

March 25, 2020

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Attention: Rico Trails Project  
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Submitted via the project web page at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=56748>  
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RE: Rico Trails Project - Comments on the February 2020 Draft Environmental Assessment

Hi Derek,

Following are comments on the February 2020 Draft Environmental Assessment for the Rico Trails Project. These comments are being submitted on behalf of myself, Robert H Marion, and on behalf of Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers (CBHA).

We are pleased to see that some aspects of your previous proposal have been changed from the September 2019 Scoping Notice, but we still believe that this project proposal has many issues that need modification and further study and justification.

As indicated previously, we are surprised to see this new travel management proposal for the Rico area, given the Forest Service just recently completed travel management planning for the Rico West Dolores area, which included consideration of motorized and non-motorized trails and roads within the Rico Area Trails project area. See July 30, 2018 Record of Decision, Rico West Dolores Roads and Trails (Travel Management Project). We submitted comments throughout the planning process for that decision, and we hereby incorporate those comments and objections, including the attachments, hereto.

CBHA and myself, Robert H Marion, agree with and support the comments submitted by WildEarth Guardians, as well as the comments submitted by the San Juan Citizens Alliance.

An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is necessary. On p. 1 of the Feb 2020 Draft EA it states –“ The Forest Service prepared this environmental assessment (EA) to determine whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact.” In this comment letter, we will present numerous significant impacts (of high intensity), areas of significant controversy, areas of uncertainty, effects on the human and physical environment, etc which demonstrate that this Rico Trails Project should not be decided based on a finding of no significant impact (FONSI). As outlined in the Comment letter from WildEarth Guardians regarding this Feb 2020 Draft EA (in the section entitled “An EIS is necessary”), this project does not meet the requirements for a FONSI or an EA - an EIS is necessary. We agree with and support the WildEarth Guardians detailed itemization of the reasons why a FONSI is not sufficient or applicable to this Project. This project proposes to make changes to the 7/30/18 RWDTMP Decision, which itself was based on an EIS – these changes need to be analyzed in an EIS. Furthermore, Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) guidance states “If a proposal

appears to have adverse effects which would be significant, and certain mitigation measures are then developed during the scoping or EA stages, the existence of such possible mitigation does not obviate the need for an EIS”.

## **1 - Purpose and Need statement needs Modification/Additional Information**

The USFS just completed an extensive evaluation and study of the travel needs in the Rico-West Dolores area. This process took over 10 years and resulted in the final Record of Decision (ROD) and FEIS issued on 7/30/18. We realize that the USFS changed the focus of this project to primarily address motorized uses – but it definitely addressed non-motorized uses. In the FEIS Appendix E – “Refinements to the Proposed Action for Scoping for Alternative B”, it describes changes to the original (Dec 2014) Proposed Action. In item 14 in Appendix E it stated – “Ultimately, the ID Team decided not to carry forward most of the proposals in the original Proposed Action for new nonmotorized trails in order to keep the focus of analysis on motor vehicle roads and trails. A few nonmotorized trails were carried forward in the analysis because they were directly tied to changes in motor vehicle use, or they are currently on-the-ground and managed for nonmotorized use (emphasis added).” On p.55 in the FEIS it states – “The proposed action for scoping included additional new nonmotorized trails. However, the Forest Service eliminated most of them from consideration in order to focus on motor vehicle uses for this analysis. The nonmotorized trails that carried forward are Little Bear Pack loop, Pack Loop Connector and Sockrider Trails.” Therefore, the USFS did consider non-motorized trails in this analysis. As an example for the Rico area, the analysis said - “Add Sockrider Trail to the Forest trail system managed as a pedestrian trail”, to “provide alternate route for nonmotorized users” (quotes from ROD Attachment 2).

RE: the above FEIS statement regarding the inclusion of trails that “are currently on the ground and managed for nonmotorized use” - the “Proposed Action Travel Management for the Rico-West Dolores Roads and Trails” dated December, 2014 proposed (on p.27) “Add the ‘Horse Gulch’ trail to the trail system for mountain biking, horse riding and hiking uses” and “Add the ‘Rio Grande Southern’ trail for mountain biking, horse riding and hiking uses”. In the text in this document it stated that these trail were currently on the ground. Therefore, these trails were already considered in the recent RWDTMP and not designated - they are currently on-the-ground and were “carried forward in the analysis” per the FEIS. Regarding the Circle Trail, the Proposed Action stated (on p.26) – “Lands east of the Town of Rico toward Blackhawk Mountain contain no Forest Service roads, trails or other developed recreation facilities. As described above, this country provides remote backcountry blocks of land without trails. At this point in time, there are no immediate needs for public road or trail access for this area”. Therefore, Circle Trail did not exist and it was stated that there is no need for it.

Additional support that the just completed RWDTMP considered non-motorized trails is given in Section 6 of the FEIS entitled “Issues”. One of the issues highlighted is “Lack of Semiprimitive Nonmotorized Recreation Trail Experiences” where it discusses the need for nonmotorized trails for hiking, mountain biking and horse riding. Therefore, these needs were addressed.

The “Purpose and Need for the Proposal” in the Draft EA needs to be rewritten. It is deficient in a number of ways:

RE: Purpose - To “provide connectivity and loop opportunities” were part of the just completed Rico-West Dolores Travel Management Plan (RWDTMP) – what has changed to make a new need? Also, “designating trails with cooperating organizations provides volunteer commitment to trail maintenance and increased connection between local communities and adjacent public lands by way of recreation opportunity, trail work and social outreach between volunteers” were also a part of the RWDTMP. See the following for more detail on these deficiencies.

RE: Need – To “respond to requests from the Rico Trails Alliance and the San Juan Trail Riders for additional trails and associated non-motorized and motorized recreation opportunities” was also a part of the recently completed RWDTMP. The Rico Trails Alliance (RTA) and the San Juan Trail Riders (SJTR) submitted comments that included the trail changes proposed in this new project – and the Final Decision issued on 7/30/18 did not contain most of these proposals – after extensive study and analysis. See next paragraph for more detail on the parts of the current “Rico Trails Project” that were mentioned in the Final Decision.

The final RWDTMP Decision on 7/30/18 briefly discussed only two parts of the proposed action in the current Rico Trails Project:

1- The final 7/30/18 Decision discussed a potential future project to identify and construct a new trail connecting the end of NFSR 692A to the Stoner Creek Trail. In the ROD Attachment 2, p. 2, it stated that this “Spring Creek Extension Connection” would be “new and pending additional analysis and public involvement” and would be “Open to Motorcycles Only, Seasonal”. The 7/30/18 Decision did not justify the need for this potential future project. The new Rico Trails Project must justify this need – there is currently a motorized connection between Stoner Mesa and Taylor Mesa via the Eagle Peak Trail # 629. Therefore, a need for a connection from Stoner Mesa to Taylor Mesa is not a justification – that connection already exists. One might claim that the Spring Creek Connection would provide a connection that is free of snow blockage earlier in the year. That needs to be verified as passable earlier and justified as a need (data on number of users, etc). Also, the need and it’s justification should not assume that it also provides an earlier season link to Calico trail because the upper section of the Priest Gulch trail is usually not free of snow earlier in the year because it is north-facing and in the trees.

2 – The final 7/30/18 Decision mentioned (in Record of Decision Attachment 2, p.6) a future action to “Reconstruct the upper end of the Ryman Creek trail to address steep grades”. The purpose of the action is to “Reduce downcutting, improve trail sustainability and enhance trail user experience (nonmotorized)”. Under “How the Action would be Implemented” it states – “Use trail re-alignment to add switchbacks to the steep section of trail near the trailhead on FR564 (Divide Road)”. The Proposed Action for this Rico Trails Project includes much more than the above described trail re-alignment – it includes trail reconstruction for over half of the Ryman trail.

