

QUC comments on Leadville and Salida Dispersed Camping Management Project

Patrick Mercer and Perry Edwards
USFS Leadville and Salida District Rangers

Dear Mr. Mercer and Mr. Edwards,

Please accept and fully consider these comments regarding management of vehicle based dispersed camping on the Salida and Leadville Districts (project 60591) as described in the February 2023 Notice of Proposed Action (NOPA) and associated documents on behalf of the Quiet Use Coalition, Rocky Mountain Recreation Initiative and Wild Connections

Our members collectively are extremely familiar with the landscapes and issues used for vehicle based dispersed camping. We have traveled over every designated motorized route on these Districts, observed and monitored camping, and worked with these Districts to complete numerous on the ground projects to better manage vehicle camping. Some of our members have gained an intimate knowledge of these landscapes by living in this area for over 50 years. Many of our members have extensive experience dispersed camping using vehicles on these Districts.

We generally support responsible vehicle based dispersed camping and welcome this analysis, decision and its implementation.

We believe this proposal should be analyzed with an EIS

We believe there are significant issues to be analyzed as part of this proposal that warrant use of an EIS

This proposal considers use of significantly large and widespread areas and acres of land covering two Ranger Districts. It will likely result in revisions of the designated motorized route system and including the addition of a potentially large number (500 and up) of new designated motorized routes. Nine or more new designated campgrounds are proposed to be designated, and these will include the designation of additional motorized routes, associated infrastructure, and potential new camping fees where none exist presently. This proposal will decide the fate and management of perhaps 2000 or more individual dispersed vehicle based campsites. will result in significant cumulative impacts.

This will also potentially be impacts to USFS Sensitive Species, TES species, Colorado Roadless Areas and potentially designated Wilderness Areas (where USFS roads exist in close proximity to Wilderness Area boundaries).

The designation of individual roads to access dispersed campsites and the impacts of individual designated campsites/campgrounds themselves may be insignificant but the cumulative impacts of nine or more new designated campgrounds and potentially hundreds of new motorized routes to access designated dispersed campsites will result in significant environmental impacts that require the use of an EIS.

Need for the proposal must consider risks

We generally agree with the stated need for the proposal.

The proposal states that the USFS will “use an adaptive management strategy to evaluate VBDC opportunities based on recreation value, resource values, and desired conditions, and provide management tools to adapt into the future.” We believe a comprehensive evaluation must also consider the risks posed by and to recreation, and the risks posed to resources, in addition to recreational and resource values. This language must be appropriately modified to ensure risks and values are both properly evaluated.

Additional Forest Plan Goals must also be considered

The Forest Plan at III-3 to III-11 includes additional goals of the Forest Plan that must also be considered and addressed in this analysis, including

- Increase diversity for wildlife and habitat improvement.
- Increase winter range habitat capacities for deer and elk.
- Improve fish habitat on suitable streams and low elevation ponds and lakes.
- Improve the health and vigor of all vegetation types.
- Manage special areas and classified lands in accordance with the purpose for which they were established. (Including the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail corridor.

Concerns with designation of motorized trails for vehicle based dispersed camping in Colorado Roadless Areas

We have concerns with and are opposed to the designation of new motorized trails to provide access to vc within designated Colorado Roadless Areas, as alluded to at the end of the Conformance with Management Direction section of the NOPA.

While motorized trails are allowed within Colorado Roadless areas, allowing vc within a Roadless Area will degrade and compromise almost every Roadless Area Characteristic.

While this analysis does include consideration of vc along trails within the analysis area, no trails are proposed and highlighted as priority areas along which designated dispersed camping will occur.

The NOPA describes the typical type of vehicle based dispersed camping being considered in this analysis as “car camping”. We question if the designation of a new motorized trail (including a motorized trail open to 4WD vehicles greater than 50 inches wide) would or should be managed to permit use by the average passenger car. It would be inappropriate to designate vc routes that are rough motorized trails that emanate from a road such as Forest Road 390 that is a Maintenance Level 3 road open to passenger vehicles.

Motor Vehicles within Colorado that use designated motorized trails are required to purchase a yearly OHV registration sticker. It would be improper to potentially expose the operator of a passenger car to a citation for failing to purchase a yearly registration sticker in order to use a short motorized trail for vc within a Colorado Roadless Area.

