choose what we pursue. It's just as complicated to submit for a micro grant as it is for a bigger grant.

Mitson: The archaeological network is sitting on some cash we were saving for acquiring the property at the DeVargas crossing. It's been in discussion for 25 years. At some point we have to do something with that money. The DeVargas crossing is one of the most pivotal historical locations in the history of the southwest and it needs to be protected. We have a little chunk of money we've been saving. But, if it's never going to happen...

Daniel: I think somebody needs to call the land owner and see how much money they want for it, raise the money, buy it, and give it to the BLM.

Minks: That's been talked about.

Daniel: There's no entity doing it, right?

Minks: I'll have to talk to Alan Law.

Daniel: No more questions for Lori? I think everyone has that presentation now.

Agenda Item 4: Solar Update

Culver presented an update on the utility scale solar project being developed in the San Luis Valley.

Culver: The winning bidder, Pine Gate Real Estate, changed their name to DeTilla Solar. Currently working on application to TriState Generation for an interim connection request to see if they can get a power purchase agreement. We've been told it can take up to two years to get that. In the meantime, they are on a deadline to provide an operations plan by June of 2025. We need it to begin the NEPA process and to then

conduct a class three cultural survey, cadastral survey, and glare analysis. We anticipate hiring a contractor to conduct some of those just on account of workload.

Mitson: The Old Spanish Trail Association is concerned about this. Will they be brought in as part of the discussion?

Culver: Yes. That is something we've discussed, the Spanish Trail, because it's on the other side of the highway.

Sztukowski: This is at the north end of the Valley, right?

Culver: It is. Right off of 285.

Mitson: The Old Spanish Trail Association hasn't had much of a response from public lands concerning the trail.

Culver: One of the things we've asked DeTilla Solar is to start working with the county commissioners more in Saguache County, and to inform them more. Start working through their permits and fees with them.

Daniel: So, what happens if they don't finish this process? Is the land back up for grabs?

Culver: I believe so.

Mitson: So, this is all hinging on transmission?

Culver: Correct. Any more questions on DeTilla?

Gillespie: So, this would basically take this area completely out of management when you do this since it's all going to be fenced in? It would have to be completely devoid of ground life?

Culver: That will all be determined as part of the NEPA process once they determine how they want to do it. The area does sit on an allotment. It's not grazed and hasn't been for 20-25 years. That's one of the things we're looking at too. How it impacts multiple uses.

Gillespie: What about cleanup? Are there any stipulations on...

Culver: Yeah. That will be put in there.

Daniel: So, it's just here (referring to map).

Culver: Right there along county road 55.

Culver: So, along those lines, the programmatic solar EIS that's happening at the national level should be coming out shortly, getting ready for a final internal review of it. With that, one of the big things for us in the Valley has been working to get the Los Mogotes solar energy zone redesignated within the solar PEIS so it can be reconsidered for development.

Minks: What's the hold up?

Culver: Cultural. Antonito is still there. Someone has put in an application. But it's not really being considered right now. The way it works is that it goes to the next in line, so we'll have to finish DeTilla before we can look at Antonito. So, we would have a long time before we could get to it. And there are the same concerns down there, with no powerlines or transmission capability.

Mitson: Are we seeing an increase in solar interest?

Culver: We are starting to see a little bit of solar inquiry increases as a whole. I think the Royal Gorge has some interest somewhere east of Pueblo. But, here in the Valley, through the Solar PEIS process, there isn't a lot of land that's suitable for solar based on slope and other concerns. There are concerns regarding wildlife corridors or other problems. That's pretty much the solar update. Timeline wise, we're still looking at 3-4 years before there's any construction. The main concern right now is transmission.

Agenda Item 5: Middle Creek Acquisition

Culver introduced Sean Noonan, the outdoor recreation planner for the San Luis Valley Field Office.

Noonan: The Middle Creek property is an opportunity that came to us through the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The money was originally allocated for a different project. When that didn't come to fruition, we worked with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to apply that funding to another project. The Middle Creek property was a unique opportunity because the private land around it meant this acquisition would create public access to the larger area.

There are two parcels with two distinct possibilities. The north parcel lends itself toward public day use. The southern parcel has the Haymaker cabin, which lends itself to rental recreation opportunities. It's a wonderful site with a wilderness-like experience and excellent hunting, and will likely be rented constantly.

