



Rocky Mountain Resource Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

9 a.m., Nov. 7, 2024

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

Members Present

Category 1

In-Person	Virtual
	Chris Cooper
	Curt Howell

Category 2

In-Person	Virtual
	Loretta Mitson
	Irene Shonle
	Mick Daniel
	John Sztukowski
	Kelly Collins

Category 3

In-Person	Virtual
	Kent Wood
	Arthur Koepsell
	April Estep

BLM Employees Present

In-Person	Virtual
	Dale Culver (acting DFO)
	Doug Mayes
	Levi Spellman
	Laria Lovec
	John Smeins

Public Present

In-Person	Virtual
none	none

Welcome, Introductions, and Housekeeping

Levi Spellman, RAC Coordinator, introduced himself and called roll.

Agenda Item 1: Field Office Updates

Royal Gorge Field Office

Doug Mayes thanked everyone for coming, offering a few updates since September. The field office is kicking off an ethnographic study in Las Animas County on a few lease parcels, and working with the U.S. Army because they have done their own studies.

The field office is working with Backcountry Anglers and the Youth Corps to remove fencing.

There is an oil and gas lease sale either this week or next. The field office has three parcels in the sale.

The field office is working with the U.S. Army on high-altitude mountain environment training.

Cathy Cook has taken position with DOI. Dale Culver is acting District Manager until Chris Ziegler is back from leave, and we will have other acting and interim DMs as the hiring process continues.

The field office has made some progress filling critical positions, including an administrative assistant, a petroleum engineering technician in the Cheyenne area, and a NEPA specialist. The field office is currently advertising for a realty specialist. The field office has thousands of miles of border edge with other lands - enough to stretch from here to Ireland.

The field office is starting to make some estimates for budget planning in FY25. Upcoming projects include the travel management plan for the 31 Mile Mountain area. It is expected to begin sometime around the new year. They received a few mining proposals, including the Beaver Creek expansion in Fremont County, a milling operation in Boulder County, and some possible changes in the Parkdale mine.

San Luis Valley Field Office

Dale Culver said Cathy Cook has taken a new position at the DOI and a new temporary manager named Chris Arne will be filling in for a while.

He explained there will be pile burns this winter.

Culver said the Valley is working on acquiring the La Jara parcel through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and that it is still the top national priority for the LWCF. He is hoping it will be done in 2025.

The field office is working on getting grazing permits updated and renewed in conjunction with land health assessments.

Well redrills are underway for the Blanca Wetlands as part of a Restoration Landscapes project.

The field office will be meeting with Great Outdoors Colorado to present a funding proposal for the Lobatos Bridge project. He is hoping to get the last bit of funding needed to move forward.

Loretta Mitson asked about the DeVargas site and asked if there would be a way to visit it and to consider the site for BLM acquisition. Culver offered to work with her on it.

Kent Wood asked if the wells being drilled in the Blanca Wetlands will be completely new or if they were re-drills of existing well sites. Culver said they were re-drills.

Mitson asked if the change in presidential administration will change priorities or planned actions. Culver said we will have to see what happens.

John Sztukowski asked if RAC applications needed to be turned in by Nov. 15. Levi Spellman said they did, but that submitting earlier gave time for review.

Mitson asked what will happen if the RAC becomes defunct again as it did during the last Trump administration. Spellman said the RAC has value to field managers because their expertise is useful. Regardless of what happens, the district will maintain a RAC.

Agenda Item 2: Wildhorse Reservoir Brief

John Smeins briefed the RAC on the background and current status of the Wildhorse Reservoir project. Aurora Water has considered several sites over the years to create a reservoir to store water to which they have existing water. They closed in on this area, which inundates a small amount of BLM land. Smeins highlighted the size of the project area, some of the water supply planning being undertaken by the city of Aurora, and showed where their supply comes from. Smeins explained the project is still just a proposal. He laid out the details of the current proposal and he explained the BLM's role in that process. He provided an update on the status of the proposal, explaining there are only applications for a right of way. Right now, alternative sites are being considered and they will need to undergo NEPA analysis. Smeins highlighted the cooperating agencies involved in various parts of the proposal. He offered a projected schedule for the environmental analysis process, and the public scoping process.

Wood asked about the water movement logistics from the Arkansas River to the intended destination. Smeins explained the water's pathway, and Wood asked if that plan would increase evaporation. Smeins explained that would all be part of the analysis and that they are working on different models. Wood asked about the average depths of the reservoir and Smeins confirmed Wood's calculations. Wood asked why storage wouldn't be on large areas in Aurora, and whether they are considering other

alternatives. Smeins explained those are part of the alternatives being considered. Wood said this seemed like a drain on BLM resources, and then asked if there was a way to divert resources back to other areas where they might be needed. Mayes explained that while it may take some work, this is part of the BLM's mission. He offered that there are cost recovery mechanisms that help mitigate those costs. We can expect to see reprioritization. But that's a normal part of doing business.

Chris Cooper said it appears this reservoir is likely to be the top choice, based on the resources being devoted to analyzing it. If the environmental impact statement does go through, do we have a timeline on permit approvals? Is it concurrent? Smeins said he anticipates Aurora would want to get started as soon as the BLM makes a decision, but he doesn't see a likelihood of any concurrent construction. The construction timeline is five years. Cooper asked if Colorado Parks and Wildlife was involved. Smeins said they were a cooperating agency.

Wood asked if there were recreation uses also planned. Smeins said all of that would be part of the analysis and had to be considered before making any decisions. Wood asked if Chaffee County had any involvement in this on account of evaporation and other concerns. Smeins explained the Antero pipeline is at maximum capacity and that Aurora has water agreements throughout the Arkansas basin. It's nothing the BLM can speculate on. It's one of the things the EIS will look at.

