

# **Comment Regarding the Dispersed Camping Management, Leadville and Salida Ranger Districts Project**

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## **I. Introduction**

I am a Jeep and off-road vehicle enthusiast from Highlands Ranch, Colorado, and a non-practicing Colorado licensed attorney currently working as a software developer. I serve as the Vice President of Colorado Offroad Trail Defenders (COTD), a non-profit organization dedicated to keeping offroad trails open to full-size four wheel drive vehicles and maximizing opportunities for offroad motorized recreation. I am also an Advisory Board member of Colorado Offroad Enterprise (CORE), a related organization based in Buena Vista, CO which focuses on trail adoptions and community outreach to preserve high quality opportunities for motorized recreation in the central Colorado mountains. These comments are submitted on behalf of both myself and Colorado Offroad Trail Defenders as an organization.

CORE currently maintains 7 adopted trails in the Salida Ranger District and 5 trails in the Leadville Ranger District and engages in a wide variety of trail maintenance projects every summer, from shoveling out snow drifts to open the high mountain passes in early summer to picking up trash and blocking off unauthorized off-route travel. Through my volunteer work with CORE and prior advocacy work on the Pike San Isabel National Forest travel management plan, I have spent countless hours exploring the four-wheel-drive roads in the Leadville and Salida Ranger Districts, and frequently engage in dispersed camping. I would estimate I have spent at least 3 weekends dispersed camping in the project area every summer for the last four years.

It is extremely important to me personally, and to Colorado Offroad Trail Defenders as an organization, that existing opportunities for dispersed camping in the Leadville and Salida districts are preserved. We therefore urge the Forest to adopt a balanced and thoughtful approach to managing dispersed camping across these two ranger districts, and to avoid enacting excessive restrictions which would unnecessarily deprive visitors to these areas of the freedom to camp in the backcountry.

As stated in our previous comments on this project, sweeping closures of large areas to camping are simply not warranted. We are pleased to see that the Forest appears to be following our previous suggestions of focusing on a few specific heavily used areas while leaving most road corridors in the two ranger districts open to unrestricted dispersed camping. We continue to encourage the Forest to pursue an approach which legitimizes and manages camping in existing sites which are currently in a bit of a gray area, while only closing individual campsites that are demonstrably causing unacceptable impacts. We also hope that the Forest

Service will work collaboratively with all stakeholders to find a balanced solution and not give undo weight to the agenda of exclusionary, anti-recreation interests groups such as Envision Chaffee County and local homeowners groups.

## **II. Discussion**

### **A. General Comments**

Though this project is still in a more conceptual stage and currently lacks specific details in many areas, we support the overall concept as presented so far. Most of the areas the Forest is proposing to limit to designated campsites or to build new campgrounds appear to be reasonable. We strongly support limiting only these areas to designated sites while leaving most other roads in the two ranger districts open to unrestricted dispersed camping.

The Forest Service should only restrict camping to designated sites in the highest use corridors, typically along ML3 roads that are accessible to 2WD vehicles and access popular recreation sites and trailheads. More remote, lightly used roads, and ML2 roads only accessible with high-clearance 4WD should remain open to unrestricted dispersed camping within one vehicle-length of designated roads. There is simply no justification for managing camping in high-use and low-use areas similarly. Any management approach the Forest adopts should therefore take use levels, remoteness, and difficulty of access into account, and reserve stricter regulations solely for high-use, high-impact corridors.

Within the areas restricted to designated sites, we strongly urge the Forest Service to set a target of maintaining roughly 100% of existing camping opportunities in each area. This would follow the same approach the Bureau of Land Management ultimately settled on in its dispersed camping management project for Chaffee County. Any significant reduction in the total number of campsites available to the public would severely diminish the quality of the recreational experience on public lands in the area, spurring competition and user conflict over the remaining sites and leading to increased public dissatisfaction as more people are unable to find campsites. This in turn would cause campers to be displaced to other areas where camping is less restricted, causing increased impacts in other areas.

For these reasons it is critical that roughly the same number of dispersed campsites remain available in the project area after the project is completed as were there before. Any management plan for the area must also provide sufficient flexibility to add additional campsites to meet rising demand as Colorado's population continues to grow.

Low cost and spontaneity are two primary reasons that people choose to engage in dispersed camping, and all areas under consideration should continue to offer those benefits. Reservations have become a huge obstacle to camping in developed campgrounds in recent years, as every reservable campsite for summer weekends can be expected to be sold out many months in advance. First-come-first-serve sites in developed campgrounds are generally taken by mid-week, leaving the typical weekend camper from the front range with no chance of securing a site there on summer weekends. For those who lack the ability to plan every summer trip by January or drive up mid-week, camping in developed campgrounds is therefore simply

not an option. Dispersed camping provides the only realistic way that most Colorado residents can go camping on short notice.