These were formally acquired last summer and now we're developing the site. Our engineers are working on it. The cabin is somewhat newer. It's wired for electricity, a hot water heater, propane appliances, a shower and bathroom, and is on a septic system. It's definitely more glamping than roughing it. However, it doesn't have an electrical supply. The previous owners used a generator, and the water was pumped in directly from Middle Creek. We're hoping it will be open to public reservation sooner rather than later. We have to finish the NEPA process, and we're working with the Forest Service since this property has direct trail access to both BLM and Forest Service trails.

We are developing a business plan for this property and we will need RAC support on developing that.

Mitson: How close is this to the upper guard station?

Noonan: On the map you can see upper crossing guard station here.

Mitson: Do you know how often that gets rented?

Noonan: I don't know the exact numbers, but I know it's rented most of the year. I don't think, because of it's accessibility, that they close it. This is an opportunity because it can provide winter recreation. We are just at the beginning of this.

Mitson: Can you explain what LWCF means?

Noonan: That's the Land and Water Conservation Fund. That's the pot of money that essentially comes from offshore oil royalties and goes toward conservation efforts on land. The acquisition of the Blanca Wetlands came from the LWCF. Your interest in the DeVargas Crossing area could potentially qualify for that kind of funding.

Culver: The RMEF is the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

Mitson: Does this property have significant cultural resources to consider?

Noonan: I don't want to say it had nothing. But it didn't have much. But that NEPA process hasn't unfolded yet. So, we'll find out more. One of the cool things about the day use is the presence of a big corral. So it could be useful for equestrian recreation.

Gillespie: How many acres is it?

Noonan: 28.

Gillespie: Between the two?

Noonan: I think it's between the two.

Gillespie: Are they adjacent?

Noonan: Yes.

That's just to get this on your radar. This is one of those kinds of things where, yes, the cabin has a lot of amenities. But we have to be aware not to price people out. It's in one of Colorado's poorest counties and we need to be sensitive to that.

Mitson: Can we invite the Saguache county commissioner to be involved in that?

Noonan: Absolutely. They were supporters of our purchasing it.

Daniel: Does Middle Creek Road dead-end in...

Noonan: Yes. It ends at the Middle Creek track, which is a mile up the road.

Mitson: Are there permittees in this area?

Noonan: Yes. There are permittees all through there. Livestock and recreation.

Noonan then presented photos of the property.

Mitson: Do we need to bring this up to code?

Noonan: Yes. That's what our engineers are looking at.

One of the projects our engineers working on is converting our picnic grounds at Zapata Falls to camping. That's what people want. They aren't using it to picnic. Right now, if you get on the reservation system, it's all full. It's overflow from the Sand Dunes. It's rented every day from May to Labor Day. We're looking to convert those picnic sites using some of our funding from the Great American Outdoors Act.

Gillespie: Is there any interpretation at Zapata Falls?

Noonan: Up at the top on the lookout over the valley there are signs, as well as at the bottom at the kiosk, and along the state-owned trails leading up.

Culver: This was just to help familiarize everyone with the work being done on this property and to lay the foundation for the business plan we'll be bringing to you.

Mitson: So the property owner just decided to sell and made a proposal, and that's it?

Noonan: I'm not 100 percent on the details. But I think the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation was on it and figured it out. Since we have this pot of money, they facilitated it and approached the owner, who was looking to sale.

Mitson: So the BLM is beholden to the appraised value and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation can pay more?

Noonan: No. That isn't how it worked out. We can only pay the appraised value. They didn't add to it. These different organizations we work with serve as a placeholder buyer until the BLM can come up with the money through the LWCF.

Mitson: When it's appraised, who chooses the appraiser, and do they take into account cultural resources?

Noonan: That would be a lands question.

Culver: Appraisals are done by the Office of Evaluation Services. So, it's done by a Department of the Interior Office. It's a little different than if the Forest Service was doing the appraisal. When they come in, they do it like anyone else would do it. As to the cultural aspect, that I can't answer. They just look at it compared to comparable value of the lands.

Mitson: I'm just thinking about the DeVargas property and its cultural value, and what Costilla County land is worth...

Culver: They're going to look at it as the land's value.