3 - The 7/30/18 final Decision has no mention of a future project to increase the nonmotorized trails in the Rico area. In fact, the Decision did the opposite – it did not include a number of trails in the Rico area that were existing trails (on the ground) before the 10 year RWDTMP process – including Horse Gulch Trail and Circle Trail (which is being proposed in this project as an addition). The Decision was based on extensive input from Rico area individuals/organizations and it decided that more trails were not needed or were not justified by the extensive environmental analysis performed. Furthermore, the Rico Trails Alliance submitted comments during the RWDTMP process and was a part of that process – therefore,

their requests, needs, desires, etc were already considered in the RWDTMP process that lead to the final 7/30/18 Decision.

The reasons behind the 7/30/18 RWDTMP Decision regarding the travel needs in the Rico area are probably still valid – if they are not, the USFS should justify the new needs based on valid changes that have occurred since the 7/30/18 Decision. The Purpose and Need statement needs to explicitly explain why the Decision and FEIS are no longer valid - what has changed in the travel needs and what has changed in the analysis of the environmental, economic, and other consequences. How can the recent FEIS and Decision be assumed to be invalid/insufficient just because a group wants it changed? If that is acceptable, then Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers (and I am sure other organizations) would like the USFS to start a project for a number of existing trails that need to have their allowed uses changed.

Without explanation in the Purpose and Need for this Project, it is hard to understand the need for the nonmotorized and motorized trail parts of the Rico Trails project. As you know, the Purpose and Need statement in a project is very important in executing the project and in determining that the agency considered appropriate and reasonable alternatives. Furthermore, if the new project proposes to change the Decision and FEIS, then the new project should have a full evaluation in an EIS (not an EA, CE, or FONSI), since it is changing a Decision that was made based on extensive analysis performed in the FEIS.

## **2- General Background Information**

The Rico Trails Project proposes a substantial increase in the number of miles of trails in the Rico West Dolores area where the USFS just completed an extensive study of travel needs and issued a new Travel Management Plan (over 10 years in the making).

- Motorized Trails – The Rico Trails Project proposes to add/construct one new motorized trail (3.4 miles - Spring Creek Trail), re-designate one trail as motorized (2.7 miles – Stoner Creek Trail), and decommission 1.9 miles of motorized trail (Stoner Creek Trail). Net result is an addition of 4.2 miles of motorized trail!! And - the motorized Spring Creek connector trail (to connect Taylor and Stoner Mesas) will result in a substantial increase in the overall amount of motorized travel on all trails in the RWD area. This is a significant impact with a lot of controversy.

- Non-Motorized Trails - The Rico Trails Project will add 2.6 miles for the Circle Trail, 4.3 miles for the Rio Grande Southern Trail and 2.5 miles of reroutes/realignment for the Ryman Trail. The new project will decommission 3.5 miles for the old Spring Creek Trail, and will decommission 6.2 miles for the Stoner Creek trail portion that dead-ends at private property. The decommissioning of this 6.2 mile section of the Stoner Creek Trail is effectively no change – because it currently gets very little use (small portions are occasionally used by hunters that bushwack down from the top of Stoner Mesa). Non-motorized users do not want to hike 6.2 miles each way on a dead-end trail after hiking about four miles to get to the start of the dead-end trail. Any study/analysis would verify this statement. The USFS should not take “credit “ for this 6.2 mile trail decommissioning in any analysis of the environmental impacts of the Rico Trails Project – this is not a qualifying mitigation measure. Therefore, the net result is an addition of 5.9 miles of non-motorized trail!!

And - the new nonmotorized trails will result in a large increase in mountain bike travel in the Rico area – especially on the Ryman Trail. Without the 2.5 mile rerouting of the Ryman trail, Ryman trail is unattractive to most mountain bike riders (this is confirmed in comments provided on the scoping letter for this project, by mountain bikers). These new trails will have substantial influence on the wildlife and habitat – above the environmental consequences evaluated in the recently completed Rico-West Dolores Travel Management Plan (RWDTMP). As discussed below, trail travel has a large negative effect on wildlife and habitat. We do not want to go backward from the wildlife and habitat protections put in place in the just completed RWDTMP.

The summary provided in the previous paragraphs support our conclusion that the Rico Trails Project is not a project with “no significant impact”.

The website for the Rico Trails Alliance (RTA) has information on trails. See the following link: <https://www.ricotrailsalliance.org/trails-portfolio/>

Unfortunately, this Rico Trails Alliance information has endorsed and directed users to illegal trails near Rico that are not part of the USFS system – prior to Sept 2019 the website had information on trails called Whispering Springs Trail and Circle Trail (these trails are not designated trails in the USFS system). Whispering Springs Trail connected from Roaring Fork Road (about 4.3 miles up Roaring Fork Road from Hwy 145 - where the road switchbacks around East Canyon) to Salt Creek Trail. On 7/26/18, I sent an email to Tom Rice and Derek Padilla stating that there is a USFS sticker sign (on one of the USFS fiberglass posts) designating a bicycle trail - a picture of the sign was included in the message. The sign designated travel by bicycles only (no stickers for other uses) and the trail followed an old logging road. Shortly thereafter, the sign was removed by the Forest Service/Chris Bouton. Since the USFS did not put up the sign, it is a reasonable possibility that someone that wants that trail to be a designated trail put up the sign (and they had the USFS posts/stickers). The RTA website still directed bikers to the Whispering Springs Trail through Oct 2019 when I wrote the comments on the Scoping Notice for this project. Sometime since Oct 2019 the Whispering Springs Trail has been removed from the RTA website. However, the Circle Trail is still on the RTA website (as of 3/5/20). This is not what we would expect from a valued USFS partner. The USFS should not reward special interests that do not respect their Decisions. Encouraging and endorsing travel that can damage the forest and it's habitat should not be tolerated and/or rewarded with more trails.

### **3- Background on the effect of trail travel on wildlife and habitat:**

1- USFS Research on the effect of trail travel on elk and elk habitat has demonstrated that mountain bikes and motorized travel displace wildlife more than hikers and horses. See the following link for scientific information on the influence of mountain bikes and motorized travel on elk and elk habitat (this is USFS research published in a peer reviewed Journal in 2018): [https://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw\\_2018\\_wisdom001.pdf](https://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw_2018_wisdom001.pdf)

This research was also published as a USDA/Forest Service publication – see the following link to Science Findings (a publication of the USFS Pacific Northwest Research Station), dated September, 2019. <https://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/science/scifi219.pdf>

Key Findings from this USFS “Science Findings” report are:

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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Elk avoided people and trails associated with all-terrain vehicle (ATV) use, mountain biking, hiking, and horseback riding. Avoidance was strongest in response to ATV use, followed by mountain biking, and was less strong in response to hiking and horseback riding.</li></ul>          |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In response to these recreation activities, elk moved to areas where they were less likely to encounter recreationists. Increased movement and flight added energetic costs and decreased foraging times, which can affect animal health and diminish their ability to reproduce.</li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Elk stayed hidden from human view as part of avoidance. Extensive forest thinning increased the field of view and, therefore, the distances that elk maintained from recreationists.</li></ul>  |

2- A two page summary of all of the USFS/Wisdom research has been put together by Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers and it is attached at the end of this comment letter – see “Effects of Off-Road Recreation On Elk and Mule Deer (Summary of Wisdom et al Studies)”. At the end of this summary of the USFS/Wisdom research it states that the bottom line is that *“for a given time frame of recreation, not only do mountain bikers adversely impact big game 4 times as much as hikers, they impact 50% to 75% more animals”*.

