**Sweetwater Community Board**

NEPA topics of concern.

**Safety**

1. Search and rescue instances will increase with a greater number of visitors.

\*S/R is based at a minimum of an hour away.

1. Fire, mudslides and rockslides have all closed Sweetwater and the Colorado River Road in the last 5 years. Increased traffic and people stranded in a box canyon intensifies at an alarming rate with the proposed plan.

\*The fire in the canyon exposed how difficult it is to communicate with two counties represented in the area.

\*Evacuations would be even more hectic (box canyon, no cell service)

1. Historically, emergency services helicopters could land safely in the nursery pasture. Per the NOI, this area would be the new campground. Power lines and other challenges make landing in other areas risky. Building a new landing pad would be strictly regulated and costly.
2. Communication difficulties: no cell service. Not just at the lake, but from I-70 to the lake for visitors (17+ miles). Increased traffic and related vehicle issues result in people coming to homes for help. This is already an issue that will be magnified by more traffic.
3. Restricted parking has led to conflicts and parking on non-state/USFS property including side of county road, private property and at hilltop area.
4. The area will box in the large numbers of visitors in a community recently evacuated due to nearby wildfires.
5. A concessionaire presence on-site, 24/7 has been and would continue to be necessary to ensure the safety and security of the concessionaire’s assets. This also provides a consistent, year-round hub for public information, emergency communication and safety.

Glenwood Canyon closures have created additional traffic and safety problems for residents north of I-70 on Colorado River road. At times, it has taken in excess of 3 hours to go from Gypsum to the Sweetwater Road when I-70 is closed due to a closure in the Glenwood Canyon. Congestion at Dotsero due to closures makes accessing the Sweetwater area nearly impossible for residents, visitors and emergency services alike. There have been at least 12 of these events in 2023. Increasing people and the potential need for emergency services will create more issues.

Hikers, horses, and hunters sharing paths.

1. The Keep ditch runs approximately one and a half miles from the Turret Creek head gate through some extreme and dangerous terrain to the three upper pastures. The NOI proposes that there would be a public trail along this path that would be shared by horses, hikers, and hunters. Building any public trail, especially a shared trail, through this steep and dangerous area would be irresponsible. It will lead to user conflicts that increases liability and risk of serious injury to all users. ***This should be completely removed from the plan.***
2. The historic, designated trailhead at Hilltop provides safer access to the flattops and should be the only access to the Turret Creek area. However, historically, the USFS has not maintained the steep one-lane road to the trailhead. In addition, this road cannot support large numbers of vehicles. It is also hazardous and dangerous due to no shoulders and steep drop-offs. With increased numbers of visitors, there will be an escalation in trash, excess human waste (ie.-Maroon Bells), and an impact on private land owners including trespassing.
3. The absence of an overall trail utilization, guidelines, and maintenance plan leaves huge concerns. A full plan should be shared/developed and reviewed by knowledgeable locals prior to approval.
4. Sweetwater Lake is a historical point of access for the cattlemen’s grazing permit. User conflict with cattle creates a huge safety issue. It is not uncommon for campers/park users to have a dog with them that may not be accustomed with dealing with cattle. The current proposal does not show how current cattle lease holders and additional users of the area will function together. The Ute trailhead located in the proposed day-use area immediately leads potential users through a gate and into a permitted cattle grazing area. This gate for ranchers/grazing is a risk to all area users. A person who is not familiar with cattle, especially with cows protecting their calves, will get themselves hurt. A mother cow can be very dangerous when protecting her calf from dogs and people. The potential liability is incredibly high. Recommended this is planned out before any proposals are approved.

**Wildlife Impacts**

Compared to historic use, a suggested number of 4X will have significant wildlife impacts.

1. Calving (Elk)/birthing (Mule Deer) grounds conflicting with campgrounds in the pastures.
2. Damaged migration patterns with additional roads and increased traffic.
3. Possible loss of Peregrine Falcons and Bald and Golden Eagles who tend to avoid areas of human activity. The Roaring Fork Audubon Society conducted a survey over the past two years and found 84 bird species, 11 of which are Species of Conservation Concern with a potential of at least 5 additional species.
4. Vulnerable Pinyon Jay population.
5. Loss of wildlife habitat.
6. There are no provisions for drones in the current proposal. With the exception of utility (Holy Cross) and emergency services all drones must be prohibited.
7. Increased stress on animals due to human numbers. Increased boat/paddle board activity will drive away many species that depend on this critical habitat for breeding and migratory purposes. The increase in water and land activity around the lake will cause birds like the Peregrine Falcon and Bald Eagle to abandon their historical nesting sites. Additionally, increased activity and noise will negatively impact feeding behaviors. The wildlife rely on the lake and pastures for survival and will be affected by increased disturbances.