Daniel: That's why I think Western Rivers or other land trusts should look at it and what it's worth.

Noonan: To that point, because the boundary of the river and natural area, because it's within that boundary or what's adjacent to it, it allows us to pursue LWCF funding. It's location has an impact on that an the priority.

Daniel: I'll talk to my board and see if we can buy the property (room laughs).

Break for lunch.

Agenda Item 7: National Conservation Areas (Guest Speaker – Anna Vargas)

Anna Vargas introduced herself and opened with a land acknowledgment. She then presented a brief history of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument expansion efforts, highlighting the uncertainty surrounding the issue in the community. She detailed some of the data collection efforts she was involved with, focusing on grazing allotments, cultural and historical values.

She explained how the Rio Grande Natural Area would not be included as a part of any National Conservation Area that might be designated. Vargas outlined some of the discussions that were had with community and government leaders surrounding permanent protections, and what uses merited permanent protection. From those discussions came several concerns across the community, many of which originated from inaccurate or incomplete information.

One area of focus was the difference between a National Monument and a National Conservation Area. Additionally, she reviewed the impact of other Colorado NCAs on the local community, finding a positive economic correlation between NCAs and the local communities where they are located.

She then provided a progress update on NCA efforts, covering public sentiment, permit progress, partnership developments, government and community leader engagement, and the next steps in pursuing this designation. She also delivered a retrospective on lessons learned from the effort to establish a national monument, providing a white paper developed by her working group.

She then opened the floor for questions.

Minks: Having been through the first iteration of this with you, how has the community response been different?

Vargas: The same family that led the opposition against the national monument extension is the one opposing the NCA. There are families in Conejos County who are concerned about restrictions on grazing and any sort of designation. So, with all of this data we collected, we can now go to the community and show we didn't just pull this out of a hat. Now we have baseline data in a number of areas, which is helpful when presenting it to the community because it's not the same effort all over again. It's different. This time, our volunteer working group are members of the community, and we are focusing on cohesiveness, seeing where it goes from here.

Gillespie: What protections are you offering to the grazing permittees to guarantee the BLM boundaries will stay the same as they always have been?

Vargas: We want to. But the resource management plan is coming up in 2025. We want to lock those things in. But the RMP process will need to play out first.

Gillespie: But you don't plan on putting anything in that is more restrictive than that?

Vargas: Not in any type of legislation. That's not up to us.

Gillespie: That's not going to affect the permits in the families?

Vargas: Those permits out there are generational. Wherever those permits are, we want to protect them. That's part of our teaching. We don't hate cows. What we're after is permanent protection for traditional uses.

Minks: I'm with Senator Bennett's office. Any questions about legislation should be directed to our office. That's my job and Cathy's job. We depend on your input and points of view. So, if you have those questions, direct them toward us. I know Senator Bennett would appreciate it.

Vargas: Erin is a member of our working group, as is Azarel Madrigal (Sen. Hickenlooper). Some of our working group are for permanent protection. Some are neutral.

Larimer: Is there a way to get a copy of the preliminary map?

Vargas: I can send you all the maps. There are more than what I presented.

Minks: There is no (official) map. I think that's the biggest message of today is that nothing has been proposed yet.

Vargas: We have the data we collected and I'm happy to send those to you since you're not from the Valley, as well as the map of the potential project area.

Vargas then shared some of her personal story and the value she places on cultural and historical ties in the Valley.

Sztukowski: Would this NCA proposal be outside of the RMP revision, or would it be part of it?

Culver: They're separate.

Sztukowski: Would they happen concurrently?

Culver: The RMP will be Valley wide. If and NCA were to happen, it would give us further direction at that point, at which point we would then have to go back and make an RMP amendment to address what's being dictated to us by congress.

Sztukowski: So, you really wouldn't be able to have those planning efforts going on at the same time?

Culver: It would depend on the timing. We would not hold up the RMP for this.

Sztukowski: [garbled]

Vargas: The best scenario is everyone is in support and it goes at the same time as the RMP. A community process takes time and we don't want to rush it. Sometimes it takes years. Timing is everything.

Minks: I think it's good to know the 1991 RMP recommended an NCA in the area. That's a place to start. The 1991 RMP.