Thus as a general matter, the Forest Service should avoid imposing fees or requiring reservations for campsites except in the proposed new developed campgrounds. Even in campgrounds, most sites should be available strictly on a first-come-first-served basis and should not require advanced reservations through Recreation.gov. While we support the construction of new campgrounds as the demand for these currently vastly exceeds the supply, the Forest must recognize that these new campgrounds will not come close to meeting that demand and continue to provide sufficient opportunities for dispersed camping to provide overflow capacity.

Any decision on how to manage camping should be based on actual evidence of impacts, not anecdotal accounts or mere opinions. We submit that mere anecdotes and the subjective observations and opinions of residents, visitors, or Forest Service staff are an inappropriate basis for agency actions under NEPA, which must be science-based.

Concerns of neighboring residents, while important, should be treated with skepticism and awareness of the inherent self-interest involved. The Forest Service should avoid closing areas of public lands solely because of NIMBYism from neighboring landowners. In the current project, this appears to be of particular concern in the area around Alpine, where the local homeowners association appears to have orchestrated a campaign asking their members to submit comments demanding that CR 162 and FR 292 be closed to camping. NIMBYism also appears to be the motivation for proposed camping closures around Angel of Shavano.

The Forest Service should remember that people who choose to own property bordering public lands enjoy great benefits from those public lands, but also must deal with occasional negative side-effects from members of the public using those public lands. That includes people camping. Public lands should be managed for the benefit of all Americans, not just those who happen to own nearby properties. Accordingly, public lands should not be closed to either dispersed camping or motorized travel simply because neighboring landowners may find such activities annoying or inconvenient. The Forest Service must balance the public interest against the self-interest of neighboring landowners and continue to provide a high quality camping experience in these areas. We strongly oppose any effort to use this project to establish buffer zones on public lands around private property where camping is prohibited.

Finally, trash and human waste pollution are most often cited as the two greatest impacts of dispersed camping. It is critical that the Forest recognize from the outset that the vast majority of negative impacts associated with dispersed camping are not caused by recreational users, who mostly follow leave-no-trace principles. Most negative impacts are caused by the inappropriate use of campsites in the National Forest for long-term residency by individuals experiencing homelessness.

It has been well-documented in Colorado media outlets over the last several years that mountain communities like Buena Vista, Salida, and Leadville are becoming increasingly unaffordable for low income and seasonal workers to live there. This has caused many workers

to take up residence camping on nearby public lands, at least for the summer. Many of these individuals may not abide by camping duration limits or properly dispose of waste. Homelessness caused by drug addiction is also at record levels, and camps of homeless drug addicts are likely the cause of some of the worst instances of trashed campsites.

All of these issues are law enforcement problems and social problems that will not be solved by restricting recreational camping on public lands. The only way to mitigate the impacts caused by long-term living in the Forest is increased enforcement of existing laws combined with local efforts to provide affordable housing. Therefore we ask that the Forest's analysis of dispersed campsite impacts distinguish as much as possible between the impacts of recreational camping and long-term camping by individuals experiencing homelessness.

To the extent that recreational dispersed campers are causing waste impacts, we urge the Forest Service to consider installing outhouses in areas with human waste problems first, before closing existing campsites. Only close campsites in those areas if the human waste problem is not mitigated by the new outhouses. The Forest Service should also consider imposing a requirement that campers use portable toilets to dispose of waste, which we are aware has been effective at reducing human waste problems around Moab, Utah.

## **B. Travel Management**

We are glad to see that the Forest Service intends to include a travel management component in this project to evaluate designating user-created campsite access routes as official system routes to be added to the MVUM. However at this stage of the project it is unclear exactly where the Forest intends to do this and what routes it will consider, as no inventory of campsite access routes has yet been provided. Based on the chart in the NOPA describing the proposed actions at various sites, it appears the Forest is only considering adding designated routes in certain areas and is only considering closing user-created campsite access routes in most others.

We submit there is a need to consider designating current user created campsite access routes in ALL of the specific areas this project is evaluating. Numerous such routes exist in each area, especially in the Halfmoon, Mount Elbert Forebay, Twin Lakes Dam, Hancock Pass, and Tin Cup Pass areas. There are also at least a few short campsite access spurs off FR 184 Turret Road and FR 278 Upper Browns Creek. We strongly urge the Forest to conduct a thorough inventory of all user-created campsite access routes in each of the project areas and consider designating them through the travel management process.

## **C. Concerns with Adaptive Management Framework**

We are concerned that the adaptive management framework as currently presented is too rigid and will force the Forest service to close or restrict camping in the future based on relatively trivial issues that would be better managed simply by enlisting volunteers to repair and clean up damaged areas.

Most of the management triggers have extremely low thresholds, such as finding trash or human waste more than two times per season. If further restrictions or closures are mandated

by a trigger with such a low threshold, those management actions are almost certain to be triggered within a very short time. While the vast majority of campers are conscientious and practice proper leave-no-trace camping, with that low of a threshold it would only take a handful of irresponsible campers per season to result in camping in that area being shut down for everyone. This is effectively a form of collective punishment that is unfair to the vast majority of responsible campers. These thresholds must be set at higher, more reasonable levels.