3- This USFS research (discussed in 1 and 2 above) clearly refutes the statement in the Draft EA (on p.13) that “non-motorized recreation has the potential to displace animals to the same degree as motorized recreation”. This is discussed further in the following sections.

4- Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers recently issued a report entitled “Impacts of Off Road Recreation on Public Lands Habitat” which discusses the negative influences of trails on wildlife habitat. A copy of the report is attached at the end of this comment letter.

Of particular note is the following info from this report:

Former CPW District Wildlife Manager, Jim Haskins, wrote: “New mountain bike [trail] construction will likely result in permanent habitat fragmentation. Habitat fragmentation impedes the movement of wildlife across landscapes. Looped trails may create islands of habitat that may be avoided entirely by wildlife.”

5- Research has demonstrated that the reproductive success of elk is negatively affected by human disturbance during the calving season. A discussion of this research is in the following link (the text of this “High Country News” article is attached to the end of this comment letter – it is titled “Hiking trails are a path to destruction for Colorado elk”):

[https://www.hcn.org/articles/wildlife-hiking-trails-are-a-path-to-destruction-for-colorado-elk-vail?utm\\_source=wcnl&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.hcn.org/articles/wildlife-hiking-trails-are-a-path-to-destruction-for-colorado-elk-vail?utm_source=wcnl&utm_medium=email)

The research was performed by Bill Alldredge, a now-retired wildlife professor at Colorado State University. The following is from the attached HCN article:

“He started studying unit 45 in the 1980s in response to expanding ski resorts and trails systems. To measure the impact on calves, he deliberately sent eight people hiking into calving areas until radio-collared elk showed signs of disturbance, such as standing up or walking away. The consequences were startling. About 30% of the elk calves died when their mothers were disturbed an average of seven times during calving. Models showed that if each cow elk was bothered 10 times during calving, all their calves would die.

When disturbances stopped, the number of calves bounced back.

Why, exactly, elk calves die after human activity as mellow as hiking is not entirely clear. Some likely perish because the mothers, startled by passing humans and their canine companions, run too far away for the calves to catch up, weakening the young and making them more susceptible to starvation or predation from lions or bears. Other times it may be that stress from passing recreationalists results in the mother making less milk.”

This research has been published in peer-reviewed, professional journals. See the following links to a couple of the articles:

“Reproductive Success of Elk Following Disturbance by Humans during Calving Season”, Gregory E. Phillips and A. William Alldredge, Journal of Wildlife Management Vol 64 No. 2: pp. 521-530 · April 2000

<https://www.emwh.org/pdf/elk/Reproductive%20success%20of%20elk%20following%20disturbance%20by%20humans%20during%20calving%20season%202000.pdf>

“Elk Reproductive Response to Removal of Calving Season Disturbance by Humans”

Kirk J. Shively, A. William Alldredge and Gregory E. Phillips, Journal of Wildlife Management Vol 69 No. 3: pp.1073-1080 · July 2005

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3803346?seq=1>

This research was performed with hikers as the disturbance. The other research cited above that compares the impact of various types of users can be used to conclude that there is a much larger effect for mountain bikers and motorcycles.

6- RE: CPW concerns on elk herd size and cow-calf ratio decline.

On 2/4/20, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) held a public meeting at the Dolores Community Center regarding "How to handle Southwest Colorado's declining and ailing elk herd populations". A comprehensive presentation was given by Matt Thorpe and Brad Weinmeister. They presented a very compelling case that our elk population is in trouble - the calf/cow ratio is continuing to decrease and the elk population in DAU 24 is now below their objective. They stated the current calf:cow ratio is below what is necessary to maintain/sustain the herd. This is serious.

They also stated that it is most likely that there are a number of causal factors. There is a lot of previous research that point toward a few causal factors – some of this research and established science is summarized above in the previous 5 sections. CPW reviewed these causal factors in their presentation. CPW has drastically decreased the number of cow elk licenses that they issued over the past 10 years (one of the few things that they can control) - and the calf/cow ratio has continued to decrease. CPW also plans to increase the harvest of predators that could be impacting young calves.

Most decision makers in a situation like this conclude that the most prudent approach is to carefully examine every new trail proposal with an analysis that addresses the top few most likely causes of the population decline. That is the only approach that has a chance to reverse the downward trend. We do not need more studies or research. We know the most probable causes - based on existing science (briefly summarized above). More trails and more potential human activity on the existing trails will only worsen the population decline. This project will do this and, therefore, we need to carefully examine the environmental effect of more trails and the corresponding increase in trail traffic. This type of prudent approach is supported by most wildlife biologists - for one example see the Hershey report (referenced in the attached summary

of the USFS/Wisdom research), where it states that relying on the precautionary principle is the needed approach.

#### 4- Spring Creek Trail:

1- The construction of this connector trail does not only add 3.4 miles of new motorized trail (to be built) - it also converts about 2.7 miles of Stoner Creek Trail #625 to motorized.

2- A bridge needs to be constructed for Spring Creek Trail #625 to cross Stoner Creek. On p.7 in the Draft EA, it states – “The stream crossing for the Spring Creek Trail will not affect the flood prone area of Stoner Creek due to the manner in which it will be constructed (see project Design Elements)”. It is not clear how the Design elements will solve this issue. During spring melt/runoff, I have seen this creek run very high – it has repeatedly washed out a large beaver dam on Stoner Creek where the West Twin Springs Trail comes down to Stoner Creek. You have not adequately addressed this issue.

3- The Stoner Creek drainage is superb wildlife habitat, and this project will negatively affect that habitat - by adding motorized travel on a part of Stoner Creek trail and by constructing a new motorized trail up to the top of the southern ridge of the drainage and continuing to FR 692. If this project is to be approved, the environmental consequences of this habitat degradation and the resulting displacement of wildlife needs to be studied and minimized/justified. The proposed trail climbs up a steep hillside in a narrow canyon that amplifies sound very well. As discussed above, USFS research has concluded that motorized trail travel has a large effect on elk and habitat.

4- More detail on the exact layout of the new trail and stream crossing is needed. How can one evaluate the environmental consequences when these details are unknown?

I previously suggested that the effects of this habitat degradation be partially compensated for by changing the presently motorized section of the Stoner Creek Trail #625 from the end of West Twin Springs Trail #739 to the intersection with East Twin Springs Trail # 741 (a distance of about 2 miles) to non-motorized. I commend you for doing this in your proposed action. This section of the Stoner Creek Trail lies in the main canyon of Stoner Creek and is valuable habitat for wildlife and contains a number of beaver dams.

However, you have not adequately addressed this habitat degradation issue in the Draft EA. In fact, **a few of the statements made in the EA are not correct.** See a and b below:

a- On p. 13 in the EA, it states – “It should be noted, however, that 8.1 miles of non-motorized trail are to be decommissioned in the Spring Creek/Stoner Creek trail system. Although non-motorized trails are not considered in the definition of a security area, non-motorized recreation has the potential to displace animals to the same degree as motorized recreation. The decommissioning of these trails should provide elk with a benefit in movement and security area habitat.” This statement does not agree with science/research. – USFS science/research states that motorized recreation has much larger consequences – see the USFS publications discussed in section 3 (#1 to #4) above.

b- Another incorrect statement is on p. 13-14 where it states – “If trails are determined to be a causal factor in elk population decline, the Forest Service will work with CPW to identify the best course of action to mitigate effects to elk populations.” Research has determined that



human disturbance is a factor in elk population decline (this research is not for the Spring Creek area but it is for areas similar to it in other parts of Colorado). A discussion of this research is in section 3 (#1 to #5) above. The USFS research discussed above stated as a key finding – “In response to these recreation activities, elk moved to areas where they were less likely to encounter recreationists. Increased movement and flight added energetic costs and decreased foraging times, which can affect animal health and diminish their ability to reproduce”. Other research supported this key finding. Some of the other research presented above was for hikers. However, extensive research cited above that compares the impact of various types of users can be used to conclude that there is a much larger effect for mountain bikers and motorcycles. Based on the demonstrated effect on elk populations, new trails should be minimized.