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(connection and recording restored)

A discussion ensued regarding the effects an NCA would have on mining and grazing in the area, what permit holders perceive as a threat to their permits, and the various protections afforded by NCA status. The discussion then turned to the public's

understanding of the BLM's multiple-use mandate and the way permit holders interpret the rights conveyed by their leases.

(video and audio connection unstable)

Agenda Item 8: Fire Mitigation Updates (Poncha Pass)

Scotty Nilson, the Rocky Mountain District Assistant Fire Management Officer, provided updates on the fire mitigation efforts taking place on Poncha Pass.

Nilson opened by highlighting the Good Neighbor Authority as a focal point for the presentation, then introduced himself and his long experience with the fuels program in this area. He explained what the term "fuels" means in a wildland firefighting context, and then provided an overview of the fire program and its management area.

Nilson showed the progress of the fire program and its increasing capacity to treat acreage, then illustrated the different nature of vegetation in the region.

Nilson laid out the relevant provisions of the Good Neighbor Authority and how it applies to fire management in the San Luis Valley. He then showed how the GNA allows for treating acres across state, federal, and agency boundaries. He highlighted how the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provided additional funding and how the GNA helped instate a forester to actively manage programs specific to GNA projects and how that created a complete planning environment when paired with both the fire and fuels programs, resulting in integrated vegetation management.

Nilson explained the value of integrated vegetation management and how the BIL funding allowed the team to partner with the Colorado State Forest service to concurrently treat federal, state, and private lands. He illustrated some of the different actions taken by this combined approach, including a timber salvage sale, which is ongoing and preparing for its second phase. He included before and after photos,

showing situations where this approach, and not prescribed burns, may be the most effective tool.

He explained the ongoing discussion in the field office about how to continue leveraging the GNA as an effective tool for fire management. Nilson highlighted the efforts at the Rock Creek housing development and the ways the GNA and BIL are making that work a possibility. He also shared the work done at the Tracy Canyon subdivision and the work that is now possible under this approach.

Nilson showed a video produced by the Colorado State Forest service to highlight the benefits of the work being done in the area.

Sztukowski: Does this influx of funding change your management approach to this area with regard to logging?

Nilson: In the first example we showed, the logger actually paid us to go in and remove the downed trees for firewood, paying us firewood permit rates. Some of the other, larger units cost money to clear using heavy machinery. That is not green timber that pays for itself. We used a stewardship agreement through the Colorado State Forest Service that paid them a fixed amount to haul it all away, plus a per-acre fee. In our largest unit, I think we ended up paying \$800 per acre. If we used some other vehicle to execute this work, we would be looking at about \$2,000 per acre. By trading the wood for that service, we lowered the price considerably. So, those are two different approaches we've used to clear the wood. In the next phase, we're again looking at stewardship. It's been standing longer and has less value as timber. So, it will still be a service contract, but we'll be paying a little bit more. Green timber pays for itself. We tried to do the whole thing as a simple sale. But the loggers wouldn't touch it. So, the BIL money hasn't really changed how we would approach things. It's just given us an opportunity to make it happen and to hire a forester that increases capacity across the board for the BLM and the state forest service. Does that answer your question?

Sztukowski: I guess so. So, management doesn't change, just more projects are possible.

Nilson: The end state of what we're trying to do doesn't change. NEPA still applies and the end state of what we want doesn't change. This different contractual mechanism just gives us more options for how we get it done.

Culver: The situation in the Royal Gorge was more timber-driven and this is more fuels-driven. But we still see those approaches resulting in the same end objective.

The conversation shifted to the impact of these projects on wildlife. Nilson explained that the biologists were involved throughout the NEPA process and those needs are accounted for during the planning process, and then gave an example of how differing areas of expertise interact during that process.

Shonle: I've seen a lot of noxious weeds getting a toehold after these kinds of treatments. How are you addressing that?

Nilson: Prior to treatment, we monitor the vegetation and noxious weeds. We make sure to target them. Post treatment, we ensure our noxious weed program has resources to go in and follow up with that. We require vendors to power wash all equipment prior to bringing it on to BLM land and we inspect it. For example, you see a lot more cheat grass on the Salida side of Poncha Pass and less where we were working. I think we're seeing it spread by public visitation and wildlife, mostly. We're trying to reseed with native grasses because some of these weeds don't do well with competition. Some of that is even with sagebrush to help improve habitat for the Gunnison Sage Grouse.