Even more concerning is the fact that “repeated complaints of encroachment and/or disturbance” by neighboring property owners is listed as a management trigger under Lands & Uses. The types of people complaining about these issues are often chronic complainers and busybodies (or to use the vernacular term, “Karens”) who deliberately seek out issues to complain about in a premeditated campaign to shut down recreational activities they object to. They are highly likely to exaggerate or outright fabricate reports of disturbances and encroachment and use any excuse they can to get camping shut down near their properties. The Forest Service should not be catering to such people, nor should unsubstantiated complaints by neighboring landowners be considered a “management trigger” that can force the Forest Service to close campsites. We ask for this management trigger to be removed from the final plan.

We appreciate that the adaptive management toolbox does include other actions than closure and allows the Forest Service to add additional campsites and new system routes and build new infrastructure. We urge the Forest to include language in the final version of the adaptive management framework stating that positive management actions (adding campsites and routes, building restrooms, etc.) should be preferred over negative management actions such as closing campsites or routes, and that negative actions should only be pursued when positive actions are infeasible or have already failed. We also urge the Forest to take care that its management actions do not turn into a form of collective punishment, punishing the responsible many for the actions of the irresponsible few.

If applied properly, the adaptive management framework could be a valuable tool to ensure that camping in these two districts is managed successfully well into the future. If applied improperly, it could quickly result in a cascading series of compounding closures which would soon cause dispersed camping to be banned throughout the entirety of both districts. The latter outcome must be avoided.

#### **D. Concerns with the role of Envision Chaffee County**

We are highly concerned by the role the organization Envision Chaffee County has played in spurring both the BLM and Forest Service’s camping management projects in the Chaffee County area. While Envision Chaffee does have the support of the Chaffee County Commission, it is not a government entity and cannot be granted cooperating agency status. Envision Chaffee has little public support beyond a handful of vocal activists and political insiders, and they certainly do not have the support of recreation user groups. Their so-called “recreation plan” should be given no more weight in the Forest Service’s planning processes than the wishlist of any other anti-recreation special interest group. The Forest Service certainly should not adopt

their views wholesale without considering those of any other stakeholders. Nor should the Forest Service allow Envision to have inside knowledge of its planning processes or allow them to participate in the planning process outside of public comment periods, which would violate the APA's prohibition on ex parte communication.

The Forest Service has a responsibility to manage public lands for multiple use, including recreation, for the benefit of all Americans, not just those with political influence in a particular county. Neither the Chaffee County government nor a single special interest group should have the right to dictate land management policies for federal public lands. Allowing Envision Chaffee to set the agenda for a federal NEPA process violates numerous laws, and the Forest Service must not grant this organization special privileges in its process above the general public.

