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Abstract

Colorado Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers Wild Lands and Wildlife Report

The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests provide essential habitat for a wide variety of wildlife and fish, and it is a national destination for hunting and fishing as well as wildlife watching. As hunters and anglers we seek opportunities to enjoy large backcountry habitats in pursuit of fish and game, as well as the solitude and challenge of experiencing large intact landscapes. The Colorado Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (CO BHA) recognizes the increasing trend in recreational development and use on the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests (GMUG) and surrounding BLM public lands is significantly impacting the integrity of our remaining wild lands and wildlife habitats. CO BHA believes it is urgent to address the cumulative impacts of recreation during forest plan revision and purposely direct management toward the conservation of our remaining wild lands and wildlife habitats that are essential to perpetuating our wildlife populations, and upon the ability to sustain our hunting opportunities and the economic benefits to our local communities. This report utilizes ArcGIS and current resource data and research to conduct a landscape-level analysis of the present status of wild lands and big game habitat integrity and connectivity and identify priority areas for conservation within the GMUG.

Our analysis has determined that the character and integrity of Roadless Areas on the GMUG Forest have been cumulatively altered by the presence of motorized and non-motorized trails. As shown on our interactive map and data table a majority of CO Roadless areas on the GMUG currently contain established mountain bike trails, ATV and motorcycle trails, and snowmobile trail systems, particularly on the Grand Mesa, Gunnison Basin, and northwestern portion of the Uncompahgre Plateau. In many areas those trail systems approach 1 mile of trail per section of land and have fragmented larger undisturbed landscapes, impacting big game habitats, security areas and migration corridors, and shifted their primitive character to developed recreation.

An extensive literature search was conducted to recognize the findings of peer-reviewed research on the effects of recreation on big game habitats and populations ([download references \(https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/backcountryhunters/pages/9144/attachments/original/1610683922/references_%28%29.pdf?1610683922\)](https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/backcountryhunters/pages/9144/attachments/original/1610683922/references_%28%29.pdf?1610683922)). In combination with this science-based research, our analysis of big game habitat integrity and connectivity is based on the spatial and temporal association of mapped big game seasonal habitats, production areas, and migration corridors with existing roads and trails on and adjacent to the GMUG. The interactive maps clearly demonstrate the greatest impacts to big game habitats and movement are associated with the larger urban areas, mountain resorts, and towns surrounding the GMUG that are experiencing the most widespread and intensive development. Associated with those population centers and resort communities are continually expanding networks of recreational trails on BLM and National Forest lands, particularly within areas

mapped as elk and mule deer winter range, winter concentration areas, severe winter range, and the migration corridors and routes that are used to migrate to summer ranges. This trend in recreational trail development has further expanded into elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep summer range, summer concentration and production areas on the GMUG and adjacent National Forests.

This report includes an interactive map of the Suggested Wildlife Management Areas that depicts recommendations from both Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) and CO BHA. Basic information and rationale for those recommendations are summarized in the table of BHA Wildlife Management Areas. As a stakeholder in the Gunnison Public Lands Initiative (GPLI), CO BHA fully endorses GPLI management consensus recommendations within Gunnison County. We believe these recommended management area designations including Wilderness additions and Special Management Areas will provide important gains in protection of our wild lands and wildlife habitats. We fully endorse the Wildlife Management Area recommendations submitted by Colorado Parks and Wildlife in 2019 with suggested boundary adjustments and additions where no overlap with GPLI consensus recommendations occur. Where overlap does occur we believe GPLI recommendations will provide important gains in wildlife protection consistent with CPW WMA recommendations and direct recreation use to limit wildlife impacts more broadly throughout the planning area within Gunnison County. In addition to endorsing CPW WMA recommendations and GPLI consensus recommendations as described above, we have identified 15 more WMAs based upon our analysis of big game habitat and backcountry hunting values, as well as current Forest and BLM travel management plans that we are recommending.

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Grand

Mesa

Uncompahgre

Gunnison

(GMUG)

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Report

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