4- Seasonal closures should be addressed on the proposed motorized sections. As mentioned above, the 7/30/18 ROD Attachment 2, p. 2, stated that this “Spring Creek Extension Connection” would be “new and pending additional analysis and public involvement” and would be “Open to Motorcycles Only, Seasonal”.

## **5- Circle Trail:**

1- Information from the recently completed RWDTMP:

As mentioned above, the “Proposed Action Travel Management for the Rico-West Dolores Roads and Trails” dated December, 2014 stated (on p.26) – “Lands east of the Town of Rico toward Blackhawk Mountain contain no Forest Service roads, trails or other developed recreation facilities. As described above, this country provides remote backcountry blocks of land without trails. At this point in time, there are no immediate needs for public road or trail access for this area”.

Therefore, Circle Trail did not exist and it was stated that there is no need for it.

2-The Draft EA states (in Table 1) that the 2.6 mile Circle Trail is a “re-designation”. It is not!! This trail exists on the ground (as an old trail), but it is not designated in the 7/30/18 RWDTMP Decision. In fact, it was not even mentioned in all of the analysis performed for the 7/30/18 RWDTMP Decision (it was only mentioned in the proposed action, as stated above). It is a “non-system trail that is a popular non-motorized connection between the Town of Rico and the Blackhawk section of the Colorado Trail” (quote from p. 3 of the Draft EA) - that is currently illegally used by mountain bikers. The fact that this trail was not designated in the 7/30/18 RWDTMP Decision strongly endorses that there is no need for it and that the environmental consequences of having the Circle trail in the system prevented it from being designated.

2- The RWD FEIS addresses watershed health in the Silver Creek watershed on p.91-92. It concludes that “the proposed activities associated with this project would not have an impact on impaired waters listed in Silver Creek” because no new roads or trails are proposed in this watershed. However, this new project will affect the watershed and this needs to be carefully analyzed.

3- The addition of nonmotorized Circle Trail to the trail system will result in a loss of effective habitat for wildlife. As discussed in the above references. all modes of travel cause habitat degradation and mountain bike travel causes much more habitat degradation than hikers/horses. This trail will also contribute to more mountain bike travel on loops consisting of Circle trail combined with Ryman trail, Salt Creek trail, Scotch Creek road, Colorado trail, the proposed Rio

Grande Southern trail and others. The amount of mountain bike travel will increase substantially. To offset this loss of habitat and wildlife displacement, I previously suggested that the Ryman trail be designated for use by hikers and horses only, as discussed more below.

## **6- Rio Grande Southern Trail:**

1- Information on the exact alignment of this trail is not given in the Draft EA. It is assumed that about the first 1+ miles of the proposed trail would use FR422 (which is a motorized road) and the non motorized trail would start in the Alkali Flat area. It appears from the map that it would then head in a southerly direction (? following an old trail toward the old Coke Ovens) to join the RR grade about 1 mile further south. This is just behind the Coke Ovens. What is the plan for dealing with these historic elements? More detail on the exact layout of the new trail and stream crossing is needed. How can one evaluate the environmental consequences when these details are unknown?

On p.4 of the Draft EA it states – “The deciding official will make two decision from this analysis due to the need for coordination with the State Historic Preservation Office on the historic nature of the Rio Grande Southern trail alignment. This trail is the only affected element for this coordination and the overall affects will not be influenced by two separate decisions.” Are the Coke ovens and the view of them from Hwy 145 part of this coordination/analysis? Again, more detail is needed. The Design Elements will not take care of this issue. It should be noted that Lynn Markey, in her Scoping comment letter dated 10/6/19, highlighted this and a number of issues that were not addressed in the Draft EA.

2- This will be a very expensive project - it has a bridge across the Dolores River which will cost in excess of \$200,000.

3- The addition of nonmotorized Rio Grande Southern Trail to the trail system will result in a loss of effective habitat for wildlife – the same effect discussed above for the Circle Trail. As discussed in the above references. all modes of travel cause habitat degradation and mountain bike travel causes more habitat degradation than hikers/horses. This trail will also contribute to more mountain bike travel on loops consisting of Rio Grande Southern trail combined with Ryman trail, Salt Creek trail, Scotch Creek road, Colorado trail, the proposed Circle trail and others. The amount of mountain bike travel will increase substantially. To offset this loss of habitat and wildlife displacement, I previously suggested that the Ryman trail be designated for use by hikers and horses only, as discussed more below.

4- A bridge will be needed to cross Burnett Creek. This stream crossing is ignored in your analysis. The exact layout of the trail is needed to evaluate the environmental consequences of this stream crossing.

## **7- Ryman Trail:**

1- On p.2 of the Draft EA, it states – “An alternative proposal would be to remove mountain bike use from that trail allowing only foot and equestrian traffic. This was not considered in the proposed action because changing the allowed used on the trail would not agree with the trail objective, and the Forest Service IDT did not identify this option as providing a measurable improvement to wildlife habitat over the proposed action due to current low use and limited projected increase of use.” An analysis has to be presented to justify the “limited projected

increase of use”. This has certainly not been the case for Salt Creek Trail – which provides a very similar route from the ridgeline down to the Dolores River. Over the past 5 years the mountain bike use of Salt Creek Trail has increased dramatically! The only reason that Ryman is not used by the mountain bikers now is that it is in terrible shape and very difficult to ride – many places require walking. This is confirmed in the comment letters submitted by mountain bike riders for the scoping phase of this project.

2- One of the primary reasons for having a non-motorized Ryman Creek drainage in the recently completed RWDTMP was it's excellent wildlife habitat, which is valued by many hunters and wildlife viewers. As discussed above, USFS research on the effect of mountain bikes on elk and elk habitat has demonstrated that mountain bikes displace wildlife much more than hikers and horses. The addition of mountain bike loops and the rerouting of Ryman that is proposed in this project (loops utilizing Circle Trail, Rio Grande Southern Trail, Scotch Creek Road, etc) will substantially increase the amount of mountain bike travel on the Ryman Trail. This will result in an unacceptable displacement of wildlife and loss of excellent habitat.

3- We really think that you should designate Ryman Creek trail as open to hikers and horses only. Since Salt Creek Trail and Scotch Creek road provide similar loop opportunities as Ryman Creek Trail, Ryman Creek trail is not needed by mountain bike riders (three routes down from the Colorado trail that are within a few miles of each other are not needed or justified). Ryman trail is very close to Salt Creek trail and both are not needed by mountain bike riders. The only opportunity that is forfeited if Ryman Trail is closed to mountain bikes is a loop using Ryman and Salt Creek Trails. The use of Salt Creek Trail by mountain bikers is less disruptive to wildlife than the use of Ryman Creek trail since Ryman Trail traverses the center of Ryman Creek drainage. And - mountain bikers love riding down Salt Creek Trail – mountain bike travel on this trail has increased a lot this year. It seems to me that giving up a “mountain bike allowed Ryman” is a small concession for all that is gained with the addition of Rio Grande Southern trail and all of the accompanying loops. And, the wildlife will still be affected, but not as much!

