



July 29, 2019

Submitted via <https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/>

Jerry Krueger, Acting Forest Supervisor  
2250 South Main Street  
Delta, Colorado 81416

**Re: Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests Draft Revised Land Management Plan**

Dear Mr. Krueger:

Western Energy Alliance appreciates the opportunity to submit comments on the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) draft revised land management plan (LMP) for Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests (NF). We support USFS's intent to update the LMP, and ask the Service to consider the comments below when preparing the final LMP.

Western Energy Alliance represents over 300 companies engaged in all aspects of environmentally responsible exploration and production of oil and natural gas in Colorado and across the West. The Alliance represents independents, the majority of which are small businesses with an average of fifteen employees.

USFS plans to identify lands in the planning area open or closed to oil and natural gas leasing "within 3 years of plan approval," according to Objective FW-OBJ-ENMI-09 in the draft LMP. We appreciate that USFS is continuing to evaluate these lands and ask that this process be open and transparent, and that any lands placed off limits to oil and natural gas development are limited in scope and justified by the planning process.

It is appropriate that USFS plans to update the lands available for oil and natural gas leasing at this time, as the industry has undergone significant technological transformation in recent years. Innovations such as horizontal and directional drilling, paired with hydraulic fracturing, dramatically reduce the industry's operational footprint.

Companies are now able to do more with less to minimize impacts on the landscape. As a result, USFS can make more lands available while simultaneously reducing the impacts to surrounding areas. We urge USFS to take this into consideration as it begins to implement Objective FW-OBJ-ENMI-09.

Once lands are leased, a primary concern for oil and natural gas companies is the length of time it takes to permit a project or individual well. To that end, we appreciate that USFS is updating its [regulations for Oil and Gas Resources](#) with the goal of streamlining permitting, pursuant to the following executive orders:

- [Executive Order 13212](#), Actions to Expedite Energy-Related Projects,
- [Executive Order 13783](#), Promoting Energy Independence and Economic Growth; and
- [Executive Order 13807](#), Establishing Discipline and Accountability in the Environmental Review and Permitting Process for Infrastructure.

Duplicative layers of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review are a prime cause of permitting delays. In order to streamline NEPA compliance, USFS should continue and expand the use of categorical exclusions (CX) in the planning area. Requiring an environmental assessment (EA) for a project that has already undergone the land management planning process is redundant and unnecessary, and merely serves to delay development.

Using CXs in place of EAs to fulfill NEPA requirements would significantly reduce the timelines associated with oil and natural gas permitting and would conserve USFS resources and staff time that could be better spent elsewhere. It would also encourage development on these lands that would in turn increase revenues for the federal, state, county and local governments and provide valuable domestic energy for the country.

Another concern companies have with the permitting process are the stipulations that may attach to a lease, such as timing limitations (TL), surface restrictions and buffers due to wildlife management. As discussed above, the impacts of oil and natural gas development on the surrounding areas have decreased dramatically in recent years, so it is appropriate that USFS reconsider previous stipulations.

Overly burdensome TLs may actually serve to increase impacts, rather than achieving the opposite goal. Halting operations and removing all equipment periodically in order to comply with timing stipulations placed due to wildlife habitat has environmental consequences. Re-deployment of rigs and associated equipment mid-job creates lengthy delays. Environmentally, having to move equipment on and off site is a large endeavor, and requires several heavy truckloads. Each additional trip increases wear and tear on local roads, increases safety risks, and causes more surface disturbance. This intensifies when activities have to mobilize and demobilize to meet separate 3-month surface restriction windows.

Year-round development, in tandem with the implementation of conservation measures to avoid and minimize disturbance, serves to limit the impacts to the land. It also allows for more timely initiation of reclamation of surface disturbances as a result of operations being more efficiently scheduled at a decreased long-term duration, instead of periodic operational interruptions due to TLs and surface restrictions.

Finally, the draft LMP revision makes several references to Colorado Parks & Wildlife (CPW) and management of species such as Gunnison Sage-Grouse, elk and mule deer (big game species). We note that, while consultation with CPW is appropriate and beneficial in order to make informed land use decisions, USFS has jurisdiction over the lands it is

charged with managing and should retain its authority to regulate on these lands, rather than deferring to CPW in placing restrictive designations.

We appreciate that USFS is undertaking these revisions to the GMUG LMP, and urge the agency to finalize the plans expeditiously. The final LMP should contemplate reducing the lands placed off limits to oil and natural gas leasing, should promote the use of CXs, and should limit the use of overly burdensome TL stipulations. Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments, and please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions. We look forward to collaborating with USFS on the final draft LMP in late 2020.

Sincerely,



Tripp Parks  
Manager of Government Affairs