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Title:

Comments: Please see the attached objection.

Dear Objection Reviewing Officer:

Please accept these objections to the Final EA (EA), Draft Decision Notice (DN), and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Leadville/Salida Camping Management Plan. The Responsible Official is the objection reviewing officer. These objections are submitted on behalf of BlueRibbon Coalition (BRC), including BRC's individual and organizational members who have enjoyed, and plan in the future to enjoy, access to the Leadville/Salida area.

These objections are submitted in accordance with 36 C.F.R. part 218. BRC and its members submitted scoping comments, draft environmental assessment comments raising the stated issues or otherwise providing a basis for these objections. The point of contact for this objection is Simone Griffin, please direct all communication regarding these objections to Simone Griffin at 800 W Main St Suite 1460, Boise, ID 83702. We formally request a resolution meeting in accordance with 36 C.F.R. [sect] 218.11.

#### 1. Interest of the Objector

BRC has a unique perspective and longstanding interest in motorized vehicle use in the Project Area. BRC is a nonprofit corporation that champions responsible recreation and encourages individual environmental stewardship. BRC members use various motorized and nonmotorized means to access public lands and waters, specifically including use of the Salida/Leadville camping area. BRC has a long-standing interest in the protection of the values and natural resources addressed in this process, and regularly works with land managers to provide recreation opportunities, preserve resources, and promote cooperation between public land visitors.

#### 1. Objection Issues

We note at the outset that the agency has conducted a lengthy process, and addressed many of our concerns. We want to express our appreciation for the agency's thoughtful effort, support of stakeholder involvement and collaboration, and patience in this lengthy process. Still, there remain concerns with the current approach, and we raise the following objections, which provide a legal basis for our requested changes to the Draft ROD.

The objection process necessarily anticipates the possibility and potential likelihood of success in subsequent litigation brought by an objector. In such a challenge the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) waives the United States's sovereign immunity for those aggrieved by [ldquo]final agency action.[rdquo] 5 U.S.C. [sect][sect] 702, 704; Lujan v. National Wildlife Federation, 497 U.S. 871, 882 (1990). APA section 706(2) provides the relevant standard of review: a reviewing court shall [ldquo]hold unlawful and set aside agency action, findings, and conclusions found to be[mdash](A) arbitrary, capricious, an abuse of discretion, or otherwise not in accordance with law; [or] (C) short of statutory right; [or] (E) unsupported by substantial evidence[hellip].[rdquo] This standard of review is [ldquo]narrow[rdquo] but the agency:

must examine the relevant data and articulate a satisfactory explanation for its action including a rational connection between the facts found and the choice made....Normally, an agency rule would be arbitrary and capricious if the agency has relied on factors which Congress has not intended it to consider, entirely failed to consider an important aspect of the problem, offered an explanation for its decision that runs counter to the evidence before the agency, or is so implausible that it could not be ascribed to a difference in view or the product of agency expertise.

Motor Vehicle Mfrs. Ass'n v. State Farm Mutual Automobile Ins. Co., 463 U.S. 29, 43 (1983) (citations omitted). This is considered a deferential standard of review. Still, there always exists some level of litigation risk, and we believe the decision can be improved.

#### EA Fails to Consider New Information

The Environmental Assessment fails to address Executive Order 13963, [ldquo]Make America Beautiful Again[rdquo], which was signed on July 3, 2025 and remains binding unless revoked or superseded. That Order explicitly directs federal agencies to expand recreation opportunities, improve public access to public lands, and reduce unnecessary restrictions on outdoor use while carrying out their stewardship responsibilities. The Draft Decision to convert OHV trails to Maintenance Level 1 roads, restrict dispersed camping, and frame access closures as a default management tool runs contrary to the intent of this Executive Order. Yet the EA contains no discussion of whether the proposed action is consistent with EO 13963, nor does it attempt to reconcile its restrictive approach with a policy directive that agencies should be enhancing, rather than curtailing, public recreation opportunities. This omission represents a failure to consider applicable law and policy, and undermines the adequacy of the NEPA analysis.

Congress passed the Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences (EXPLORE) Act in 2024 with bipartisan support to ensure that federal land management agencies expand and enhance outdoor recreation opportunities.