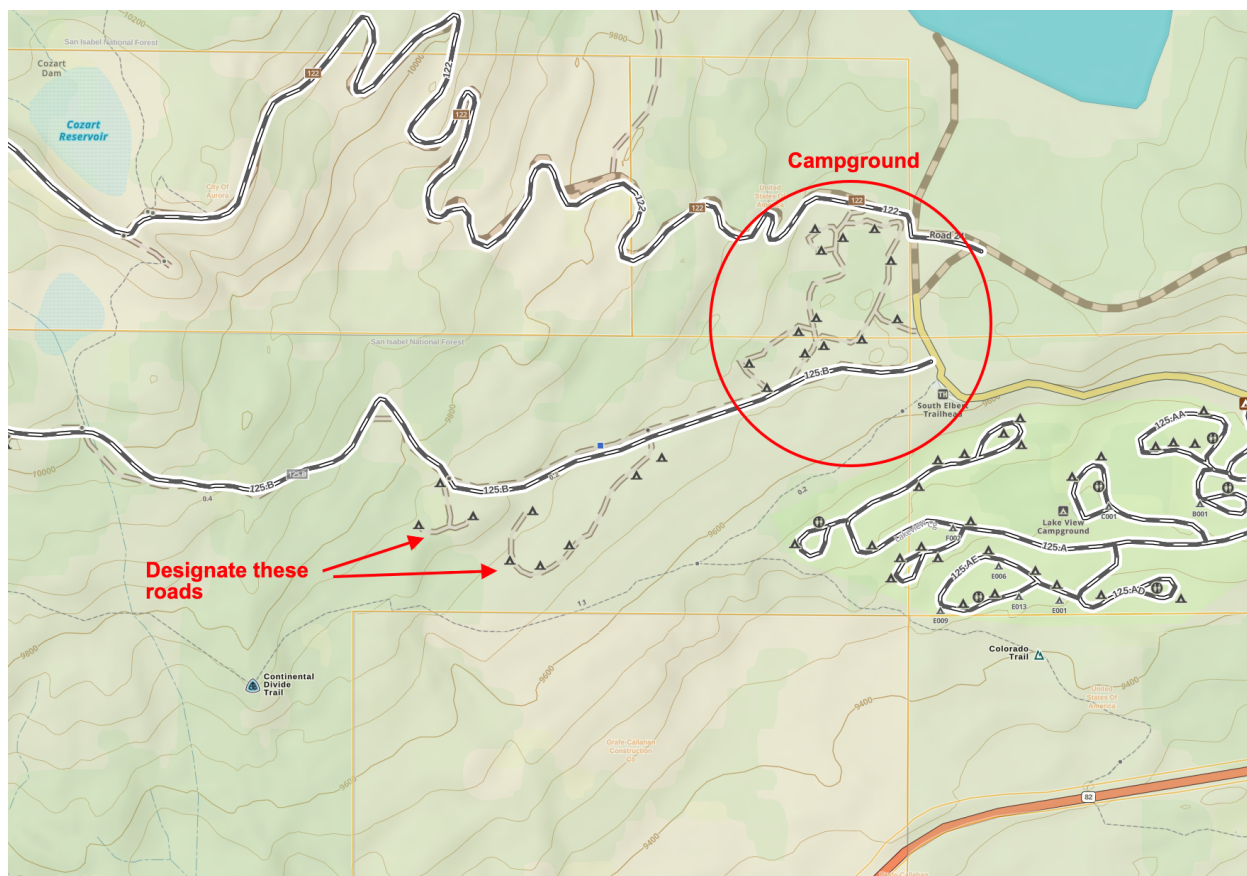
We also note that Envision's "Recreation in Balance" plan is based on faulty science and that a peer review analysis has found it to grossly overestimate recreation impacts on wildlife. This peer review analysis was attached to our previous comment in this process. We therefore urge the Forest Service not to give any credence to Envision Chaffee's recreation plan, and to conduct its own analysis of camping impacts based on the best available science.

## **E. Area Specific Comments**

- **Mount Elbert Forebay**

We are a little confused by the map of the Forest's proposed actions in the Mount Elbert Forebay area. Specifically, it is unclear if the Forest intends to designate two existing unauthorized camping spurs just west on FR 125.B from where the Forest is proposing to construct a new campground in the area between FR 122 and FR 125.B. Both of the routes shown on the map below are well-established routes hosting multiple popular campsites, and should be designated as system routes with designated campsites.

The Forest's map of the new campground is also confusing, because it shows only part of the circled area on the map below as being Forest Service property, even though the entire area is shown as Forest Service land in the public lands layer of Gaia GPS.



The circled area currently contains a high concentration of user-created roads and campsites and is an excellent candidate for a new campground. We want to ensure the Forest Service utilizes the entire area. We also urge the Forest Service not to require reservations at this new campground and keep all sites available on a first-come-first-served basis to best preserve current opportunities for spontaneous camping without having to reserve a site months in advance.

- **Interlaken / Twin Lakes Dam**

The provided map of the Interlaken / Twin Lakes Dam area is somewhat confusing since the yellow area for Vehicle Based Designated Camping appears to overlap with an area of Prohibited Camping, making it unclear where camping will actually be allowed. It's also unclear which user-created roads in the area will be considered for designation and which will be closed. Below is a map of this area from Gaia GPS, showing routes mapped in OpenStreetMap. We ask that all of the routes shown on this map be considered for designation as authorized routes, as even ones where the Forest Service has prohibited camping provide important lake access for fishing and boating.

We also ask that the Forest designate as many dispersed campsites in this area as possible in addition to the proposed campground, and ask that the campground not require reservations.



- **Twin Lakes Peninsula**

We are unclear why the Twin Lakes Peninsula area is being evaluated in this project, which was supposed to only evaluate vehicle-based dispersed camping. The Twin Lakes Peninsula is only accessible by hiking trails and there are no roads open to vehicles leading to the area around the old Interlaken Resort on the south side of the reservoir. Unless there are serious environmental issues requiring the closure of this area to camping, backpackers hiking the Continental Divide Trail should remain free to camp there, as it is the only place where they can camp along the shores of Twin Lakes.

- **Halfmoon**

We are glad to see from the provided maps that the Forest Service only intends to restrict the lower, more crowded portion of Halfmoon Road to designated sites and will continue to allow unrestricted dispersed camping on the upper reaches of FR 110 and the FR 110.J spur to the Iron Mike Mine. Once the road becomes rougher and only accessible to 4WD vehicles, the density of existing campsites decreases significantly and there is no need to restrict camping to designated sites only. We strongly support only restricting camping along the lower portion of the road as shown in the current project maps.