Vehicle based dispersed camping must be prohibited on routes not open to public use

The maps indicating where vehicle based dispersed camping (vc) will be restricted to designated sites depict administrative and permit roads closed to public vehicle use as prioritized (yellow area highlighted). Those roads/road segments must prohibit all vc along them as it would be inappropriate to allow and consider designated vc along a route where public motor vehicle use is prohibited. Those roads were not analyzed for public motor vehicle use and vc along them would add additional impacts to resources that were not fully considered in the designation of those roads as closed to public use.

Since those roads may be open to non-motorized public use, they are potentially used by the public for hiking and horseback riding. We believe the yellow highlighted camping restricted area/zone along those roads should be retained, and any dispersed camping in that area/zone should be restricted to designated sites. There should be no designated dispersed camping allowed in those area/zones as that it will be difficult to monitor camping and/or educate/enforce regulations in those areas. In addition, camping in those areas may interfere with access to, safety and security of, and use of the sites those roads provide access to (powerlines, radio towers, mines, private land, etc.). The public may be tempted to park vehicles outside of locked gates and walk or bike in on those roads to camp.

We support restricting all camping to designated sites in proposed zones adjacent to certain roads

These restrictions are necessary to preserve desired camping experiences of campers using designated vc sites. Otherwise other users may legally park a vehicle and walk in to camp in locations near or adjacent to those designated sites.

This restriction is necessary to make monitoring, education and enforcement easier and more efficient in those areas. It will help limit impacts on wildlife, watersheds and other resources.

We agree with and support restricting all camping to designated sites within 1/4 of a mile from the centerline of certain roads with a yellow highlighted area around them as indicated on project maps. The USFS stated in a March 2023 public zoom meeting that this yellow highlighted area was intended to indicate a restricted camping zone 1/4 mile from the centerline of those roads.

While this 1/4 distance aligns with other recent PSI decisions, it is inconsistent with a recent BLM decision which restricts camping within 1/2 mile of any road.

We generally agree with proposed focus area roads as highlighted in yellow. We would like the USFS to also consider limiting camping to designated sites along the initial segment of the Fooses Creek Road 225 up to and including 225C, and along the West Tennessee Road 131. Both of these areas experience high levels of vc use due to their proximity to Highways. These two roads receive a much higher concentration of vc than other roads highlighted and proposed for designated site management, such as road 377.

New roads must not be designated for developed campgrounds in 5B areas

The Numbers location may be managed by AHRA, but it is still on USFS land and subject to USFS regulations. The land in this area is under a 5B management area prescription where the emphasis is on big game winter range. The Forest Plan at III-158 and III-159 contains a standard/guideline addressing the construction of new roads in this area, presumably desired as part of a new designated campground. The Plan contains language and direction that would apparently prohibit the construction of a developed campground and associated roads in a 5B area, including that the road must be essential and there is no feasible alternative to build the road outside the area. Colorado Parks and Wildlife must be consulted before new roads are designated in 5B areas.

This location is within elk, mule deer and bighorn sheep winter range, which are all areas where CPW recommends avoiding new route development.

The Forebay proposed campground is also within a 5B area, and is also within elk and deer winter range and an elk production area.

Use the best and latest science and recommendations for route planning in wildlife habitat

The 2021 "Planning Trails with Wildlife in Mind" document represents the best available science and recommendations for route planning and management in wildlife habitat.¹

Appendix D of that document states that US Forest Service Region 2 Trails Lead Chad Schneckenburger and South Zone Wildlife Biologist Melissa Dressen were fully involved members of the Taskforce that developed the 2021 'Colorado's Guide to Planning Trails with Wildlife in Mind', and they agreed to unanimous consensus and enthusiastic support for the document and the recommendations contained in it.

That document best explains the concept of avoiding placement of new designated recreation sites (trails or even designated dispersed campsites) as the primary and best way to protect and preserve significant wildlife habitat. Only if areas cannot be avoided should minimization actions, such as seasonal closures, be considered.²

Appendix A of that document contains species specific best management practices to avoid and minimize impacts to specific habitat.

Although that document is focused on trail planning and development, the recommendations contained in it represent the newest and best 'gold standard' for managing recreation and wildlife. Vehicle based camping has much greater impacts than trail use.

That 2021 document recommends avoiding new route designation to the maximum extent possible in elk winter concentration areas, production areas, severe winter range and migration corridors, but this proposed vc plan will apparently allow the designation of new roads and designated campgrounds in those areas with seasonal closures.