Among its provisions, the Act:

- \* Directs agencies to increase access to dispersed and motorized recreation opportunities where appropriate ([sect]102, [sect]201).
- \* Requires agencies to coordinate with local communities and stakeholders to support rural economies dependent on outdoor recreation ([sect]301).
- \* Establishes a framework for comprehensive recreation planning that emphasizes the expansion of opportunities rather than restriction ([sect]401).
- \* Mandates that agencies track and report on recreation capacity to ensure public lands meet growing demand ([sect]501).

The EA for the Salida and Leadville Ranger Districts conflicts with these statutory requirements. By reducing dispersed camping opportunities, converting broad public lands into designated-only sites, authorizing rolling closures, and narrowing vehicle access, the plan restricts rather than expands recreation. The agency has not demonstrated how the proposed action complies with the EXPLORE Act's mandate to grow outdoor opportunities and strengthen rural economies, nor has it provided the required analysis of recreation capacity or economic impacts on gateway communities.

This omission represents more than a policy disagreement [mdash] it is a failure to comply with governing federal

law. Unless the EA is revised to explicitly demonstrate consistency with the EXPLORE Act's directives, the decision is procedurally and substantively deficient.

All alternatives should comply with EO 12963 and the EXPLORE Act.

#### EA Fails to Take Hard Look at Dispersed Camping Impacts

The Environmental Assessment acknowledges that dispersed camping opportunities will be reduced or otherwise affected by the proposed action. However, the discussion of these impacts is cursory and fails to satisfy NEPA's requirement for a "hard look" at environmental consequences. Dispersed camping is a popular and unique form of recreation in the project area, providing affordable access to public lands and serving as an important complement to developed recreation infrastructure. The EA does not quantify the number of campsites or user-days likely to be lost, does not assess the displacement effects on nearby areas, and does not consider how reduced dispersed camping opportunities may compound the regional recreation access crisis as population growth and demand increase. Instead, the EA offers only broad and generalized statements that impacts will occur, without the detailed analysis necessary for decisionmakers and the public to understand the scope and significance of these losses. By failing to meaningfully evaluate the effects on dispersed camping, the agency has not taken the required "hard look" at the environmental and social consequences of the project.

#### EA Fails to Provide a True Recreation Alternative

Despite clear public requests, the EA rejected a recreation-focused alternative that would have maintained broader dispersed camping access and expanded motorized routes. NEPA requires agencies to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate reasonable alternatives, yet the EA limited its analysis to restrictive frameworks that reduce access. By refusing to evaluate a reasonable recreation alternative, the agency violated NEPA's "hard look" requirement (40 CFR [sect]1502.14) and deprived the public of an opportunity to meaningfully weigh management choices that would prioritize recreation.

BRC would like a recreation alternative that studies and analyzes how expanding routes and camping areas could alleviate the camping impacts.

#### EA Arbitrarily Converts Public Lands to Designated-Only Camping

The EA converts large areas from open dispersed camping to a limited number of designated sites. This represents a de facto closure of most existing campsites without adequate analysis of lost recreational capacity. The Forest Service's multiple-use mandate under MUSYA (16 U.S.C. [sect]528[ndash]531) requires balancing recreation with other values, not systematically reducing opportunities. By eliminating the traditional flexibility of dispersed camping in favor of restrictive, designated-only sites, the agency has failed to demonstrate that the public's recreation needs are being preserved.

BRC recommends providing additional designated camping areas with appropriate infrastructure while still permitting free, open dispersed camping.

#### EA Defers Critical Closure Decisions Without Analysis

The EA acknowledges that the specific campsites and areas to be closed will only be determined later during on-the-ground "layout" (pages 3[ndash]6, 15[ndash]16). This leaves the actual scope of closures undefined and "up in the air," preventing the public from understanding how many sites will be lost or where. Deferring those decisions to future site-level planning without NEPA review unlawfully segments the analysis, undermines transparency, and denies the public the ability to provide informed feedback. NEPA requires the agency to analyze and disclose the specific recreational losses now, not later.

