

# BLM plans more protection for Animas Forks

**But agency trims a more ambitious plan; will work with the historical society**

The ghost town of Animas Forks has had a population of zero for about a century now, but according to a new study produced for the BLM, hundreds of thousands of visitors now visit the high alpine site each summer.

And that's been raising concerns about how to better protect the historic site.

Elijah Waters, BLM field manager

for the Gunnison district, which includes San Juan County, told the commissioners last week that "there hadn't been a real scientific study done before this. It could help in looking for grants and developing management plans."

The Alpine Loop Visitor Use Study was conducted last summer by Western Colorado University graduate student Kendall Cox, who presented the results to the county commissioners on Feb. 13 at the San Juan County Courthouse.

Cox said she relied on magnetic vehicle counters and direct obser-

ations last summer to determine that more than 158,000 vehicles traveled on the Alpine Loop over the season, with an estimated 313,000 passengers.

The daily traffic peaked on July 21, with 2,194 vehicles traveling the 4-WD trails on that day.

Cox's study found that 56,257 vehicles passed through Silverton last summer to access the Alpine Loop.

"It's the first time we've had hard data," said County Commissioner Pete McKay. "I'm only speaking for myself, but I am

stunned. We've got 158,000 vehicles on the Alpine Loop. Man, that's unsustainable. That's not what we envisioned."

McKay said the impact on the county roads and the town itself is obvious.

"It's changed our communities and in my opinion, for the worse," McKay said.

"It's a disaster. We have 78,000 OHVs on the Alpine Loop in the summer, impacting every other use there. We've got to do something."

"What would be your recommendation?"  
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mendation?" asked County Board Chairman Ernie Kuhlman.

McKay said the county "shouldn't be encouraging any more vehicle use. You can see we're overwhelmed here. We do not need to promote this any further."

McKay said he'd like to work with the BLM to address the management issues.

"I'm looking for help, Elijah, as to how we're going to address this," McKay said. "This can't go on. It's changing us. Lake City is in a freefall. We have to be mature and address this problem."

DeAnne Gallegos, executive director of the Silverton Area Chamber of Commerce, said that pressure is growing on public lands throughout Colorado and the West.

"Communities grow and places change. You either look at it with a vision of being terrified, or look at what we can do for appropriate growth."

"I'm saying this is inappropriate," McKay responded, "and I'm not the only one who feels that way."

Noting the informal, dispersed campsites throughout the Alpine Loop, Waters said he would like to see the BLM develop a formal campground above Silverton.

"I can't wave my magic wand to make that happen, but I think that will eventually come," Waters said.

Lisa Richardson, Silverton-based recreation technician for the BLM, said safety needs to be addressed.

She said she favors making the Alpine Loop routes one-way roads, though it might be complicated for some land owners and visitors.

On Feb. 13, BLM officials presented the agency's draft management plan for Animas Forks to the San Juan County Commissioners.

It includes a consolidation of trails at the town site and a trail to make the Duncan House handicapped accessible.

Liz Francisco, archaeologist for the BLM's Gunnison field office, said she is "proposing a management plan for Animas Forks to try to protect the standing structures."

She said the plan will address "current and anticipated vandalism and unauthorized activities."

Francisco said the BLM would like to implement recommendations from a 1994 cultural resources management plan for the Alpine Triangle.

One problem at Animas Forks, she pointed out, is the informal web of trails.

"I'd like to designate a single



Animas Forks

perimeter trail around Animas Forks that connects each structure," Francisco said. "It's now a criss-cross of trails going everywhere, with increased erosion, soil loss and small artifacts being moved."

County Commissioner Scott Fetchenhier said that with the proposed walkways and other improvements "you're going to lose some of the ambiance. There's something to be said about just walking around these sites. You're 'citing' it."

But Fetchenhier said he understands why the BLM needs to do the project.

"There used to be just a few folks at Animas Forks," Fetchehier said. "The times have changed and now we have to deal with that huge human impact."

On Tuesday, Feb. 19, however, Francisco said the BLM is putting the project on hold for now.

"I received quite a bit of resistance to the Animas Forks project, and so we are putting it on the shelf for now," Francisco said in an e-mail to the *Standard*. "I will work with the historical society to create a project that will work better for the community."

Francisco said the BLM and Historical Society have entered into a financial partnership, and the BLM will be working with the historical society to maintain and preserve several structures along the Loop.

"This coming summer, we hope to maintain several Buffalo Boy tram towers, re-create the Animas Forks jail doors (the original is in the museum) and remove graffiti in the Duncan House," Francisco said.

"We also have a contractor scheduled to remove hazard trees (beetle kill) that surround the Minnie Gulch cabins, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places to prevent the cabins being damaged by dead fall."

The BLM will be initially providing the historical society with \$37,500 for projects on the Alpine Loop.

"I hope to max out the funding limit within the 3-year agreement period (\$100,000)," Francisco said.

Waters said the BLM "has talked about having a host at Animas Forks. Clearly this is a destination for visitors."

"That would be a good idea, if you want to protect it," said County Board Chairman Ernie Kuhlman

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