

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 8/5/2024 6:50:37 PM

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Comments: Sweetwater Lake Recreation Management and Development Project (SLDP) #64047

Town of Gypsum Official Comments - August 5, 2024

1.The "Save the Lake" campaign had significant support from Gypsum because our community has enjoyed Sweetwater Lake and its authentic western Colorado experience for generations.

2.Our community loves this land and believes there's tremendous value in preserving not only the land, but also the essence of the property, in much the state it is in today.

3.All future plans for Sweetwater Lake should aim to maximally preserve its natural landscapes and the rustic western culture that drives meaningful emotional connections to the place.

4.The consequence of the "Save the Lake" campaign should not be to "Disturb the Lake" - its waters, its flora and fauna, nor the nearby neighbors that call this area home.

5.In general, the direction established by the cooperating agency's group has tended in the right direction with its trajectory towards reducing impacts on the property, the size and scope of the proposal and the number of visitors aimed to be accommodated by the plan.

6."Small," "Quiet," "Rustic," "Dark," "Traditional Flat Tops," "Difficult to Access" or "Off the Beaten Path" are all key words and phrases that come to mind when envisioning a qualitatively appropriate future for Sweetwater Lake.

7.Key concerns remain that this process has not gone far enough in the preservation of the character, remoteness, wildlife and landscape conservation and rural quality of life that exists in the area today. Specifically:

a.Visitor parking areas for Day Use should be reduced in size/parking space count, particularly at the south end of the lake at the location of the current campsites.

b.Campsites should only be limited to primitive sites and should be reduced to no more than 16. Similarly, any cabin offerings should fall on the low side of the range proposed on the Proposed Site Amenities map.

c.Camping "at" the Lower Pasture should be confined to the northeast border of the pasture, east of the existing road so that the camping uses can be separated from the pasture itself, perhaps by a fence. This would separate the pasture from a primitive camping experience adjacent to a working pasture that supports a variety of useful purposes including greenspace that reduces fire risks and offers quality wildlife habitat, grazing, and beneficial uses of irrigation water that provide return flow benefits to the lake, etc.

d.The proposed Day Use parking at the south end of the lake should accommodate a turnaround area at the western end big enough for up to 4 trailers for cattle load out from the grazing allotment to the west. Alternatively, if a cattle catch and loading area can be maintained immediately south of the day use area, this may also be appropriate.

e.It is critical that cattle grazing permit rights and southern lake access in the fall through Oct. 15th should be fully maintained and honored irrespective of the changes to the management of Sweetwater Lake. The interface between visitor safety and needs of the permittees' ability to manage their livestock appropriately need to be addressed.

f.The United States Forest Service (USFS) should clearly explain why certain areas of the 832 acres were chosen for inclusion in the Sweetwater Lake Recreation Management and Development Project. Clear justification and communication as to why the USFS is expanding the management area into current grazing

allotments, especially around the southern and western parts of the lake would be welcome.

g. When deciding the total number of visitors allowed on the property each day, road traffic and safety should be taken into account. If the number of visitors exceeds expectations, a system may need to be set up to manage daily visitor limits. Local residents should be given priority in this system because they contributed directly to the Save the Lake campaign, which secured permanent public access. Site capacity should be planned with the assumption that the current roadway will remain mostly unchanged. Paving, widening, or other major road improvements would suggest that the Sweetwater project is not aligned with the interests of the local community, which raised significant funds to add the property to the federal public lands inventory with the expectation that doing so would preserve the property's current character.

h. It would be beneficial if a concession-operated "Lodge" included a restaurant facility, reflecting the character of the now-defunct establishment that was once central to the community.

i. Preservation of Sweetwater Lake's dark skies and quiet nature should be a management priority. Noise and light pollution would be contrary to the intent of the Save the Lake campaign.

j. The proposed evaluation of establishing day-use hiking and equestrian trails on the northeast side of the lake needs serious scrutiny. The Keep Ditch trail is not safe as currently constructed with a sheer drop-off and narrow and eroded surface. The trail would need realigned and require significant and costly ongoing maintenance to allow safe passage for hikers and horses which can be easily incompatible in such steep terrain.

k. USFS or Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) housing for employees on the property should be no more than two (units). Any on-site management quarters should house only those employees that service the property itself, not the larger regional housing needs of the USFS or CPW. Doing so would add needless additional impacts to the site and additional traffic to the road, falling far outside of the original intent of the Save the Lake campaign.

Finally, it's become clear throughout the scoping process that USFS believes it is resource limited and needs CPW's partnership to provide for appropriate management on the site. It's become equally clear that virtually no one in Eagle or Garfield County wants Sweetwater to become Colorado's next State Park. Town of Gypsum is hopeful that the site will receive a relatively benign name such as "Sweetwater" and be designated as a special management area, a state wildlife area, or something with significantly less marketing and promotional emphasis than a state park. Public marketing should be minimal to non-existent by either agency, or their affiliates or partners, to preserve the lake's natural and tranquil environment.

Town of Gypsum looks forward to continued partnership with the United States Forest Service and Colorado Parks and Wildlife to ensure that this project meets the original intent of the "Save the Lake" campaign.