- **Lost Canyon**

We support the current proposed action of continuing to manage the Lost Canyon area for traditional dispersed camping. However, instead of closing and rehabilitating unauthorized

routes, the Forest should evaluate all user-created campsite access spurs for adoption as system routes and legitimize as many existing campsites as possible that are beyond the current one vehicle length limit from a designated road.

- **Turquoise Lake**

We support the proposed action of designating campsites and access routes. We ask that the Forest set a target of maintaining 100% of existing camping opportunities and designate nearly all existing campsites and access routes.

- **Winfield Area / Clear Creek NFSR 190 & Lake Ann**

We support the proposed action moving to designated sites in this area. However we believe that closing all campsites within 100' of riparian areas is too extreme. Some of the campsites near the creek (especially near the Clohesy Lake trailhead and near the end of FR 390 by the Mount Huron trailhead) are highly desirable and can be made sustainable even if within 100' of the stream. We ask the Forest to evaluate individual sites on a case-by-case basis and see if an exception can be made to the 100' rule.

We appreciate that the Forest is not proposing to limit camping along the Clohesy Lake road (FR 381) to designated sites but will continue to allow traditional dispersed camping along that road. We do however believe this project presents an excellent opportunity to resolve some unfinished business from the PSI travel management process and correct the serious mistake that project made by closing the last half mile of FR 318 from the meadow up to the established gate and parking area close to Clohesy Lake. CORE is the adopter of this trail and both COTD and CORE strongly believe that allowing vehicles to travel closer to the lake and park at the established parking area at the existing gate is a better way to manage this road than requiring vehicles to park at the meadow lower down, forcing people to hike further to the lake.

Closing the final segment of FR 381 and designating it as an admin road was a serious mistake in the PSI travel management process that needs to be corrected. Last we heard, the Leadville Ranger District supports keeping this road open all the way to the existing gate. We request that the Forest Service include designating the final half mile of FR 381 as open to public motor vehicle use in this project.

- **Cottonwood Pass / South Cottonwood**

We support the proposed action of designated campsite management in both these areas. However we ask that the Forest set a target of maintaining 100% of existing camping opportunities in both areas. We believe the upper section of FR 344 past the junction with FR 344.G is particularly suitable for camping and request that the Forest designate as many campsites as possible in this area. Campsites should also be designated along FR 349 and 344.G. FR 348 is generally lightly used and we do not see why that should be limited to designated sites, but if it is, all existing campsites along it should be designated.

One specific request we have is that the Forest use this project to correct an acknowledged error from the PSI travel management process regarding the endpoint of FR 349 Grassy Gulch.

That process designated the road as open to the public only to the Ptarmigan Lake trailhead and designated it as an admin road past that. This designation was because of a mapping error which showed a parcel of private land in the wrong place on Forest Service maps, causing the Forest Service to believe that the road crosses private property when it does not.

This error was acknowledged in the final decision for the travel management plan, which mentioned that a future action could correct this error and designate the upper section past the Ptarmigan Lake trailhead as open. The upper section of the road is highly desirable, as there is an excellent viewpoint and campsite at the end of the road at the summit of the ridge at 38.76736, -106.38743. This spot is highly deserving of designation as an authorized campsite, and this project presents an excellent opportunity to correct the blatant and acknowledged error in the travel management process which caused this section of road to be mistakenly closed.

- **Fourmile Area**

The Fourmile Area is an extremely popular area for dispersed camping, and any management actions the Forest takes here must respect that fact and continue to provide numerous high quality opportunities for dispersed camping there. While we acknowledge that designated site management is probably appropriate here, we are highly concerned that any such management would result in a significant decrease in campsites compared to those that exist now. The BLM has already restricted their portion of the Fourmile Area to designated sites, and designated only a handful of campsites there. This unfortunate action will displace campers to the Forest Service section, contributing to overcrowding there.

We strongly urge the Forest to set a target of designating 100% of existing campsites in the Fourmile Area, and to regularly evaluate whether more sites need to be added. We support designating a new campground near FR 375.C, which based on the provided map appears to involve reopening an old closed road and turning it into a campground. This is an excellent use of previously abandoned infrastructure and is the type of project the Forest Service should consider more often.

We ask that the Forest consider designating FR 376.G as a large group campsite. While this road is shown as a short spur on maps, in reality it is more of a large parking area centered around 38.861163, -106.052134. This parking area is commonly used as a large group campsite, including for organized events. The Rocky Mountain Orienteering Club typically hosts an overnight orienteering meet there every summer, which my wife and I have attended several times. Any designated site management for the Fourmile Area should continue to allow large groups to camp at this site so it can continue to be used for events such as this orienteering meet.

- **Browns Creek**

We support the proposed action of limiting the Browns Creek area to designated sites and also constructing a new campground. We request that the Forest set a target of maintaining 100% of existing camping opportunities and designate all or at least almost all existing sites. User-created campsite access spurs should be evaluated for adoption as system routes. Please

remember that the goal is to manage camping in this area and not eliminate it as some locals have called for. The Browns Creek area offers some of the best dispersed camping opportunities near Buena Vista and should continue to offer a high quality dispersed camping experience in the future.