Agenda Item 3: Grazing Fee Brief

Laria Lovec introduced herself and briefed the RAC on rangeland management. She explained she doesn't actively manage the land. She manages the ranchers who manage the livestock that use the land, with the goal of conserving rangeland for sustainable forage.

She gave a brief history of the evolution of grazing management on BLM land. She explained the qualifications to hold a grazing permit and who qualifies, and how a grazing lease is tied to land ownership. Essentially, public lands are a supplement – not

a primary resource. She then explained the differences between permitting an existing allotment and a new or vacant allotment. She explained the terms and conditions of permits or leases, which cover a wide variety of contractual obligations and prohibitions. She then explained the history and formula for assessing grazing fees. Lovec offered a perspective on the impacts of grazing on land health and the influence of market forces when establishing statutes governing grazing on public land. She then explained challenges and priorities in managing land for the future.

Wood asked whether the fee formulation will change with inflation. Lovec explained that the other factors in the formula account for inflation.

Mitson said she has seen devastation of rangeland fodder and the impacts it has on wildlife. She asked if the comments the BLM receives on things like that are taken into consideration and investigated. Lovec said the comments are viewed and considered. Limited resources can restrict how much action can be taken. She explained that's also why public lands are a supplement, not a primary resource. Ranchers must have their own land. Most permittees are reasonable and not like Cliven Bundy. Mitson asked if Bundy isn't dealt with, how can we expect to deal with violators in the Valley in the courts. She asked when the BLM can lobby for legislative changes. Lovec explained the BLM cannot lobby for policy changes. She then explained the costs and repercussions of unlawful grazing. She emphasized the BLM's responsibility to follow the law and that we are limited by what can be done or pursued because of the laws.

Cooper asked whether infractions and violations were tracked. Lovec explained the BLM does keep records, but they could be better. The BLM often doesn't track inconsequential or non-willful infractions, or informal corrections. Those aren't always documented as often as they could be, even if those might impact grazing permit qualifications. Cooper said it could be worth tracking those, even the situations with positive outcomes, because it would not only log those infractions but also make note of successes of the BLM. Laria explained it can be recorded, but it's not always reported. If

there's an investigation of any kind, it may not be releasable to the public because it involves sensitive information.

Mayes said it could be an opportunity to highlight BLM success stories. A lot of the feelings surrounding it are tied to a few bad actors on the national scene. Most of the time we have good relationships and willing compliance. Cooper said it's worth letting people know.

Mitson asked how grazing program management varies between areas with different management designations. Is it the same regardless of status? Lovec said specific management plans tend to have more specific management objectives. Mitson asked if the upcoming management plan for the Valley could be impacted by the creation of a National Conservation Area. Lovec said she can't address those issues specifically without more familiarity. She explained there is an obligation not to blindsides leaseholders. Any changes require a two-year advance notice.

Agenda Item 4: De Tilla Gulch Solar Brief

Dale Culver provided an update on the status of the De Tilla Gulch solar lease. He provided a history of solar energy zones, which were established by the solar programmatic environmental impact statement in 2012. He showed the RAC where it is located in the Valley, and a few photos to help them understand the type of land it sits on.

He explained the initial opening of these zones to gauge interest in developing utility scale solar production. Multiple locations received interest.

He outlined the research and analysis surrounding solar development, and how other land uses were considered during that process. He provided background on the lease sale, as well as the requirements for both the BLM and the bidder to reach a successful lease.

He provided an update on the challenges and issues they're facing in developing and transmitting the power.

Mitson said it may be putting the cart before the horse in developing power before transmission capacity exists. Culver agreed, saying there is still a need for that. But the bidder must figure it out and submit it as part of their plan of development, which will then be considered by the BLM as part of the EIS. This can take years.

Wood asked whether it might make sense to leave existing vegetation in place if removing it just creates an opportunity for invasive weeds to establish a foothold. Culver said technology has changed since then and the requirements for vegetation removal have likely changed. How they plan to develop it would come under analysis during the EIS. But at the end of their lease, they must have a plan to reclaim the land back to original status. Wood suggested a pilot study with a limited number of solar panels. Culver said that may not provide any information in addition to what the BLM already has regarding the impact of similar projects elsewhere.

Mitson said solar is more efficient when power is consumed near where it is generated, and it's not possible to predict whether a company can follow through on their commitments. She objected to carving up public land for this use. She then asked if there were mammoth fossils found on site. Culver said those fossils were found elsewhere. Mitson then asked how the BLM could guarantee a company can follow through on land reclamation. Culver said that's where the bond comes in, and they must put that money up before they can start a project.

Agenda Item 5: Setting 2025 RAC Meeting Dates and Call for Agenda Items

Mick Daniel asked whether the current meeting schedule worked, meaning two virtual and two in-person meetings per year. Irene Shonle said she liked it. April Estep agreed. Daniel suggested in-person meetings be during the summer, or warmer weather.

Shonle suggested April and October as possible in-person dates. Discussion ensued on dates. Finalized dates are below:

February 13, 2025: virtual meeting via Zoom from 9 a.m. to noon.

April 3, 2025: in-person meeting at the Royal Gorge Field Office from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

April 4, 2025: field tour.

June 26, 2025: virtual meeting via Zoom from 9 a.m. to noon.

Oct. 23, 2025: in-person meeting at the San Luis Valley Field Office, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Oct. 24, 2025: field tour.

Agenda Item 7: Public Comment

No members of the public present.

Closing Remarks

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

Presentation Materials

- Wildhorse Reservoir Brief
- Grazing Fee Brief
- Solar Lease Brief

RAC Recommendations

- None.