Larimer: What's the status of the sage grouse in the district? Have there been any changes?

Culver: The group here is considered a satellite population. This spring there was a survey and we have seen more birds. It's still a small population. But it has done well.

Nilson: US Fish and Wildlife has a stipulation that prevents work and other ground disturbance from March 15 to July 15. Still, we'll see UTVs running around, and our vendors call me about the discrepancy between personal and commercial use.

Sztukowski: More of a comment. Some groups take issue with the fact that different groups use different approaches to the science, which then results in different decisions on how to manage land that's in the same area.

Nilson: Managing for multiple use is a challenge. One of the things I try to do is to not only wear my fire and fuels hat, but to also see the impact on other uses. I know my decisions need to consider these things.

Minks: The NEPA process is there to ensure all of these things are taken into consideration, and to give people the chance to object to decisions. We have folks who come to the Senator's office and we ask them if they got involved prior to a decision. Did they comment? More often than not, they didn't know. So, maybe the question for you is whether the GNA cuts corners or streamlines in some way that doesn't adhere to the normal NEPA process and announcements.

Nilson: Whether it's BIL-related or GNA, any projects we do we have to follow national fire policies. Funding streams or contract mechanisms don't affect that.

Minks: After Senator Bennet visited the site, we had a number of people reach out with concerns about the issues Scotty (Nilson) and I talked about, and we ended up telling them to go back to the site, comment, and follow the process. They weren't too happy with the answer.

Nilson: Everything we do, anything that falls under the NEPA process, is available to the public on our website on our ePlanning page. The comments we receive on fire and fuels projects is typically from the permittees asking us when we're going to do more projects.

Larimer: I've done some work the last couple years with the Colorado State Forest Service on Pinyon Jays, concerning whether fire mitigation on private lands is having a negative impact on the species. I don't know how much that has affected you.

Nilson: It's definitely affecting some of the other offices. Our district has been more proactive in working with biologists, hiring seasonal wildlife biologists to work with US Fish and Wildlife and other bird conservation groups. Our fuels tech in the Royal Gorge has decades of experience doing this. She has treatments in and adjacent to Pinyon

Jay populations and is collecting the data that will be used to help determine how these are or aren't affecting those populations. This is all happening now. It's one of the ways we're being proactive about that. Some of the conversations I've had with biologists is that Pinyon Jays like a combination of trees on the edge of open spaces and trees deeper in a stand where they can nest. One of the things we're seeing in our projects is that we're creating more of those edge spaces. There is likely to be a short-term effect following a treatment. But we're still waiting to see what the long-term effect will be.

Agenda Item 9: Royal Gorge Updates

Kalem Lenard is filling in for this meeting and will be presenting updates for the field office.

Lenard shared the appointment of a new field manager, Doug Mayes, then followed up with updates on agenda topics from the last meeting.

Fees associated with the RAC's recommendation were implemented at The Bank and Sand Gulch campgrounds, going from \$7 to \$20. The blowback from campers has, so far, been less than anticipated.

The expansion of the Sand Gulch campground is complete, expanding sites, restrooms, and parking. One comment from a camper, in response to restroom cleanliness, said increased fees should see improved services. We do need to improve the level of service with these fee sites when compared to on-fee sites.

To charge the new fees recommended by the RAC, we were required to publish a federal register notice in advance. The review process for that was delayed, pushing To charge the new fees recommended by the RAC, we were required to publish a federal register notice in advance. The review process for that was delayed, delaying our ability to charge fees at Turtle Rock until mid-to-late August. Given that the season will be mostly over by then, we won't be charging until next year, which gives us time to get our signage in place and our collection method worked out.

Our camping and travel management plan in Chaffee County now limits camping to designated sites only. We've been working on implementing that, working closely with the county and multiple partners, and have just gotten through the busiest weekend of the year for camping in our field office. Initial reports are that use was down. We're not entirely sure of the reason for that. It seems the camping management strategy is working. People are camping in the designated sites. We have good feedback from campers saying there is less trash and human waste in those sites. It's been successful and it may be worth a visit for the next meeting.