4- As mentioned above in section 1, the final 7/30/18 Decision mentioned (in Record of Decision Attachment 2, p.6) a future action to “Reconstruct the upper end of the Ryman Creek trail to address steep grades”. The purpose of the action is to “Reduce downcutting, improve trail sustainability and enhance trail user experience (nonmotorized)”. Under “How the Action would be Implemented” it states – “Use trail re-alignment to add switchbacks to the steep section of trail near the trailhead on FR564 (Divide Road)”. The Proposed Action for this Rico Trails Project includes much more than the above described trail re-alignment – it includes trail reconstruction for over half of the Ryman trail in addition to the rerouting. This need for additional improvements/etc on the Ryman Trail must be justified and all of the environmental consequences fully evaluated - including habitat issues, wildlife, user displacement, etc.

5- The trail work that is proposed is still needed even if this trail is closed to mountain bikers (but the amount of trail work needed will be less).

## **8- Funding of the work required to implement Non-motorized trail portion of Proposal**

Before approving more mountain bike trails that negatively influence wildlife habitat, the USFS should consider the maintenance/repair needs of the existing trail system. There are a number of trails in the Rico area that are not used much and are in serious need of maintenance and trail

work. This work should be done before new trails are added and the capability of the USFS to maintain the existing trails needs to be realistically assessed. They are not being maintained now. A good example is the Horse Creek trail – this trail needs reconstruction and repair in the upper elevation portion of the trail. It needs work in a number of areas, but a good example is the portion of the trail that is near the intersection of the old Horse Gulch trail (this is presently not a USFS system trail) – the Horse Creek Trail has a slide area where the trail was reconstructed a number of years ago with 3 foot high log retaining walls – these walls were wiped out last winter and the trail now has no horizontal/flat portion on a cross-slope exceeding 45 degrees. This is unsafe for all users.

Detailed information is needed in this proposal on the source of the funding for this project and the cumulative effect of the need for this funding on the existing trail system approved in recent travel management plans.

1- Re: Maintenance of existing non-motorized trails:

The Dolores District of the SJNF has in excess of 200 miles of non-motorized trails that need regular maintenance. The USFS knows these costs much better than we do but a rough estimate based on previous work and work in other National forests is about \$500-1000. per mile per year. That equates to greater than \$100,000. to \$200,000. per year.

2- Re: Construction of new trails:

Existing commitments - In the 7/30/18 RWDTMP Decision, you have already committed to a lot of expensive work on non-motorized trails. The Boggy Draw Trail Expansion Project (March 2018) involves the construction of approximately 25 miles of new non-motorized trails. The Chicken Creek Trails Project involves the construction of about 6 miles of new non-motorized trail. And – the list goes on further. As we said previously, you know these costs better, but – a very rough estimate is at least \$10,000. per mile. This equates to a commitment of greater than \$310,000.

3- Cost of this Project – The bridge across the Dolores river will be at least \$200,000. New trail construction of 6.8 miles of non-motorized trail will cost at least \$68,000.

4- Where will all of this money come from? The primary source will probably be the CPW Non-motorized Trail Grants. As you know, this fund source has less money than the motorized Grant program.

The cost for existing commitments (maintenance and new construction) will overwhelm the available funds in the CPW non-motorized Grant program for at least the next 5-10 years. Detail is needed on the source of funds for this new project. And when it would be available – demand for trail funds has increased dramatically in the past few years, so your past success in obtaining funds will probably decrease.

## **9- E-Bikes**

1- On p.9 of the Draft EA, you state – “The Forest Service classifies E-bikes as motorized vehicles and are allowed on motorized trails only. If the Forest Service modifies its travel rule to allow E-bikes on non-motorized trails additional analysis would likely be required on a Forest Service wide level.” This statement is just trying to get “an easy way out”. The most probable outcome of this future travel rule modification is that additional site-specific analysis will not be required for all trails in the Forest Service system. The Bureau of Land Management did not do that!

Although E-Bikes are currently managed as motorized vehicles by the USFS, it would be negligent for the USFS to not consider and evaluate them in any new project proposal. They

clearly would have an increased influence on wildlife and wildlife habitat. Let's do the right thing! An excellent intro/summary/review is given on the following link:  
<https://mountainjournal.org/do-ebikes-represent-a-menace-to-wildlife-in-the-backcountry>

## **9- Conclusion**

Please consider these comments in the development of your final EA. The Purpose and Need must be rewritten to justify this Project. If that is done and the EA stands as it is written in the Feb 2020 Draft EA, we support the No-Action Alternative.

In this comment letter, we have presented numerous significant impacts (of high intensity), areas of significant controversy, areas of uncertainty, effects on the human and physical environment, etc, which demonstrate that this Rico Trails Project should not be decided based on a finding of no significant impact (FONSI). This is strongly supported in the WildEarth Guardians comment letter on this Draft EA.

A full EIS is needed for this Project. The "Purpose and Need for Action" needs to be modified and/or supplied with additional information regarding the reasons why the just completed RWDTMP is no longer valid or needs changing. If a new need (that did not exist for the just completed RWDTMP) is identified for nonmotorized trails near Rico and the addition of the Spring Creek motorized connector, you should issue an EIS that addresses the issues identified in this comment letter.

The Feb 2020 Draft EA is very weak in the Environmental Analysis performed - to protect wildlife and wildlife habitat, to protect water sources, etc, etc. We have put a lot of detail into this comment letter to demonstrate these shortcomings.

Regards,

Signed by Robert Marion

Robert Marion  
Habitat Watchman, Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers

# On Elk and Mule Deer

## (Summary of Wisdom et al Studies)

The Starkey Experimental Forest and Range (Starkey) is a one-of-a-kind, world-class research facility located in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon. Starkey is the primary field location for scientific study of deer, elk and cattle in a natural environment. Most of the 28,000-acre forest and range is enclosed by a game-proof fence. Research on ungulates (hoofed mammals) is conducted jointly by the USDA Forest Service Pacific Northwest (PNW) Research Station and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.<sup>1</sup>

There are a wide variety of research projects completed and ongoing at Starkey. Studies examine key questions about elk, deer, timber, cattle and recreational uses on National Forests. Starkey is managed for multiple public uses like other National Forest lands.<sup>2</sup> The facility encompasses spring, summer and fall ranges typical of those used by mule deer and elk in the western United States.<sup>3</sup>

The Starkey Project measures the population response of deer and elk to managed forests and rangelands. The project is a synthesis of long-term studies on the impact of off-road recreation on elk and mule deer.<sup>4</sup> The research is a controlled comparative evaluation of off-road activities as experimental treatments and periods of no human activity as experimental controls.<sup>5</sup>

Wisdom et al. (2005) and Wisdom (2007) measured responses of radio-marked elk (from April to October: 2002-2004) to four types of off-road disturbances: hikers, equestrians, mountain bikers and ATVs. This controlled study design mimicked daytime patterns of motorized and non-motorized disturbance on National Forests.<sup>6</sup>

The studies measured levels of disruption quantified as: 1) the likelihood of flight by the animal, 2) how fast and how far the game moved from the disruptor, and 3) how long game ceased resting and eating. These variables correlate directly to overall health and stamina of the big game subjects. An automated GPS tracking system provided the subjects' locations every 30 seconds.<sup>7</sup>

To balance the distances covered in a given timeframe for each of the disruptors, the study used double the numbers of mountain bikes, compared with ATV's, and triple the number of hikers and equestrians. This is based on the ATV's covering 20 miles per transect, mountain bikes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fs.usda.gov/treesearch/pubs/6271>

<sup>2</sup> Terry Hershey, Wildlife Biologist (Salmon, Idaho). "Implications of Back-country Travel on Key Big Game Summer Range in the Bighorn-Weitas Roadless Area, Clearwater National Forest." *Report*: 1/18/11.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Hershey, Wildlife Biologist (Salmon, Idaho). "Implications of Back-country Travel on Key Big Game Summer Range in the Bighorn-Weitas Roadless Area, Clearwater National Forest." *Report*: 1/18/11.

