Data Submitted (UTC 11): 3/28/2024 8:04:16 PM
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Comments:

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) appreciates the opportunity to participate as a cooperating agency on the Junction-Falls Integrated Resource Management (J-FIRM) Project within the San Juan National Forest (SJNF). CPW's 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. This mission is implemented through our 2015 Strategic Plan and the goals it embraces which are designed to make CPW a national leader in wildlife management, conservation, and sustainable outdoor recreation for current and future generations. Part of this implementation includes responding to agency requests during planning efforts with recommendations to maintain and improve wildlife habitats on the landscape. Although CPW is responsible for managing the wildlife of Colorado, we could not maintain sustainable populations without high quality habitats across public lands.

CPW's involvement in the J-FIRM plan has been extensive. We participated in a pre-scoping site visit (July 2022), provided a written comment letter during Scoping (October 2022), participated in multiple public outreach meetings hosted by the SJNF, and have had multiple in-person meetings to discuss various aspects of this planning effort.
The Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and Draft Biological Assessment/Biological Evaluation (BA/BE) contain a variety of proposed treatments across different geographic areas with varying habitat types. CPW appreciates the proposed habitat treatments which include prescriptions that will result in a functional habitat uplift for wildlife. Thinning treatments and prescribed fire have been shown to increase the abundance of palatable grasses, forbs, and shrubs for a variety of wildlife species. CPW also appreciates that hand thinning and mechanical treatments will not be conducted in big game High Priority Habitats (HPH) from the time period of December 1 - April 30, as specified in Colorado Parks and Wildlife 2015 Strategic Plan (November 2015) http://cpw.state.co.us/Documents/About/StrategicPlan/2015CPWStrategicPlan-I 1-19 I5.pdf

Appendix A. CPW requests to be notified if burning operations are scheduled during this time period in order to provide recommendations to minimize impacts to big game. CPW is in support of the SJNF's commitment to conduct habitat improvements in the Falls Creek valley and looks forward to working with the Forest Service in designing low impact habitat improvement projects with the goal of returning this area to functional habitat for big game and other wildlife.

CPW appreciates the opportunity to review the Draft Environment Assessment for the J-FIRM planning area, and the consistent communication with SJNF staff on the planning process. We look forward to continued collaboration as a cooperating agency.