

San Carlos Ranger District
Pike-San Isabel National Forests and Cimarron and Comanche
National Grasslands
Attn: Destiny Chapman
3028 East Main Street
Canon City, CO 81212

July 24, 2023

Dear Ms. Chapman,

For the last 25 years, The Board of Directors for Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp (RTLCL) has been in conversation with the United States Forest Service (USFS) and your San Carlos Ranger District about the feasibility of a Land Exchange. RTLCL has been on a Special Use Permit to lease the 19 acres of USFS land we're on for 57 years. As an organization, we thought it was prudent to look into the possibility of owning it ourselves. As you know, it's a long and detailed process for USFS and for RTLCL to make changes to existing buildings or add new buildings to the site that can take up to two years. It's a cumbersome time-consuming process for both entities.

As a non-profit organization, it also just didn't make much sense to raise money from our families to improve the buildings on our site, when the last line of the lease has always said that if the USFS wanted to end the lease or take the land back, RTLCL would have to return it to its original condition—removing all of our buildings.

So, we began the process in 1998, inviting Paul Crespino, the Ranger at the time, to our Board meeting and learning what would be involved. He encouraged us at that time that we've always been in good standing with USFS and had a good partnership. He also explained how the Land Exchange process works and invited us to meet with John Brown and Sean Hines at the District Office in Pueblo, which we did.

We employed the help of Todd Robertson with Western Land Group to assist us all in working through the details and process of a Land Exchange. I believe for all of these years, the Forest Service and RTLCL have had an excellent partnership.

We've met together to learn what would be the most helpful for the Pike-San Isabel National Forest, and the Locke Park property was identified as a top priority.

An Outreach Opportunity of the Rocky Mountain Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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In 2014, RTALC acquired the Locke Park property for the purpose of continuing the process of the Land Exchange with the USFS. This property is known for its many benefits. Primarily, it is not only a substantial wetland area, it is also the location of the headwaters of Newlin Creek, which is the municipal watershed for Canon City. It is also identified by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as a critical habitat for the Mexican spotted owl and is also habitat for the Canada lynx.

When the USFS acquires the Locke Park property, perhaps one of the main benefits is that it closes the last-remaining privately owned inholding in that area of the Wet Mountain Range. The current 7.5 mile-long winter vehicular access route will no longer need to be maintained in the future. This enhances the Canada lynx habitat in the area as well as recreational values on the surrounding Forest Service lands.

The USFS has also let us know over the years that there is a desire to reduce the number of Special Use Permits as they take a lot of time for staff to manage. Exchanging the Locke Park land for the land RTALC leases will reduce the administrative burden in this district as well—both in the management of the permit and the process of approving building change requests.

For all of these reasons and many more, we feel that it's a great benefit to the people to gain the Locke Park property as Federal land.

We also believe that our historic partnership will continue after the Exchange is complete. RTALC shares many of the same values that the USFS has. We have been operating in that space for 57 years with great love and care and a "Leave no Trace" philosophy. RTALC is voluntarily entering into a Conservation Easement with Colorado Open Lands. This agreement includes a master plan designating the type of use allowed on the site, a map of zones in the property showing a small building envelope where current buildings will be expanded, a slightly larger programming area (for hikes, camping, etc.), and a much larger section showing the amount of land that will never be developed—including the area near Lake Creek Campground. That map indicates that Balman Rd (NFSR 198) will remain a right-of-way to the public for access to USFS lands west of the RTALC parcel including Balman Reservoir, Rainbow Lake and Cloverdale Basin.

We've been good neighbors with the landowners surrounding us, and our Executive Director and Board have had conversations with the owners to continue those good relationships. We've served the community every year for 24 years with a Thanksgiving meal open to all. About 170 people attend every year.

RTLCL has a long multi-generational following of youth, adults, families, local schools, and people from many states. I myself have been a part of RTLCL since 1973. 4 generations of my family so far. The primary benefit of owning our land is that we can go on serving our people and the people of the Wet Mountain Valley for generations to come.

Campers and families come to RTLCL to relax, to experience nature, to be accepted and to grow. They come to be in community with each other and to take a break from the stresses of daily life. They are passionate about the place, the land it sits on, and the ministry that happens there. We are open and accepting to all. And as they'll tell you, they take a piece of that peace back home with them when they leave.

Respectfully,
Michelle Okes
RTLCL Board of Directors President

RTLCL Board:
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