<sup>4</sup> Wisdom, M. J., A. A. Ager, H. K. Preisler, N. J. Cimon, and B. K. Johnson. 2005. Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Mule Deer and Elk. Pages 67-80 in Wisdom, M. J., technical editor, *The Starkey Project: a synthesis of long-term studies of elk and mule deer*. Reprinted from the 2004 Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, Alliance Communications Group, Lawrence, Kansas, USA.

<sup>5</sup> Terry Hershey, Wildlife Biologist (Salmon, Idaho). "Implications of Back-country Travel on Key Big Game Summer Range in the Bighorn-Weitas Roadless Area, Clearwater National Forest." *Report*: 1/18/11.

<sup>6</sup> Wisdom, Michael J., et al. "Effects of off-road recreation on mule deer and elk." *Transactions of the Sixty-ninth North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference*: March 16-20, 2004. [http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw\\_2004\\_wisdom001.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw_2004_wisdom001.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Wisdom, Michael J., et al. "Effects of off-road recreation on mule deer and elk." *Transactions of the Sixty-ninth North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference*: March 16-20, 2004. [http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw\\_2004\\_wisdom001.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw_2004_wisdom001.pdf)

covering half that distance (10 miles) and hikers and equestrians about 6 miles. Basically, they wanted equal length transects. All the reviewing peers agreed this methodology was appropriate.<sup>8</sup>

**Study results:** The probability of flight varied according to distance from the disruptor. When within 100 yards of any of the four disruptors the probability of flight was roughly equal. However, as the distances increased those probabilities spread out. At 500 meters from a hiker there was basically zero flight response. To achieve the same zero flight response the elk needed to be 750 meters from the equestrians and 1500 meters from both ATV's and mountain bikes.<sup>9</sup>

Doing the conversions, hikers can clear a swath of disturbed animals 1/2-mile wide, equestrians clear a swath 3/4th-to-1 mile wide, and ATV's and mountain bikes clear a swath a full 2 miles wide! Visiting the flight speed data, we see similar results. Elk move away from ATV's 35% faster than from hikers and equestrians. They move off 15% faster from mountain bikes in comparison to hikers and equestrians.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding recovery data, compared to control data (i.e., movement throughout the day with NO disruptors), the elk never settled down regardless of the disruptor. Their recovery from the disruption was never complete; no long times resting or eating. This last data simply points out that regardless of our mode of movement we humans aren't particularly good for the general wellbeing of elk within a half mile or so of us.<sup>11</sup>

**Takeaways:** Elk flee 2 times as far from equestrians than from hikers and they flee 4 times farther from mountain bikes and ATV's than from hikers, and they're running faster. Hence, the argument that mountain bikes cause LESS disruption than hikers because they're here and gone quickly isn't valid based on study data. In fact, we could make the argument that the sudden, intense scare from rapidly moving mountain bikes is the cause for their greater displacement.<sup>12</sup>

An important point to remember in comparing the flight responses to hikers vs. mountain bikers is that for a given time frame of recreation (i.e., one hour, two hours, whatever) mountain bikes generally cover 50% to 75% more ground, thus impacting that many more animals.<sup>13</sup>

**Bottom line:** For a given time frame of recreation, not only do mountain bikers adversely impact big game 4 times as much as hikers, they impact 50% to 75% more animals.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wisdom, Michael J., et al. "Effects of off-road recreation on mule deer and elk." *Transactions of the Sixty-ninth North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference*: March 16-20, 2004. [http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw\\_2004\\_wisdom001.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw_2004_wisdom001.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Wisdom, M. J., A. A. Ager, H. K. Preisler, N. J. Cimon, and B. K. Johnson. 2005. Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Mule Deer and Elk. Pages 67-80 in Wisdom, M. J., technical editor, *The Starkey Project: a synthesis of long-term studies of elk and mule deer*. Reprinted from the 2004 Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, Alliance Communications Group, Lawrence, Kansas, USA.

<sup>10</sup> Wisdom, M. J., A. A. Ager, H. K. Preisler, N. J. Cimon, and B. K. Johnson. 2005. Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Mule Deer and Elk. Pages 67-80 in Wisdom, M. J., technical editor, *The Starkey Project: a synthesis of long-term studies of elk and mule deer*. Reprinted from the 2004 Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, Alliance Communications Group, Lawrence, Kansas, USA.

<sup>11</sup> Wisdom, M. J., A. A. Ager, H. K. Preisler, N. J. Cimon, and B. K. Johnson. 2005. Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Mule Deer and Elk. Pages 67-80 in Wisdom, M. J., technical editor, *The Starkey Project: a synthesis of long-term studies of elk and mule deer*. Reprinted from the 2004 Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, Alliance Communications Group, Lawrence, Kansas, USA.

<sup>12</sup> Wisdom, M. J., A. A. Ager, H. K. Preisler, N. J. Cimon, and B. K. Johnson. 2005. Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Mule Deer and Elk. Pages 67-80 in Wisdom, M. J., technical editor, *The Starkey Project: a synthesis of long-term studies of elk and mule deer*. Reprinted from the 2004 Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, Alliance Communications Group, Lawrence, Kansas, USA.

<sup>13</sup> Wisdom, M. J., A. A. Ager, H. K. Preisler, N. J. Cimon, and B. K. Johnson. 2005. Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Mule Deer and Elk. Pages 67-80 in Wisdom, M. J., technical editor, *The Starkey Project: a synthesis of long-term studies of elk and mule deer*. Reprinted from the 2004 Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, Alliance Communications Group, Lawrence, Kansas, USA.

<sup>14</sup> Wisdom, M. J., A. A. Ager, H. K. Preisler, N. J. Cimon, and B. K. Johnson. 2005. Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Mule Deer and Elk. Pages 67-80 in Wisdom, M. J., technical editor, *The Starkey Project: a synthesis of long-term studies of elk and mule deer*. Reprinted from the 2004 Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, Alliance Communications Group, Lawrence, Kansas, USA.

# Impacts of Off-Road Recreation On Public Lands Habitat

Due to the breadth and depth of our state's vast public lands estate, Colorado boasts more [elk](#) than any other state. At the same time, our human population is booming and expanding its impact on wild habitat. The Colorado [chapter](#) of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA) has been hearing from an increasing number of hunters, anglers, public land managers and others about the detrimental impacts of increasing off-road recreation on public lands habitat.

Wildlife habitat in Colorado is being significantly impacted by the proliferation of mechanized (i.e., mountain bike) and motorized (ATV/OHV) trails on public lands. Sportsmen and wildlife managers are finding that elk hunting opportunities, in particular, are being compromised by trail development in many parts of the state.

In the Roaring Fork Valley (which stretches from Glenwood Springs to Aspen), for example, user-created trails have displaced elk to a point where a Colorado BHA member, Bob Shettel, no longer finds elk in traditional hunting areas north of Basalt.<sup>15</sup> Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) is also growing increasingly concerned about decreasing elk numbers in the vicinity of areas with expanding off-road recreation trail systems.