The USFS should not implement anything on the ground that has not been explicitly analyzed and proposed to the public.

#### EA Restricts Vehicle Access and Parking

In several areas, the plan prohibits the traditional practice of pulling off the road within one vehicle length, instead requiring camping only in marked parking spaces (pages 4, 15). This effectively closes many long-standing camping opportunities and undermines the Travel Management Rule framework, which was designed to provide continued motorized access along designated roads. These restrictions directly conflict with Forest Plan allocations that emphasize motorized recreation opportunities along these corridors.

#### EA Reduces Stay Limits Without Analysis

The EA authorizes adaptive management to reduce the 14-day stay limit to as few as 7 days in some areas (page 16). Such a change materially alters how the public can use the forest, yet the agency provides no analysis of how reduced stay limits would affect demand, user displacement, or the affordability of recreation. Without evaluating these impacts, the decision to shorten stay limits is arbitrary and unsupported.

There should be a consistent 14 day stay limit in all areas.

#### EA Authorizes Rolling Closures Through Adaptive Management

The EA gives managers broad discretion to close individual sites or entire areas if “resource degradation” is observed (page 16). This authority enables rolling closures that could drastically reduce dispersed camping opportunities without additional NEPA review, public involvement, or environmental analysis. By allowing closures to occur incrementally through adaptive management, the Forest Service has created a system that bypasses procedural safeguards and undermines accountability.

The USFS should also have language and provisions in place that allows managers broad discretion to open roads and areas to camping if there is a need and demand for additional camping opportunities.

#### EA Compounds Permanent Area-Specific Closures

Several areas in the project are already subject to camping prohibitions: Chalk Creek (CR161/FR292), Twin Lakes Peninsula, parts of South Cottonwood Creek, and the Poncha Loop sage-grouse habitat (pages 6, 20). Layering new restrictions on top of these existing Forest Orders compounds the cumulative loss of dispersed camping and recreation access in the region. Yet the EA fails to provide a transparent cumulative impact analysis that accounts for how these overlapping restrictions collectively erode recreation opportunities.

#### EA Fails to Analyze Economic Impacts of Dispersed Camping Restrictions

The EA does not provide any meaningful economic analysis of how reducing dispersed camping opportunities will impact nearby communities, even though dispersed camping is a significant economic driver in the Salida and Leadville areas. Visitors who rely on dispersed camping often support local economies by purchasing food, fuel, gear, and services in gateway towns. By converting dispersed camping to a limited number of designated sites, reducing stay limits, and authorizing rolling closures, the EA directly constrains recreation capacity without disclosing or evaluating the economic consequences of those restrictions.

NEPA requires agencies to evaluate not just environmental impacts, but also the social and economic effects of proposed actions. Here, the EA’s failure to quantify the number of campsites that will be lost, or the visitor-days displaced, makes it impossible to understand the magnitude of economic impacts to surrounding communities. In Chaffee County and Lake County, outdoor recreation is a cornerstone of the local economy, and dispersed camping plays a critical role in sustaining affordable access for families, OHV users, and long-distance travelers. By ignoring this connection, the EA has failed to take the required “hard look” at how its actions will ripple through local businesses and tax bases.

The lack of economic analysis is particularly significant because these decisions will not just affect National

Forest users, but also compound restrictions already imposed on nearby BLM lands. When both agencies simultaneously reduce dispersed camping access in the region, the cumulative effect on visitation and local revenue is likely to be substantial. Without a transparent analysis of these impacts, decisionmakers and the public cannot evaluate whether the proposed action is consistent with federal policy to support rural communities and expand recreation access.

#### Conclusion

The Draft Decision and EA are deficient in both substance and procedure. They eliminate unique OHV opportunities and restrict dispersed camping based on negligible sediment concerns, while failing to contextualize impacts, consider reasonable alternatives, or incorporate significant new information and applicable federal policy. These shortcomings demonstrate that the EA does not comply with NEPA's requirements or the Forest Service's multiple-use mandate.

We respectfully request that the agency modify the Draft Decision, prepare supplemental analysis that addresses these deficiencies, and reconsider alternatives that both protect environmental resources and maintain existing recreation experiences.