While we are not opposed to the construction of the new campground and understand it will have fees, we oppose requiring advanced reservations and ask that the new campground be solely first-come-first-serve. The designated dispersed campsites in the area should remain free without any fees or reservations.

- **Browns Canyon National Monument**

We strongly support the intent of this project to designate campsites along Aspen Ridge Road (FR 185). This road along the eastern boundary of Browns Canyon National Monument is a popular camping destination, and the Browns Canyon National Monument Resource Management Plan includes the following direction for the Aspen Ridge Management Zone:

- Close and rehabilitate spur routes off of FS 185 and FS 185D if determined appropriate after site-specific NEPA review.
- Designate areas for camping with recreation infrastructure and motorized vehicle access.
- Camping in designated sites only.<sup>1</sup>

Note that the BCNM RMP does not require all unauthorized spurs to be closed, but requires the Forest Service to conduct a site-specific NEPA review to determine whether such spurs should be either closed or designated as authorized routes. It also requires the Forest Service to limit camping along the Aspen Ridge Road corridor to designated sites. This camping management plan is the perfect venue to conduct the necessary environmental analysis to meet these requirements.

In doing so, we urge the Forest Service to keep all existing campsites and campsite access spurs open as legally designated campsites. We disagree with the comments of Friends of Browns Canyon that suggest only a total of six sites should be designated. There are significantly more than six campsites in current use along the Aspen Ridge Road, and the Forest Service should set a target of maintaining 100% of existing camping opportunities. Unless a specific campsite has unavoidable resource conflicts that cannot be mitigated through other means than closure, every currently existing campsite along the Aspen Ridge Road corridor should be designated as an official site, and any spur routes accessing sites more than the current allowable distance off designated routes should be added to the travel management plan as system routes.

Regarding FR 184 Turret Road, we do not see a reason to limit camping on this route to designated sites only as currently proposed. Camping on this route is generally very light even during peak holiday weekends, and I have observed only a handful of existing sites along this

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<sup>1</sup> Browns Canyon National Monument RMP (USFS), Appendix 1-25, [https://eplanning.blm.gov/public\\_projects/69924/200147053/20022482/250028686/BCNM\\_ROD\\_USFS\\_July2020-508\\_signed\\_opt.pdf](https://eplanning.blm.gov/public_projects/69924/200147053/20022482/250028686/BCNM_ROD_USFS_July2020-508_signed_opt.pdf).

route. Campsite proliferation is not a significant concern along FR 184, and there is no reason why traditional dispersed camping cannot continue to be allowed there.

For the Turret Road Management Zone along FR 184, the BCNM RMP gives the following direction:

- Allow motorized dispersed camping within one vehicle length off of designated routes, where not specifically prohibited, unsafe, or causing resource damage.
- Camping, where allowed, would be limited to 7 days.
- Allow designated dispersed camping if needed to adaptively manage, mitigate, and protect monument ROVs.<sup>2</sup>

The Browns Canyon management plan directs that the Forest Service continue allowing traditional designated dispersed camping off FR 184, and states that limiting camping to designated sites should only be done if necessary to protect monument ROVs. There are only around four or five campsites that I have seen during my visits to the area, and only two near the beginning of the road are regularly used. While people may occasionally camp in a number of different flat meadows along the road, such usage is infrequent enough to not leave a noticeable trace. We therefore do not believe that camping activity along FR 184 has risen to a level where there is any need to limit camping to designated sites to mitigate resource impacts or protect monument ROVs.

While there are not enough campsites along that road to merit limiting it to designated sites, this camping management plan would be an excellent venue for legally designating one existing campsite spur along that road which begins at 38.65128, -105.99242 and access an amazing campsite at 38.65057, -105.99281. Though this user-created spur is not on the MVUM, it is regularly used to access what I believe to be one of the best campsites in the entire Browns Canyon area, pictured below. This campsite has stunning views of both the Collegiate Peaks to the west and various towering rock formations to the east. Whether the Forest Service ends up limiting camping along FR 184 to designated sites or not, the 0.1 mile access spur to this campsite should be evaluated for designation as a system route. I camped there for a night in May 2021.

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<sup>2</sup> Id. at Appendix 1-26.



Epic campsite off FR 184 at 38.65057, -105.99281

If the Forest Service does carry through on limiting camping to designated sites only, then it should at minimum designate each of the following four sites:

- 38.64635, -105.99132: Prominent campsite just off the road at the top of a hill overlooking the village of Turret
- 38.65057, -105.99281: The previously described epic campsite on a ridge overlooking the Arkansas Valley accessed by a short user-created spur route.
- 38.66974, -106.00987: A sheltered meadow where my wife and I camped in May 2022. Though rarely used, we saw evidence of previous camping use since there was a fire ring down in the dry wash.
- 38.70553, -106.01240: Regularly used campsite in a meadow near the end of the road. I observed a group camping here in May 2021.