Former CPW District Wildlife Manager, Jim Haskins, wrote: "New mountain bike [trail] construction will likely result in permanent habitat fragmentation. Habitat fragmentation impedes the movement of wildlife across landscapes. Looped trails may create islands of habitat that may be avoided entirely by wildlife."<sup>16</sup> During the 2017 Colorado BHA Rendezvous at Sylvan Lake State Park (June 2-4), CPW District Wildlife Manager, Craig Wescoatt, stopped by. He's concerned that elk are being displaced by mountain bike trails in the Eagle area.<sup>17</sup>

At a February 27, 2018, Vail Planning and Environmental Commission meeting, CPW officer Bill Andree told board members about the decline in area wildlife populations, including a roughly two-thirds decrease in the elk herd between Vail Pass and Wolcott south of Interstate 70 in the past 15 years. The *Vail Daily* Editorial Board added these insights:<sup>18</sup>

"Ultimately, preserving and rebuilding wildlife herds is up to us. 'We all feel we don't have an impact, that it's the other guy,' [CPW officer Bill] Andree told commission members. He's right, you know. We're all the problem. From people who ... [walk dogs] on trails ... to people who violate trail closures—'oh, the elk will never notice me'—individuals can and do impact wildlife. When a few hundred—or even several dozen—individuals take the

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<sup>15</sup> Bob Shettel. "Wildlife and the Crystal Trail." Glenwood Springs (Colo.) *Post-Independent*: 11/8/17.

<https://www.postindependent.com/opinion/letter-wildlife-and-the-crystal-trail/>

<sup>16</sup> Jim Haskins (CPW District Wildlife Manager), in a 2015 letter addressing a mountain bike trail proposal for Buffalo Pass (northeast of Steamboat Springs): <http://www.steamboattoday.com/news/jim-haskins-bids-farewell-after-rewarding-career/>

<sup>17</sup> Craig Wescoatt, CPW District Wildlife Manager (Glenwood Springs), attended Colorado BHA's general membership meeting during our 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Rendezvous at Sylvan Lake State Park south of Eagle (on 6/4/17).

<sup>18</sup> Editorial Board (Publisher Mark Wurzer, Editor Krista Driscoll and Business Editor Scott Miller). "Do we truly value wildlife? Then it's time to acknowledge that it's up to everyone to help." *Vail Daily*: 2/27/18. <https://www.vaildaily.com/opinion/do-we-truly-value-wildlife-then-its-time-to-acknowledge-that-its-up-to-everyone-to-help-editorial/#.Wpbk8e914sg.facebook>



same attitude, the results can be devastating to local wildlife.<sup>19</sup>

"Whether or not you see an elk or deer, that animal has probably seen you, and at a fairly great distance. An elk can spot a hiker as far away as 550 yards. An animal can spot a person on an all-terrain vehicle nearly a mile away. An animal easing away from a human isn't doing the work needed to stay alive or raise a viable calf."<sup>20</sup>

"That contributes to the decline of our herds. Better education—from locking gates to crystal-clear closure signs to, perhaps, having volunteers at trailheads explaining closures—can all help. Ultimately, though, responsibility falls on us."<sup>21</sup>

In southwest Colorado, around Durango, illegal trails are vexing land managers and wildlife officials, who have struggled with reining in the longstanding, escalating problem. "We're not talking small connector trails," said Shannon Borders, spokeswoman for the Bureau of Land Management. "We're talking miles of illegally built trails."<sup>22</sup>

Tyler Fouss, a BLM law enforcement ranger, said the trails appear to be mostly constructed and used by mountain bikers. The BLM and other agencies treat the illegally built trails as a criminal case of trespass, but it's tough to find perpetrators. Since 2015, no one has been caught in connection with building illegal routes.<sup>23</sup>

Trails are also being built and used in closed areas. Every year, the BLM cordons off areas that are critical winter habitat for wildlife (from Dec. 1 to April 15), and every year, people disregard the closures. "It's a shame people can't share the landscape with wildlife," said Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) spokesman Joe Lewandowski.<sup>24</sup>

"The purpose of this seasonal closure is to reduce the recreational impacts ... on wintering big game animals during the time of year when deer, elk, pronghorn and moose are most vulnerable to stress," a CPW official explained. "The result of this stress can be decreased body condition, increased mortality, and decreased fawn/calf survival. Winter can be extremely difficult in wildlife as body weight is down and access to food is very limited. The survival of wildlife relies heavily on keeping as many calories as possible until the green shoots pop up, heralding spring's return."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Editorial Board (Publisher Mark Wurzer, Editor Krista Driscoll and Business Editor Scott Miller). "Do we truly value wildlife? Then it's time to acknowledge that it's up to everyone to help." *Vail Daily*: 2/27/18. <https://www.vaildaily.com/opinion/do-we-truly-value-wildlife-then-its-time-to-acknowledge-that-its-up-to-everyone-to-help-editorial/#.Wpbk8e914sg.facebook>

<sup>20</sup> Editorial Board (Publisher Mark Wurzer, Editor Krista Driscoll and Business Editor Scott Miller). "Do we truly value wildlife? Then it's time to acknowledge that it's up to everyone to help." *Vail Daily*: 2/27/18. <https://www.vaildaily.com/opinion/do-we-truly-value-wildlife-then-its-time-to-acknowledge-that-its-up-to-everyone-to-help-editorial/#.Wpbk8e914sg.facebook>

<sup>21</sup> Editorial Board (Publisher Mark Wurzer, Editor Krista Driscoll and Business Editor Scott Miller). "Do we truly value wildlife? Then it's time to acknowledge that it's up to everyone to help." *Vail Daily*: 2/27/18. <https://www.vaildaily.com/opinion/do-we-truly-value-wildlife-then-its-time-to-acknowledge-that-its-up-to-everyone-to-help-editorial/#.Wpbk8e914sg.facebook>

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Romeo. "Illegal trail building a vexing problem for public land managers: Mountain bike paths build in recent years." *The Durango Herald*: 3/20/18. <https://durangoherald.com/articles/214352-illegal-trail-building-a-vexing-problem-for-public-land-managers>

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Romeo. "Illegal trail building a vexing problem for public land managers: Mountain bike paths build in recent years." *The Durango Herald*: 3/20/18. <https://durangoherald.com/articles/214352-illegal-trail-building-a-vexing-problem-for-public-land-managers>

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Romeo. "Illegal trail building a vexing problem for public land managers: Mountain bike paths build in recent years." *The Durango Herald*: 3/20/18. <https://durangoherald.com/articles/214352-illegal-trail-building-a-vexing-problem-for-public-land-managers>

<sup>25</sup> <http://cpw.state.co.us/antlershed>

The problem extends beyond BLM- and CPW-managed lands. The U.S. Forest Service discovered an illegal mountain bike trail near Hermosa Creek Campground, in a special management area protected by law. Forest Service staff and volunteers went out to eliminate the route by spreading shrubs, rocks and trees along the path. Cam Hooley, spokeswoman for the Forest Service, said illegal trails have become more of an issue in the last five to 10 years.<sup>26</sup>

Partly as a result, we are losing critical wildlife habitat in Colorado at an alarming rate. A [study](#) conducted by Conservation Science Partners found that from 2001 to 2011 the West lost a football field worth of natural areas to human development every 2½ minutes.<sup>27</sup> Colorado alone lost 525 square miles of natural areas (or 254,259 football fields) during that time, and threats to our public lands continue to proliferate.<sup>28</sup>

As a result, sportsmen and women are increasingly concerned that off-road trail systems on public lands—especially in places that provide critical wintering habitat for elk and mule deer—are negatively impacting wildlife populations. The scientific studies and related information below provide additional detail supporting and confirming our concerns.

### Scientific Studies

Although there are some groups who claim that their off-road recreation activities on public lands don't impact elk and other wildlife species, scientific (peer-reviewed) studies prove otherwise.<sup>29</sup> The Starkey Project measured the population response of deer and elk to managed forests and rangelands. The project is a synthesis of long-term studies on the impact of off-road recreation on elk and mule deer.<sup>30</sup> A summary of the data is included here: “[Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Elk and Mule Deer](#).”