\*As CPW is tasked with protecting the wildlife, how will this be successfully managed?

1. More negative and potentially unsafe human/wildlife interactions. This is bear and mountain lion country and is also located in the new wolf population’s watershed.

Encounters with moose, bear, mountain lions (etc.) will increase and lead to significant injuries or death.

1. Elk calving areas are very close to Sweetwater lake. By bringing in additional visitors, the mortality rate for animals will be impacted. There must be a plan for trail and campground closures through June.
2. Riparian areas—-all of the magnificent birds in the area will be impacted by the proposed sizing of development and holding capacity. It is not just protecting the areas by “roping things off”---the volume of people, traffic, noise, etc will negatively impact the birds and other wildlife. This area includes Blue Herons, Golden Eagles, Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, Black Swifts, owls, bats, etc.
3. The pastures are currently winter habitat areas and are heavily utilized by wildlife. Removing or developing the pastures into campsites will take this valuable resource from the wildlife.

**Traffic/Road**

The dirt road, which is maintained by Eagle County, has a posted speed limit of 25 MPH. Without a formalized, full traffic study and budgeted solutions for all problems found, development cannot proceed. The state/USFS should be required to define the increased volume expected and adjust plans for the lake to a volume that is well below what the roads/community can handle.

1. Speed limit (no enforcement)
2. Dirt road (washboards, potholes). Increased traffic will damage the road surface.
3. Not designed for two *standard* vehicles to pass in many places, certainly not for longer vehicles/trailers/etc. The road does not meet the definition for a standard, rural, 2-lane road in many places.
4. Semitruck turn-around (at lake currently), will potentially be removed with current site plan.
5. Predict clogged roads with increased numbers and some RVs can be too large for the road.
6. Increased road accidents due to increased traffic.
7. This proposal will increase traffic on both Sweetwater Road and the Colorado River Road, both of which are popular roads for bicyclists.
8. Local youth walk their 4-H animals and locals walk their dogs on the road today/daily. Locals also ride their horses on the road to access trails from their homes.
9. Local youth ride their bikes on the road today/daily.
10. Wildlife on the road is common. Recently re-introduced turkeys to the area along with deer, elk, livestock, pets, are common and locals are always on the lookout. Visitors to the area will not be aware of these hazards.
11. Intersection of 151 and 150 is a huge concern–increased traffic could result in a horrible accident–especially vehicles coming down from the lake. This must be looked at, along with other areas of the road before doing anything to increase traffic to the area. In the month of June, a local had a close encounter with a USFS vehicle coming down from the lake in this area. This is already a dangerous area without traffic increases.
12. Additional traffic will impact the maintenance required for upkeep resulting in increased taxpayer costs for both Eagle and Garfield counties.
13. Both Eagle and Garfield County have stated in a public forum that they have no plans to make improvements to Sweetwater Road.
14. 250 people with 2.5 riding in each vehicle is an extra 100 vehicles (equals an extra 200 vehicles going up and then down the road) on the road ***in addition*** to local traffic. There are currently 93 homes on Sweetwater Road and County Road 151.

Sizing of the plans for Sweetwater are over 50% the current size of Sylvan Lake. Sylvan lake traffic is significant; not just the cars/trucks/rvs etc, but also the increase in other uses at, and around, the state managed area. All roads within 15 miles are impacted by Sylvan Lake traffic and visitors. It is safe to assume similar impacts will occur in the Sweetwater area. Sheep Creek Road, CR 151 and Colorado River Road will all be impacted by development of the area by the state or the USFS.

**Environmental Impacts (flora and fauna)**

***Do no harm and leave no trace.***

1. Diminished fragile plant life - Bearded Penstemon, Mountain Willow.
2. Shock to the sensitive riparian area with added use near the lakeshore.
3. Overused trails that border the park. Currently, the USFS has not been able to maintain the trails with the historic level of use.
4. Excess human waste in the areas outside of the campgrounds and cabins. Sweetwater community center and the Sweetwater Road and the Colorado River Road (including the river) become dumping grounds for trash and waste from increased visitor population.
5. Noise pollution - Late night parties in the cabins or campgrounds, late night traffic. No external speakers should be allowed.