There are also a few regularly used campsites along County Road 184 before you get to Turret which are on Forest Service land. These are accessed off short user-created spur routes and include sites at 38.62861, -105.96300 and 38.62816, -105.97203. These sites and the spur routes accessing them should also be considered for designation.

While there are likely a few other campsites along FR 184 that receive occasional use, those are all the ones I have observed. As stated above, we do not believe this small number of lightly used campsites justifies limiting the area to designated sites only. Camping is not causing any

significant resource impacts along FR 184, and it should remain open to unrestricted traditional dispersed camping as the Browns Canyon National Monument Management Plan recommends. If the Forest Service does insist on limiting camping along FR 184 to designated sites, then it should set a target of maintaining 100% of existing camping opportunities and should designate all currently existing campsites.

We are strongly opposed to the comments by Friends of Browns Canyon, which opposed designating any campsites along FR 184. I have camped off this road twice in the last two years and both times found it an amazing, off-the-beaten-path place to camp in relative solitude compared to the crowded Aspen Ridge and Fourmile areas nearby. Most recently, my wife and I camped off FR 184 during Memorial Day weekend 2022, and we were the only ones camping along the entire road. It made a convenient basecamp to hike some of the trails in Browns Canyon National Monument, and we only saw a couple other vehicles the whole weekend.

Even though it is in a national monument, FR 184 has somehow escaped widespread visitation, and it is a perfect hidden gem to get away from the crowds in other nearby areas. It is critical that camping continue to be allowed along this road in some form. Friends of Browns Canyons' comments opposing any camping along this road have no legal or factual basis. Camping is not causing any significant negative impacts along this road, and the BCNM management plan directs that dispersed camping continue to be allowed along this route. Prohibiting camping along FR 184 completely would in fact violate the BCNM RMP.

We strongly urge the Forest Service to continue allowing unrestricted dispersed camping along FR 184, or at the very least designate all existing campsites described above as designated campsites.

- **Chalk Creek / Tincup Pass / Saint Elmo**

The proposed action in the Chalk Creek / Saint Elmo area is confusing. The map provided by the Forest shows CR 162 highlighted in yellow indicating designated campsite management. However the NOPA states that the Forest intends to make no camping/campfires permanent along CR 162 except in campgrounds. This action is not shown on the map, nor is there any indication of the boundaries of the restricted area. This has led to significant public confusion in the comments regarding whether (and where) camping will or will not be allowed along CR 162, FR 292, and FR 267.

We agree that the corridor along CR 162 between Mount Princeton Resort and Saint Elmo is not appropriate for dispersed camping outside campgrounds, of which several already exist. If this proposal merely formalizes the existing forest order prohibiting camping on CR 162 and FR 292, we do not oppose that.

However, we strongly oppose any action to prohibit camping along FR 267 Tincup Pass Road. This is also shown as CR 162 on the project map and highlighted in yellow. There is no section about Tincup Pass in the NOPA document, so we are unsure of the Forest's intentions here. Tincup Pass Road west of Saint Elmo is a highly popular camping destination, and it is critical that the Forest Service continue to allow dispersed camping along this route. While we would

prefer that it remain open to unrestricted traditional dispersed camping, designated site management may be appropriate. If so, we ask that the Forest designate all existing campsites and also adopt all existing user-created campsite access spurs as system routes.

- **Mount Antero, Hancock Pass areas**

We appreciate and support the proposed action to continue to manage the entire network of 4WD roads on Mount Antero, and the nearby road network in the Hancock Pass area, for traditional dispersed camping. These roads all require high clearance 4WD vehicles to access, which naturally limits the amount of people who can camp there. Camping in these areas is not causing any unacceptable impacts, and there is no reason why they cannot continue to allow unrestricted dispersed camping for the foreseeable future. We are aware of a number of short, user-created campsite spurs in both the Hancock Pass and Antero areas, and ask that the Forest evaluate each of these spurs for adoption as system roads in this project. In particular, there is at least one campsite access spur off FR 278 Upper Browns Creek which begins at 38.642682, -106.265237 and goes to a campsite at 38.641482, -106.268152, which should be evaluated for designation.

Also, this project would be an excellent time to evaluate the upper segment of FR 277 Baldwin Creek past the hiking trailhead to Baldwin Lake for inclusion as a system route. Even though CORE and others asked for this route to be designated as part of the PSI travel management process, it was not evaluated in that process. The upper portion of the route to the mine above Baldwin Lake is regularly driven by the public and is a highly desirable route, but was mistakenly left off the MVUM and the recent travel management process. There are no resource concerns on this route, and it should be evaluated for designation as a system route.