Elk calving grounds are carefully selected by cows and are generally in locations where cover forage and water are in close proximity. Sites must provide security from harassment and be within or adjacent to high quality summer range. Hiking and other recreational activities in or near elk calving areas can have a significant impact on reproductive success. Gregory Phillips and William Alldredge (2000) studied reproductive success of elk following disturbance by humans during calving seasons in central Colorado<sup>31</sup> A summary of the data is included here: “[Reproductive Success of Elk Following Disturbance by Humans During Calving Season](#).”

### Mitigation Issues

A USDA-Forest Service Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), for the Gunnison Basin Federal Lands Travel Management plan, stated: “Basically all activities related to roads and trails will have an effect on wildlife species. The widespread, detrimental impacts of human disturbance on wildlife are well documented in the literature. No positive benefits to wildlife

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<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Romeo. “Illegal trail building a vexing problem for public land managers: Mountain bike paths build in recent years.” *The Durango Herald*: 3/20/18. <https://durangoherald.com/articles/214352-illegal-trail-building-a-vexing-problem-for-public-land-managers>  
<https://disappearingwest.org/>

<sup>27</sup> John Gilroy. “Bill Would Protect Colorado Wilderness, WW II History, and Recreation Economy.” *Pew Charitable Trusts*: 1/26/18. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/compass-points/2018/01/26/bill-would-protect-colorado-wilderness-wwii-history-and-recreation-economy>

<sup>29</sup> Michael J. Wisdom, et al. “[Elk responses to trail-based recreation](#) on public forests.” *Forest Ecology and Management*: March 2018, p. 223-233.

<sup>30</sup> Wisdom, M. J., A. A. Ager, H. K. Preisler, N. J. Cimon, and B. K. Johnson. 2005. Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Mule Deer and Elk. Pages 67-80 in Wisdom, M. J., technical editor, *The Starkey Project: a synthesis of long-term studies of elk and mule deer*. Reprinted from the 2004 Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, Alliance Communications Group, Lawrence, Kansas, USA.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Dept. of Agriculture-U.S. Forest Service. “Application for Transportation and Utility Systems and Facilities for the Village at Wolf Creek Final [Environmental Impact Statement](#) (EIS).” *Rio Grande National Forest-Divide District*: 3/27/16.

have been identified from increases in travel management access.”<sup>32</sup> A discussion of issues related to off-road recreation mitigation measures/effectiveness (or lack thereof) is included here: “**Off-Road Recreation Trail Development Observations/Mitigation Issues.**”

Mountain biking is an increasingly popular form of quiet and healthy recreation that has a place on public lands. Many sportsmen and women use mountain bikes for exercise, enjoyment and hunting. When well-planned and managed, mountain bike use can occur in a way that minimizes conflicts with other public lands users and maintains high-quality fish and wildlife habitat.

Healthy public lands help sustain healthy fish and wildlife populations, and Colorado BHA is dedicated to working collaboratively with other public lands user groups to provide avenues for sustainable outdoor recreation, while also conserving the large tracts of intact habitat that make Colorado’s public lands a national hunting and fishing destination.

## **Resources**

“**Impacts of Off-Road Recreation on Public Lands Habitat: Resources.**”

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<sup>32</sup> USDA Forest Service, Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest (GMUG). “Final Environmental Impact Statement: Gunnison Basin Federal Lands Travel Management.” *USDA FS-GMUG*: April 2010, p. 3-112.  
[http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5182985.pdf](http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5182985.pdf)

Article from High Country News

**Hiking trails are a path to destruction for Colorado elk**

Recreationalists in Vail are having a devastating impact on the local herd.

**[Christine Peterson](#) Aug. 27, 2019**

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Biologists used to count over 1,000 head of elk from the air near Vail, [Colorado](#). The majestic brown animals, a symbol of the American West, dotted hundreds of square miles of slopes and valleys.

But when researchers flew the same area in February for an annual elk count, they saw only 53.

“Very few elk, not even many tracks,” their notes read. “Lots of backcountry skiing tracks.”

The surprising culprit isn't expanding fossil-fuel development, herd mismanagement by state agencies or predators, wildlife managers say. It's increasing numbers of outdoor recreationists – everything from hikers, mountain bikers and backcountry skiers to Jeep, all-terrain vehicle and motorcycle riders. Researchers are now starting to understand why.

U.S. National Parks and wilderness areas have boomed in popularity in the last decade, with places like Yosemite National Park hitting as many as 5 million visits a year. The influx is due to a mixture of visitation campaigns, particularly during traditional “off seasons”, and an explosion of social media exposure that has made hidden gems into national and even international viral sensations.

The impact on wildlife is only recently apparent, and the Vail elk herd may be one of the more egregious examples.

Outdoor recreation has long been popular in Colorado, but trail use near Vail has more than doubled since 2009. Some trails host as many as 170,000 people in a year.

Recreation continues nearly 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, said Bill Andree, who retired as Colorado Parks and Wildlife's Vail district wildlife manager in 2018.

Night trail use in some areas has also gone up 30% in the past decade. People are traveling even deeper into woods and higher up peaks in part because of improved technology, and in part to escape crowds.

The elk in unit 45, as it's called, live between 7,000 and 11,000 feet on the pine, spruce and aspen-covered hillsides and peaks of the Colorado Rockies, about 100 miles from Denver. Their numbers have been dropping precipitously since the early 2010s.

Blaming hiking, biking and skiing is controversial in a state where [outdoor recreation is expected to pump \\$62.5 billion into the state's economy in 2019](#), an 81% increase from 2014.

But for Bill Alldredge, a now-retired wildlife professor at Colorado State University, there is no other explanation. He started studying unit 45 in the 1980s in response to expanding ski resorts and trails systems.

To measure the impact on calves, he deliberately sent eight people hiking into calving areas until radio-collared elk showed signs of disturbance, such as standing up or walking away. The consequences were startling. About 30% of the elk calves died when their mothers were disturbed an average of seven times during calving. Models showed that if each cow elk was bothered 10 times during calving, all their calves would die.

When disturbances stopped, the number of calves bounced back.

Why, exactly, elk calves die after human activity as mellow as hiking is not entirely clear. Some likely perish because the mothers, startled by passing humans and their canine companions, run too far away for the calves to catch up, weakening the young and making them more susceptible to starvation or predation from lions or bears. Other times it may be that stress from passing recreationalists results in the mother making less milk.

“If you’ve ever had a pregnant wife, and in the third trimester you chase her around the house in two feet of snow, you’ll get an idea of what she thinks about it,” Andree said.

The problems came to a head in 2017, when a group called the Vail Valley Mountain Trails Alliance proposed building a new trail through more of unit 45’s elk calving area.

Andree wrote a letter explaining the dire impact of constant recreation on elk. Even if certain trails were closed during calving season, he said, elk would still be disturbed because some people simply disregarded instructions for them to keep out.

“Generally when you ask people to stay out of the area no matter what the reason is, 80-90% obey you,” Andree said. “But if you get 10% who don’t obey you, you haven’t done any good.”

The recreation community acknowledges its impact on wildlife as well as other development, said Ernest Saeger, the executive director of the mountain trails alliance. Many people don’t understand the significance of the closures. Others, he acknowledged, just don’t care.

So the group formed a trail ambassador program to post more informative signs at closures and even place volunteers at trailheads to explain why trails are closed.

The scheme reduced closure violations in 2018, according to Forest Service numbers.

If trail building and closure violations in critical habitat continue, Devin Duval, Colorado Parks and Wildlife's district wildlife manager in the area, anticipates the worst.

"It will be a biological desert," he said.

*Christine Peterson has written about outdoor recreation, land and wildlife issues for the past decade from her home in Laramie, Wyoming. Email High Country News at [editor@hcn.org](mailto:editor@hcn.org) or submit a [letter to the editor](#).*