Paddle boarders use external speakers to listen to music while they recreate on the lake and this will affect wildlife around and in the riparian area due to the disturbing noises.

Also possible use of generators will disturb the peaceful surroundings.

Light pollution - will we be able to get and keep Dark Skies designation?

1. Calving/birthing areas are very close to Sweetwater lake. By bringing in additional visitors, the mortality rate for animals is likely to be impacted. What is the plan for seasonal closures? Trail closures in local communities are a constant battle as people do not abide. (see Town of Eagle and Eagle Ranch area)
2. Additional traffic on the roads will impact Sweetwater Creek and Colorado River Road. The increase in just USFS and State Park vehicles has already been noticeable in the last few years and becomes more problematic as they increase staffing with proposed merge in staff housing. The additional maintenance required for upkeep of the road is unbudgeted by Eagle and Garfield County at this time. Traffic will increase dust and sediment, which affects the flora and fauna in the Sweetwater and Colorado River drainage. It will affect the water quality in both Sweetwater Creek and the Colorado River.

**Livestock**

Historically, ranchers drive cattle up Sweetwater Road from Sheep Creek,and from the Colorado River (Green Horn Permit area).

1. There was a comment at a meeting by the USFS/CPW in Gypsum that “they” would truck the cattle up to the lake, as well as pick them up in cattle trucks from the lake. Historically, the cattle are driven by horseback and/or trucked up the Sweetwater Road. Each permittee rancher has different modes of travel for their operation.
2. The Sweetwater area and Colorado River Road are designated “Open Range” with potential livestock/car collisions.
3. Loss of historial access to traditional open range cattle drive along the road right of way will present considerable financial impact/burden on local ranching families. Many of these families have been ranching in this area for at least five generations.

The current proposal lacks any detailed plan around cattle management:

1. The expansion of the 832 acres from the actual purchase has now impeded on the cattle leases and potentially created new conflicts between users and ranchers.
2. The permit holders need facilities and a clear plan on how they will manage things before approval.
3. The additional acreage should be removed from the State lease area and/or a full justification of why acres of forest land that have historically been utilized and managed as USFS land were combined with this NEPA request.

Catch pens must be included in the plan so that cattle are not roaming freely with the campers when the cattle find/gain access to the lake area.

**Site size and Design**

**~~JUSTIFY THE YEAR ROUND MANAGEMENT~~**~~.~~??

Development of the site to support 250 visitors daily, which has been mentioned during meetings with USFS and CPW, is completely unacceptable for the traffic, community, road conditions and ecosystem.

1. The restaurant at Sweetwater Lake has been the heart of our community, open for over 100 years. Replacing the restaurant with a “lodge” like the one up brush creek at Sylvan Lake for “administrative, education, interpretive spaces” does not support the historic and cultural type of facility/environment.
2. Adding infrastructure, such as RV pads and electric hookups, will attract more visitors and lower the quality of the current outdoor experience.
3. Removing access to the lower and middle pasture will mean that the concessionaire will have to bring in weed-free hay to feed their horses. This will be a huge expense, and will cause the concessionaire to operate at a loss regardless of the new barn/increased business.
4. Catch pens need to be included in the plan for cattle that come down from the USFS area.
5. Development of the meadows will have a significant impact on wildlife habitat.
6. Sweetwater Lake is at the end of the community of Sweetwater, meaning that a visitor must drive to and from the lake through the entire community negatively impacting all residents.
7. The development and marketing of a recreation area of the size proposed will detract from the enjoyment of our unique environment and destroy the character of the area.
8. Once in state management, what would keep them from expanding the “park” in the future? The plan does not call out specifics or have “limits” on development. The vague nature for future plans is concerning.

Alternative: Un-develop the entire site. Remove the buildings that do not have historic significance. Remove the traffic concerns and all the conflicts and remove all items and do not add any new facilities. Do not remove the barn and historically significant buildings.

**Volume (people)**

Historic use before the property went on the market was a daily rate of 10 to 200 people including staff (average is 60). Moving from an average daily rate of 60 to the proposed 250 means over four times as many people in the area each day.

1. The historic high numbers occurred 4-5 times a year, during the months of June to October.
2. The actual average was under 60 in a multiple months-long study done during the high season for the water system by the State of Colorado.

The Governor commented, “preserving and conserving some of our most amazing wild areas…We want to make sure that we have a sustainable level of visitation and people that visit here have that special experience and it’s a different experience than people might expect at other parts of our state park system…preserving the undeveloped nature of the property.”