- **Methodist Mountain**

We strongly support continuing to manage the Methodist Mountain area (and especially FR 124) for traditional dispersed camping with active management. We are aware that the local homeowners association has called for a complete ban on camping along FR 124, and strongly oppose these comments. While the residents have cited fear of fire as their justification for wanting to ban camping along this road, camping use is already light there and is not causing any significant resource concerns. Fire risk can be better dealt with through education and enforcement, within the Forest's proposed adaptive management framework. We ask that the Forest not allow local NIMBYism to deprive the public of the valuable camping opportunities that currently exist along FR 124 and to carry through the proposed action of continuing to manage the Methodist Mountain area for unrestricted dispersed camping.

- **Rainbow Trail**

The NOPA document says that the Rainbow Trail will continue to be managed for traditional dispersed camping, yet the map shows FR 101.A, which is near a trailhead for the Rainbow Trail, as restricted to designated sites. To my knowledge, this is a little used obscure area that does not seem like designated dispersed camping is warranted. We ask the Forest service to leave this road open to unrestricted dispersed camping.

- **North Fork**

We are strongly opposed to the Forest's proposed action of prohibiting camping along CR 240 to the Angel of Shavano Campground and then restricting camping to designated sites north of that. For one thing, these actions are not shown on the area-wide map but only on the more detailed map, which only shows the prohibited area and not the designated sites area. This leaves it confusing where exactly designated site management would apply along the FR 240 corridor.

Based on the justification given, the motivation for prohibiting camping along CR 240 from the forest boundary to the Angel of Shavano Campground and part of FR 219 appears to be to create a buffer zone around private property in the area. This is absolutely not appropriate. The Forest Service lands in this area are a public resource and private property owners are not entitled to have buffer zones prohibiting the public from camping on public lands adjacent to their properties. Property owners knowingly bought property adjacent to public lands, and that adjacency in turn confers higher property values. They have no right to then prevent members of the public from using those public lands.

The risk of wildfire along the CR 240 corridor is no greater than anywhere else in the forest, and exaggerated concerns about escaped campfires are not a sufficient justification to ban camping in this entire area. Proximity to private property does not justify banning camping south of the campground, and any conflicts with private landowners should be dealt with through educating both members of the public and nearby landowners.

As an alternative, we suggest restricting camping from the forest boundary to the campground to designated sites, and continuing to allow unrestricted dispersed camping along FR 240 from the Angel of Shavano Campground to Billings Lake. The road past the campground is a high clearance road which naturally limits access, and is a highly desirable destination for overlanders, fishers, and other recreationists who enjoy dispersed camping, and should not be restricted to designated sites. If it is restricted to designated sites, all existing campsites should be designated and all existing campsite access spurs should be adopted as system routes.

- **Marshall Pass Area**

While I am not personally familiar with this area, I question the need to restrict the entire Marshall Pass area to designated sites. Most of the roads in this area are high clearance roads which naturally limit access. If the Forest does believe designated dispersed is warranted here, it should designate all existing sites and campsite access routes.

- **Misc. Areas**

We are glad to see the Forest is proposing to leave other areas such as the area around Monarch Pass and Deadhorse Gulch road south of Aspen Ridge open to traditional dispersed camping. We strongly support leaving less crowded, more remote road corridors open to unrestricted dispersed camping, though we do have some concerns with the adaptive management framework (discussed above) which we fear will eventually lead to camping being restricted in these areas as well. We oppose restricting camping to designated sites in any

additional areas not currently proposed for this management in the NOPA, and ask the Forest to refrain from adding additional restricted areas as this project develops.

## **F. Conclusion**

To conclude our comments, we urge the Forest Service to take into consideration the myriad of factors contributing to camping impacts within the project area, not all of which are attributable to recreation. Homelessness, addiction, and lack of affordable housing are all drivers of camping impacts which cannot be solved solely by restricting recreational dispersed camping.

We hope that the Forest Service will adopt a nuanced approach to camping management which reserves the strictest measures like limiting camping to designated sites for only the most heavily impacted areas, while leaving the vast majority of roads in the Leadville and Salida districts open to traditional dispersed camping. Where camping is restricted to designated sites, the Forest should set a target of designating 100% of existing campsites and campsite access spurs. We are also highly concerned about allowing the agenda of Envision Chaffee County to drive this process, and ask the Forest Service to conduct this planning process in an impartial manner which equally considers the viewpoints of all stakeholders and does not unduly favor one specific group.

We strongly oppose the mass closure of existing campsites, which will only increase overall impacts by concentrating campers in smaller areas and displacing others to surrounding public lands with fewer restrictions. Instead we ask the Forest to consider ways it can more effectively manage existing campsites while also legitimizing existing campsite access spurs by formally designating them through the travel management process. In this we hope that the Forest will continue to work with partner organizations like CORE to directly address issues on the ground, while preserving most existing campsites for people of all demographics to enjoy. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Patrick McKay, Esq.  
Vice President, Colorado Offroad Trail Defenders