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Guest Columns

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Kara Chadwick: Land exchange would acquire critical elk and deer habitat

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In November, the San Juan National Forest looked to the public for feedback regarding a proposed land exchange on the Pagosa Ranger District.

Land exchanges are a way to acquire land on behalf of the public that has important natural and recreational resources. The proposed Valle Seco 2019 Land Exchange would secure important winter rangeland, a crucial migration corridor for elk and mule deer and additional public access for motorized use in the Valle Seco area.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Southern Ute Indian Tribe identify the Valle Seco area as one of the most important areas for wintering big-game animals in the San Juan Basin. Both routinely document thousands of wintering animals in the area annually as they migrate from high-elevation summer ranges in the San Juan Mountains to low-elevation winter ranges in Colorado and New Mexico.

Federal, tribal and private entities share in the management of elk and mule deer habitat.

The USDA Forest Service has been discussing potential land exchanges with former and current owners of the 880-acre private inholding in the Valle Seco area since the 1980s because of its critical wildlife values. Such an exchange would protect a continuous landscape supporting wintering habitat and corridors for wildlife migration.

The Forest Service has the authority to purchase land, but only from a willing seller. In the case of Valle Seco, the land is not for sale and is only being offered as part of a land exchange; therefore, funds appropriated through the Land and Water Conservation Fund cannot be used to purchase the land.

Through the proposed Valle Seco 2019 Land Exchange, the Forest Service would acquire a total of 900 acres in two parcels, while 11 parcels of National Forest System land containing a total of 472 acres would be conveyed out of federal ownership. Further information and supporting specific area maps are located at our website, www.fs.usda.gov, and we are developing an interactive map and answers to frequently asked questions, which will be available on the website.

Providing access to public land and rivers is important. The proposed land exchange preserves existing access to the San Juan River upstream of Pagosa Springs from Highway 160 and existing access to the Blanco River from County Road 326. None of

the parcels in the proposed land exchange include the bed or banks of the San Juan, east or west forks of the San Juan or the Blanco rivers. The road that goes through the Valle Seco area would also secure improved access to public land.

The proposal includes the exchange of approximately 26 acres of federal land within two suitable wild and scenic river corridors for 20 acres within one of the same corridors for a net loss of six acres within one of the corridors.

Conservation easements will be placed on the portions of the two federal parcels within suitable wild and scenic river corridors that are being conveyed out of federal ownership to protect the rivers' free-flowing conditions and natural and recreational values.

The proposal also includes the exchange of approximately 176 acres of federal land within Colorado Roadless Areas on two federal parcels. These acres comprise a total of 0.5% of the South San Juan Adjacent Colorado Roadless Area and 0.003% of the Turkey Creek Colorado Roadless Area. The parcels are not immediately adjacent to any designated wilderness area.

There are existing authorized and unauthorized roads, ditches and fences within these roadless areas, which detract from their roadless character, making them appropriate for conveyance out of federal ownership.

We expect to release a draft environmental analysis document in the coming months. The environmental analysis will be open for public comment and incorporate feedback we have received thus far.

In the meantime, we encourage anyone who would like more information about the proposal to contact Becca Smith at the Pagosa Ranger District, (970) 264-1521 or rebecca.smith@usda.gov.

Kara Chadwick is the San Juan National Forest supervisor.

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