



# Mineral County Sheriff's Office

- CREEDE, COLORADO -

Sheriff Terry Wetherill

June 12, 2024

Rio Grande National Forest  
1055 9<sup>th</sup> Street  
Del Norte, CO 81132

Re: Comments on Over Snow Travel Management Planning Project

To whom it may concern:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed OSVTM Planning Project. Mineral County has a land mass of 876 square miles and 96% of that is Public Land, with the vast majority of that 96%, the Rio Grande National Forest (less than 1% is State Wildlife Lands). It is with pleasure that we make these comments as the health, use and economy of this forest is paramount to the success and viability of our residents and pleasure of our visitors. I have concerns that this plan has the potential to negatively impact the Mineral County Sheriff's Office in both Deputy workload and Search and Rescue operations.

Mineral County has a very good and continuing to grow winter outdoor economy that includes an outstanding ski area and thousands of acres of winter motorized and human powered recreation opportunities. I am very concerned that any attempt to silo uses beyond the restrictions of Wilderness, Roadless areas and Big Game Winter Range that are already placed on motorized travel will have negative effects on that growing winter economy. Of the 876 square miles of Mineral County, 28% (244 square miles) is Roadless and is always susceptible to restrictions on motorized travel. Designated Wilderness that absolutely prohibits motorized recreation is 160 square miles of that Roadless number. Accounting for private land and unrideable terrain the amount of multi-use area, including motorized dwindles quickly.

The appeal of the Rio Grande National Forest and specifically the Divide Ranger District is its **Multi-Use Nature**. Doing anything to diminish that fact and perception will detract from the Forest in general. Once again, limiting who can recreate where will lead, at minimum, to the perception that the Forest only caters to a select few and not the general population which in turn will negatively affect Mineral County's Winter Economy.

Should areas of the Rio Grande National Forest have additional limitations put on its motorized use, I have no idea how this will be enforced. We currently have 3 USFS Law Enforcement Officers to patrol hundreds of square miles and they are clearly already spread too thin based on the USFS contracting with Colorado Sheriff's Offices to assist in patrolling the National Forests. I only have four sworn law enforcement officers in the Mineral County Sheriff's Office including myself. We do not have the time, manpower or equipment to go enforce new laws that have been unnecessary in all the past years. Plus, if we or the USFS LEO's did ride a snowmobile into a non-motorized area to conduct some type of patrol, within a week there would be more tracks because that is what people do. For that matter, the USFS LEOs don't inform us, nor do we inform them, where we are patrolling in the National Forest. It is entirely possible it would be law enforcement chasing each other's snowmobile tracks in a non-motorized area and then everyone else would follow these tracks.

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I am not sure that people who are not heavily involved in Search and Rescue (SAR) understand the complexities and requirements to conduct a safe winter SAR mission in rugged backcountry and minimize risk management at the same time. SAR teams are made up of local individuals who have the ability and a desire to help others in need. All too often SAR missions start about one half hour before dark. That is usually when the SAR subjects figure out, they are in trouble and would like SAR to instantly show up and save the day. Should the SAR subjects be back country skiers, skiing in an area that the SAR members have not been allowed to ride their snowmobiles in, my SAR members would be at an immediate disadvantage. They will not be familiar with the area. By the time the SAR Team has been paged, assembled, determined the necessary equipment and travel from Creede to the initial staging area, it will be dark and probably snowing. The SAR team will not have the working knowledge of where avalanches are known to occur. The SAR Team will not know the best route into the specific area where the skiers are located? The SAR Team will be attempting to navigate unknown, unsafe, deep snow-covered rugged terrain, at night, possibly in a snowstorm. This entire scenario puts my SAR team in significantly more risk than would be necessary. Additionally, this situation adds a significant increase in time in the planning and rescue of the injured / lost subjects. Of course, the other option is to inform the SAR subjects they are going to have to figure out how to stay overnight in temperatures significantly below zero and possibly fashion a tourniquet out of a piece of clothing or a belt. A side note: Flight for Life Helicopters do not conduct missions at night and do not fly in snowstorms.

I respectfully request long consideration of any new restrictions on OSV travel on the Rio Grande National Forest. Designated Wilderness, Roadless Areas, Big Game Winter Range, Private Land, all exist and restrict OSV travel. I ask that you consider the economic downside of minimizing motorized use across the Forest. I hope you will recognize the multi-use mandate of the Forest Service in general and keep this Forest as close to that mandate as possible. It is imperative that you understand the limited resources of my Mineral County Sheriff's Office and our Search and Rescue Team. We want to be good partners and designated non-motorized areas, in what are now considered open riding areas, would really tax and challenge these resources.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment and I am looking forward to continued conversations.

Respectfully,



Terry Wetherill,  
Mineral County Sheriff

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