We believe the “sustainable level of visitation” to be that level that occurred here in the two decades before the area was closed to visitors in 2018. That level allowed a “special experience” for a wide variety of people from locals to international visitors. At the same time it allowed the Bald Eagles to nest beginning in 2006, and the moose to graze, and the river otters to frolic on the banks. This was the ideal use level that allowed the humans, the wildlife, and the unique plant habitat to thrive. Sweetwater Lake gives visitors a euphoric experience like no other into the past of what the Colorado mountains/frontier was like. Areas like this and its wildlife have disappeared due to development and pressure from large numbers of visitors recreating.

**Locals Access**

Formerly, locals (Sweetwater, Dotsero, Gypsum, Eagle, Edwards, Avon, Vail, (etc.) could use this area spontaneously.

1. Allow for a “locals pass” for Sweetwater residents to use at any time - no reservations needed
2. The Hack Lake Trailhead near Sweetwater Lake crosses BLM land on the way to Hack Lake. Historical, free, public access to this trailhead should continue. Access to this trail is missing from the current proposal
3. Concern that those living within 60 miles of the area might have to pay for day use and need reservations significantly in advance.
4. Bigger concern is that Sweetwater Lake will become like Sylvan Lake with the majority of users from outside of a 60 mile range, removing a local amenity from the local communities. The fact that the State of Colorado, the Governor, Eagle Valley Land Trust, and USFS built out this plan without discussions with the local communities, Garfield County and Eagle County must require a complete “reset” to the process. Making plans and announcing this level of a change to a local area is not OK and is irresponsible. It should not be permitted without consulting the local government.

**The Goal of Increasing Access**

1. Sweetwater Lake has long welcomed a wider previous audience than Sylvan Lake did before it became a State park; yet the visitation has never needed to “be controlled,” until there became the potential for a state park. This area has been open to the public with the exception of the private cabin rentals. While only half of the lakeshore was previously owned by USFS, the public was always allowed access on the “private” side.
2. Advertising surrounding a new state-managed area will inform new people about the lake, but there is no increased access to those people than had been previously opened. False advertisement by CPW has caused a misrepresentation of amenities and access at the lake.
3. Increased access for front range visitors will mean losing access for the nearby residents, the very people who worked so hard to move the land to public ownership in the first placer or the land to be saved, not developed.
4. Public access has been consistently available at Sweetwater Lake, so the goal of “increasing access” is debatable. There is a historical USFS campground at the lake and over the years, there has been a public dock on the USFS side part of the time. There is a nice hike to a fenced overlook and the wonderful Indian Cave site and there has been a public parking area for equestrian use in the middle of the “private” side. Visitors could park and hike up to the top of the east side on private land without paying any fees (“big rock hike”). Additionally, the “private” dock has always been open to the public to launch boats at no cost. If CPW takes over management, all of this will require fees, which will decrease accessibility to those with less financial means. Today, the USFS has closed the inlet acres and the big rock hike, actually ***reducing access***.
5. The “private” restaurant has always been open to the public. The public was always welcome to use the inlet side of the “private” land for free fishing or even launching small watercraft. Retaining the current concessionaire would retain the historical cultural experience.
6. Sweetwater Lake is at the end of the community of Sweetwater, meaning that a visitor has to drive through the entire community to get to and leave from the lake.
7. There has always been good public access at Sweetwater Lake. Again, the proposed CPW management plan might increase the numbers, but it will not increase the access, rather, it will *shift* access to those with more money and those with better internet for online reservation, but it will not *increase* access.

**Water Impacts**

Decrease in available water to irrigate.

More development = watershed issues.

Impacts to Sweetwater Creek and the Colorado River.

1. Increased traffic will impact water quality on Sweetwater creek/Colorado river
2. Increased maintenance of the road will decrease water quality and quantity.
3. **Attach letter from Hope re: lawyer and water bottling plant.**

**Overflow affecting other areas**

People encroaching into other areas (Sheep Creek, Cow Camp, Flat Tops Wilderness) will negatively impact these areas.

1. No designated parking
2. Not regulated by CPW (etc.)
3. 250 visitors/day will also impact campgrounds along the Colorado River–increased visitors = increased trash, etc.
4. Increased visitors will result in increased traffic throughout the area. Sylvan Lake is a great example of increased traffic. Sheep Creek, Cow Camp (CR 151), even the Colorado River Road north to McCoy will see increased traffic. The additional burden on the area must be planned for by Road and Bridge teams, land owners, and the overall communities. Two current short-term rental locations on CR151 already create substantial winter travel issues. At least 10 vehicles/occupants seek assistance each winter from local residents. This will be nothing compared to the volume that the proposal is planning for.

