

20 February 2022

Dear Forest Service Administrators,

I'm writing to comment on the new proposed Crystal River valley trail. In short, I worry that the sum total impact of all recreation types is harming our wildlife herds, and I advocate against building this trail. Please prioritize wildlife and ecology over increasing recreational access!

I grew up in Glenwood Springs. I have lived in Marble, Paonia, Crested Butte, and I currently reside in Leadville. The mountains of Colorado are my home. I am an avid trail user: I hike, bike, fish, hunt, ski, and generally love to spend time in nature on my own and with my two young children. I have made a career of outdoor experiences: I instructed with Colorado Outward Bound for 8 years, then became an administrator. I most recently was an outdoor program director for a Leadville organization called Get Outdoors Leadville!, and I serve on Leadville's City Council.

I absolutely understand the wellness and positive economic impact that outdoor recreation has in Colorado and beyond. Trail development can have huge returns on investment both for local economy, and holistic well being for the trail users. I acknowledge all the positives!

However, I have been reading and learning more about some of our area ungulate herds, and how the impact of increased backcountry recreation has been very hard on the herds. I care about the ecosystem and wildlife above any sort of extractive or recreation industry. We have so many trails already - I don't believe we need more. And if the trails we have are too congested, then I propose we have a permitting or reservation system. As a recreationalist, I don't love the idea of having to schedule a bike ride, but as a hunter I have lived a life scheduling hunts, applying for permits, paying for my share of impact and supporting wildlife.

In recent decades, the recreation and amenity economy has largely replaced extractive industry. We asked extractive industries (like mining, logging, etc.) to have constraints and contribute portions of profits to help offset the harms. Rec and amenity economies have impacts, too, and I do believe we must reign in recreation sprawl and increased trail building, and ask rec economy profiteers (of which I am one!) to offset our impacts. I also acknowledge as a hunter that perhaps hunting licenses need to be dialed back to offset our impact.

Please preserve precious habitat for our wildlife! Climate change is threatening them; sprawling urban development is threatening them. I know there is only so much the USFS can do about global problems, but you have tons of control over the future of this Crystal Valley habitat. Please conserve it! The new trail will further fragment and hurt Elk, Deer, and other wildlife.

And on a personal note, I grew up bowhunting with my dad in the Redstone, Huntsman Ridge area. Over the decades the Elk have become more scarce there, as increased year-round recreators become more abundant. I love that place and love that elk herd. Please protect it!

Don't let the Crystal Valley Elk herd become like Vail's: dead and gone. Read more about the Vail elk herd in Christine Peterson's article, "Resort Town Blues" (link below). And there's increasing research on the cumulative impacts that all recreationalists (including hunters) have on megafauna. I cite the USFS's own publication: "Seeking Ground Less Traveled: Elk Response to Recreation."

Thank for considering my input, and thank you for balancing multi-use on our public lands. I know it is no easy thing!

Best wishes,

Francisco Tharp

Sources cited:

- https://www.backcountryhunters.org/resort_town_blues?utm_campaign=crystal_trail&utm_medium=email&utm_source=backcountryhunters.
- <https://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/sciencef/scifi219.pdf>