Penrose Commons has experienced a variety of issues, particularly among OHV users, resulting in the need for a recreation management plan that was signed and is now being implemented. The Colorado Motorcycle Trail Riders Association was recently awarded an off-highway vehicle grant to do some more site-specific trail assessment and design. We're also available to do cultural surveys for some of the user-created trails and see what we can officially designate as motorcycle trails. In the assessment, we believed they met the sustainability guidelines we follow for trails and the cultural surveys and biological surveys showed no cultural issues or sensitive plant and animal species. We're excited to move forward. We just need to follow our legal processes.

That about covers what the RAC has been weighing in on. Are there any questions?

Sztukowski: At the last RAC meeting, Keith Berger mentioned a May meeting with CPW and Forest Service to address travel management, and then report back to the RAC. I was wondering if you knew anything about that.

Lenard: It's more of a coordination meeting. We try to do each May, bringing together the regional land management agencies and share a high-level awareness about what's happening. We did sign the Three Peaks travel management plan and there were no appeals. So that's in place. Right now we're gathering an inventory of routes around 31 Mile Mountain in southern South Park and norther Fremont County. I'd anticipate sometime in the next month that going out to the public.

Sztukowski: I appreciate that and the work being done around the Arkansas river. One thing I took away from last meeting was the scattered nature of BLM land in this district and the small parcels that you'll find everywhere. In speaking with members of the Forest Service, they've identified several areas where people are coming on to their land, where they do have travel management, from adjacent BLM land where there isn't any. For example, around Elevenmile Reservoir there's a small section of BLM land that sees a lot of use. It's completely unmaintained. But there are miles and miles of routes into Forest Service roadless areas that shouldn't be there, and it sounds like it won't be dealt with any time soon. So, what are the options for addressing that?

Lenard: That's news to me. If you do have those conversations, please put them in contact with my office. My staff hasn't received reports of that in the area. It's still illegal to create new routes where there isn't a travel management plan. We've tried putting signage in South Park in coordination with Colorado Parks and Wildlife where they have intimate knowledge of an area and where the routes might be new. We can go in and mark it with those signs. Just because there's no travel management plan doesn't mean you can create new routes. Routes are limited to what existed in 1996. That's a complication if we don't have a thorough inventory. But if our staff has knowledge that the route is unauthorized, we can take action. We're trying to prioritize based on the issues, concerns, and conflicts we're aware of. Those priorities aren't set in stone. We try to anticipate where our efforts will make the maximum impact. One of those areas is the Salida and Leadville Ranger District, where they're working on a camping management plan. I'm a little concerned if they sign something to manage camping and we don't have something in place in that area, we could see those impacts landing on us. But if you do see or hear of something, please let us know.

Gillespie: One of the big concerns of private landowners and permittees in Penrose Commons was trespass coming down off of the private and from Brush Hollow coming up. The BLM discussed strategic gates or signage to stop traffic because there's not a lot of fencing and there are constant issues with trespass. Have any of those issues been addressed?

Lenard: The one issue that was brought to our attention on the west side, we got a gate in there and the private owner put up some signage. It does seem to be holding so far and is effective. We'll keep monitoring. We're working on getting a "friends-of" group going. It does seem to be mostly the OHV groups since they seem to want the most out of the land out there. But we're trying to pull in the private landowners and keep them in the conversation. There's a gate we put in on the north side that we're monitoring and it seems to be holding as well.

Agenda Item 10: Call for Agenda Items for Royal Gorge Meeting

Daniel: Review of what the resource management planning looks like, an overview of that process.

Sztukowski: Travel management planning process.

Daniel: I'd like to visit some of these "designated dispersed" camp sites.

Daniel: Potential motion for NCA letter of support.

Spellman: Background information on funding, fee collection, and staffing. Funding silos and separations, etc.

Gillespie: Updates on the restructuring of the law enforcement in the RMD (this was answered by Culver and Ziegler)

Mitson: Can we get the wording used in the previous NCA prior to the meeting?

Public Participation and Public Comment Period

None.

Closing Remarks

Spellman thanked the group for their attention and participation in service to their communities and closed the meeting.

Presentation Materials

- Lobatos Bridge presentation
- Middle Creek presentation

- NCA presentation
- NCA white paper
- Poncha Pass fire presentation

RAC Recommendations

- None.