**Alternatives to a State Management Area**

Require the State of Colorado and the USFS to share examples of successful 20 year leases of land between the agencies that are also developed for recreational use. There are more tested models of USFS leasing lands to private businesses and not to a state. Budges Lodge and Trappers Lake are more common models for a property like this; not a lease to the state and certainly not a 20 year lease if other examples of this type of arrangement do not exist in Colorado.

1. USFS does not have the funds to develop the property, which is the preference of many, if not all, residents in the area. We would prefer that the current resort managers would become Forest Service concessionaires and things would run pretty much the way it had for the previous 30 years, just the landlord would change. This would include boat rentals, horseback riding, the restaurants and the cabins. The manager would be allowed to pursue private funding and grants to remodel, yet be required to meet Forest Service specifications. The USFS could provide realistic dates for raising funds, and if not met, the cabins could be dismantled, and no new cabins would be constructed. The USFS could continue to run their current campground or pay to move it should they choose or include it in the concessionaire contract like many campgrounds within Colorado and nationally. However, the pastures would continue as pastures and not become campgrounds. The basic “Sweetwater Lake Experience” would stay as it was historically, but perhaps be open to a wider audience.
2. The USFS retains sole management, so the local ranchers in the area can continue its historic relationship with the USFS and their cattle permits.
3. Over the years, the USFS has expanded their utilization of concessionaires in different types of models. Smaller and more intimate campsites are working in similar areas like Budges, Trappers, and even Yeoman Park (campgrounds only).

**Attach Matt Lou’s proposal.**

**Impacts within the neighboring community**

People who live near Sylvan Lake State Park said that becoming a state park has “ruined” the experience for them.

1. Impacts to rural way of life
2. Increased trash
3. Increased trespassing
4. Increased traffic

 RVs with trailers

 Side-by-sides

 Snowmobiles

 Bicycle traffic

 Hikers/Pedestrians

1. Vandalism

People moved to this area for the peaceful, country atmosphere.

New recreational consumers will target this area once marketed and promoted.

Concerns that the restaurant/cultural heritage center/community gathering spot will not reopen.

**Historic Uses**

Historically, there were 6 multi-bedroom wet cabins with wood burning fireplaces, no wifi, and space for multi-generational families to gather together.

Lodging in houses with kitchens and bathrooms opens up the area to many folks who prefer not to, or are unable to go camping due to a disability etc. This is an alternative for those who don’t own RVs or those who choose not to use outhouses. In addition, “dry cabins” have not been a historical use.

1. Visitors who have historically enjoyed wet cabins will not move into tiny dry cabins.
2. The multiple dry cabins do not *increase* access, they just *change* access.

**We need to expand on cultural, historical losses/changes this plan creates**.

 Outfitter business

 Horse rides

 Restaurant

 Community gathering point

 Horse pastures

 Limited visitation

**NOTE regarding entities involved:**

Eagle Valley Land Trust Mission- “Our Mission is to protect forever, as a permanent legacy, the land we love including the scenic beauty, recreational opportunities, and wildlife habitats.”

\*United States Forest Service “is to maintain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation’s forest and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. Helping States and communities to wisely use the forests to promote rural economic development and a quality rural environment. **Motto: Caring for the land and Serving People.”**

\*Colorado Parks and Wildlife- mission “is to perpetuate the wildlife resources of the state, to provide a quality state parks system and to provide enjoyable and sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities that educate and inspire current and future generations to serve as **active stewards of Colorado’s natural resources**.”

**Add YouTube Link to the Sweetwater Documentary**

**Include current and historical culture**

**-Potlucks, kids and 4-H and local gatherings.**

**IN CONCLUSION OR ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

-The USFS told us we need the state “because they have money to develop the property.”

 ***We saved the lake to protect it from development.***

-The USFS told us we need the state because they can afford personnel to manage the large crowds of people who would flock to the lake once it became public. It has been public for 2 ½ years now, and there are no flocks of people. As Jeff Shroll, EC manager, mentioned, the numbers are now lower than they were in 2020. Without CPW presence, development, and marketing, we believe there will not be the damaging numbers that were originally predicted.