

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 8/5/2024 3:04:53 PM

First name: Marcia

Last name: Gilles

Organization: Eagle County Government

Title:

Comments: RE: Eagle County Comments on Sweetwater Lake Management and Development Project

Dear Scott Fitzwilliams,

Eagle County appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed Sweetwater Lake Management and Development Project Notice of Intent. Eagle County is highly supportive of the overall outlined proposed action and purpose and need for the project. Eagle County participated initially with the pre NEPA working with the Sweetwater Community to outline ideas that were brought forward in cooperating agency meetings. As a cooperating agency, Eagle County participated in crafting the proposed action based upon community feedback. We appreciate the Forest Service's very thorough and thoughtful public engagement process and look forward to the continued engagement. We commend the Forest Service for undertaking this Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to sustainably shape the future of Sweetwater Lake so that locals and visitors can have a continued sense of community and rustic recreation experience. Below are Eagle County's comments on the proposed project.

Wildlife Considerations

The project area lies within critical elk habitat according to best available spatial data from Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Eagle County residents and visitors highly value wildlife, and wildlife-related recreation contributes significantly to our economy. Due to the project area's location, Eagle County urges a thorough analysis of potential impacts of the project on elk herds, particularly considering declining elk populations and calf to cow ratios. In addition, since the project location is within critical elk habitat, Eagle County strongly recommends implementing a seasonal wildlife closure during winter into late spring to protect elk populations during their calving season, potentially reducing mortality rates during this vulnerable time.

Grazing and Ranching

Ranching & grazing is a cultural and historical aspect defining Eagle County. Due to the project's proximity to ranching operations, grazing rights and boundaries-particularly fencing and operational separations-need careful analysis to minimize conflicts between visitors and ranchers. Eagle County supports continued grazing within the current permitted allotment. The grazing allotment and permit should be honored, with potential impacts to the allotment and visitors analyzed. Accommodation for stock semi-truck turnarounds is essential to support ranching operations and should be continued. Lastly, Eagle County supports prohibiting grazing in riparian areas and near the upper lake to protect water quality. Additionally, an assessment of the outfitter and guide resort grazing permit and location of pasture grazing should be included in the analysis.

Developed Campground

For the developed campground site, Eagle County supports the use of electric hookups for recreational vehicles (RV) instead of generators to reduce noise and air pollution created by generator use. Eagle County believes that RV and trailer size limitations are necessary due to the narrow, unpaved county road leading to Sweetwater.

Long-Term Management

Similar to partnerships with the Ozark National Forest and State Parks, Eagle County supports a phased approach to better understand the site's carrying capacity and user needs before further development. Specifying the maximum buildable recreation site capacity would allow for a clearer comparison of alternatives. For example, the site capacity for the proposed action is (specify xx-capacity number) for all campsites, parking, day use, and trailhead access. Eagle County recommends a 20-year permit with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), endorsing their ability to manage Sweetwater for a primitive and rustic character.

Trails

Trails should be aligned in a location away from irrigation ditches and a detailed trail design for review is essential. There are a number of existing trails in the area and Eagle County recommends considering reroute options for existing trails to ensure the necessity of a new trail. Eagle County recommends any new trails be evaluated for sustainable grades to evaluate sustainability, safety, and user experience.

Irrigation

Any potential impacts on water quality due to the unlined irrigation ditch and trail users near the ditch should be addressed.

Guard Station

Historic and potential uses of the guard station should be analyzed for inclusion in the overall site design analysis.

Maps and pasture clarification

The signed Notice of Intent letter and proposed action fact sheet reference "lower pasture" and "middle pasture" as locations for improvements. The provided aerial project map, titled Sweetwater Lake Recreation Management and Development Project, from April 8, 2022, indicates the following pastures: 3rd Pasture, 2nd Pasture, Nursery Pasture, 4th Pasture, Hospital Pasture, and Lake Pasture. It is not clear from the provided information which pastures will be improved, as the naming for the pastures in the written materials does not match the map materials. Please use the same naming conventions for the pastures as described on the maps in the written materials to avoid confusion.

Cave Management

We appreciate the collaborative approach to this project and support continued work with the Ute Tribe to manage the cave resources and seek counsel and consultation. Additionally, Eagle County would appreciate collaboration with developing a specific cave and visitor management plan. The Forest Service has responsibility under the Federal Cave Resources Protection Act of 1988 to designate significant caves and provide for their protection and preservation. Please analyze if this cave will receive significant cave designation and manage options for visitor access.

Thank you for your partnership and the opportunity to comment on the proposed Sweetwater Lake Management and Development Project. We appreciate your attention to our comments and look forward to continued opportunities to engage. If you have questions regarding this letter, contact Marcia Gilles via email marcia.gilles@eaglecounty.us or at (970) 230-1583.