¹ Colorado Trails with Wildlife in Mind Taskforce. (2021) Colorado's Guide to Planning Trails with Wildlife in Mind. Prepared by Wellstone Collaborative Strategies and Rocky Mountain Innovation Lab. Project supported by Colorado Parks and Wildlife in collaboration with land managers in City, County, State, and Federal government across the State of Colorado. 58pp. Online via

https://cpw.state.co.us/Documents/Trails/Planning_Trails_with_Wildlife_in_Mind_full_plan.pdf

² Ibid. pages 17-18 and 22-25.

The project design features listed in Appendix A of the vc management proposal are incredibly weak when it comes to balancing the impacts of recreational use and wildlife. Newly designated vc sites will apparently be allowed in most priority habitats, and avoiding those habitats is not considered. Minimization of impacts (seasonal closures) when those sites are near raptor nests or in elk/sheep production areas or elk winter range are the only wildlife protections measures considered. Designation of any new vc sites will **increase use** of those sites and areas resulting for greater impacts to wildlife.

This vc management proposal must be modified to consider avoidance of habitats for numerous species in addition to those listed. USFS Region 2 Sensitive Species must be considered. Bighorn sheep, northern goshawks, white-tailed ptarmigan and imperiled plants must be considered. The Forest Plan specifically mentions protecting deer winter range from disturbance.

Concern-adaptive management does not offer strong enough protections for wildlife

The NOPA states,

“The application of adaptive management in the context of this project **compounds uncertainties** about natural resource systems with uncertainties regarding human interaction with natural resources. The uncertainties we are attempting to address within this project are:

- *How much dispersed recreation use may an area receive and can forest resources remain resilient with the changing level of use?*
- *Will the initial actions completely address current risks to forest resources, or will additional actions (“tools”) be required to achieve the desired outcome?”*

Compounded uncertainties are likely to result in significant adverse impacts to wildlife individuals and species.

We have concerns that the initial proposed assessment and execution is not sufficiently strong enough to protect wildlife. For example, instead of avoiding any new approved authorization of human use and occupancy within 800 meters of Northern Goshawk nests as recommended by CPW, the USFS is proposing to only seasonally close those camp areas to during nesting season. If this, or other, executed actions are later determined in review to be insufficient to protect wildlife (if a N Goshawk nest is abandoned because new designated dispersed campsites were approved within 800 meters of the nest), adjusted executed actions are likely to be insufficient and ineffective to result in that nest location becoming active again.

The USFS must err on the side of caution when executing actions that may adversely impact wildlife to avoid permanently displacing wildlife from an area. Adjustments may not be able to restore desired outcomes with regards to wildlife once those species leave the area or perish.

The adaptive management desired condition and trigger Table 3 is weak. It allows creation of one new unauthorized user created route each year in each area with no action being taken. The standard should be all, each and every user created routes should elicit action. It measures wildlife impacts only via the evaluation of vegetation damage, and not things like nest destruction/abandonment, displacement, population declines, etc.

New vc sites can be added when demand exceeds supply, with only mitigation of impacts considered, not avoidance. With a growing population and use demand will inevitably exceed supply, and carrying capacities must be considered.

Dispersed vehicle based dispersed camping should be prohibited unless open

The USFS commented during a zoom meeting that they “will not limit camping unless there is a reason to do so” Concern that this open unless closed does not adhere to the 2005 USFS Travel Management Rule and general USFS regulations where routes/and areas are closed to motor vehicle use unless designated as open. Since this proposal is analyzing vehicle based camping, that approach is counter to USFS regulations that limit motor vehicle use to designated routes. Essentially the entire forest is closed to motor vehicle use for the purpose of dispersed camping unless designated open according to USFS regulations. Much of the vc that is occurring on the forest now involves unauthorized use of motor vehicles greater than one vehicle length away from a designated route. Districts have made some efforts to manage dispersed camping, it has not been enough. Most forest visitors are not aware of regulations that restrict motor vehicle use to designated routes, and restrict vehicle travel to parking and camping to within a vehicle length of a designated route.

The Rec Rangers do not operate in Lake County and on most of the Leadville District.

There has been much discussion regarding how the Rec Rangers can assist with implementation of any decisions made as part of this project. While that is true and the Rec Rangers do good work, as far as we know that group only operates on the Salida District and potentially only within Leadville District lands within Chaffee County.

Thank you for consideration of these comments

Tom Sobal
Director, Quiet Use Coalition