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First name: Hannah
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Organization: Ouray County Colorado
Title: Deputy Clerk of the Board
Comments: Ouray County Cooperating Agency Comments on SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN are attached for the August 2021 DRLMP and DEIS Public Documents - Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison Forest Plan Revision #51806.

[ATTACHMENT COPIED BELOW. NOTE PDF CONVERSION MAY RESULT IN FORMATTING ERRORS. SOME FOOTNOTES ARE EMBEDDED IN THE TEXT FOR CODING PURPOSES.]

November 23, 2021

Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests 2250 South Main St

Delta, Colorado 81416

Attn: Responsible Official Frank Beum, Regional Forester, USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region (Region 2); Responsible Official Chad Stewart, GMUG Forest Supervisor; and GMUG Plan Revision Team

Via email to: frank.beum@usda.gov; chad.stewart@usda.gov; tamera.randall-parker@usda.gov; samantha.j.staley@usda.gov; jonathan.tucker@usda.gov and gmugforestplan@fs.fed.us; and via electronic comment submission at https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public//CommentInput?Project=51806

RE: Ouray County Cooperating Agency Comments on the August 2021 DRLMP and DEIS Public Documents [ndash] Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison Forest Plan Revision #51806 [ndash] SPECIES OF CONSERVATION CONCERN AND WILDLIFE AND PLANT SPECIES
Dear Responsible Official(s) and Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests Planning Team,

On behalf of the Board of County Commissioners and citizens of Ouray County, thank you for the opportunity to provide comments regarding the GMUG Forest Plan Revision. Ouray County is one of the cooperating agencies for this GMUG Forest Plan Revision Process.

We are including Frank Beum, Regional Forester of the USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region in these comments because it is our understanding from the Forest Service Manual FSM 1900 - PLANNING CHAPTER 1920 [ndash] LAND MANAGEMENT PLANNING1 Chapter 1921.04a [ndash] Regional Forester, that the Regional Forester is a Responsible Official for determining the species of conservation concern (SCC) and has the role to: "Identify, in coordination with the Responsible Official, the species of conservation concern (36 CFR 219.7(c)(3)) to be used by Responsible Officials for meeting the requirements of diversity of plant and animal communities (36 CFR 219.9(c)).2"

Ouray County, through the Board of County Commissioners, is providing comments on the proposed Draft Revised Land Management Plan (DRLMP) provided to the public in mid-August, with Volumes I and II of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). This document is specific to Species of Conservation Concern, and

Ouray County comprises 542 square miles; 54 percent is private land, 36 percent is U.S. Forest Service (USFS) administered by the GMUG Ouray Ranger District, and 7 percent is Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administered by the Uncompahgre Field Office. Our two municipalities Ouray and Ridgway, and 4,900 residents, provide gateway services to public lands users. Our Master Plan, adopted in 1999, provides: "The overall goal of the Ouray County Master Plan is to allow gradual, long-term population and economic growth in Ouray County in a manner that does not harm the County's irreplaceable scenic beauty, wildlife, air, and water resources, and other environmental qualities and that does not unduly burden the County's residents or its governments." Our Master Plan emphasizes the importance of agriculture, local government relationships, economic development, housing, natural resources, rural character, tourism, transportation and infrastructure, visual resources, and wildlife and plant habitats.

Federal public lands are important to our local economy and cultural values. The ecological integrity and sustainability of the Forest, which provides our source waters and headwaters, and opportunities for agriculture, pristine habitats, recreation, responsible mining, and ecosystem services, is vital to our local economy and well-being.

Our Master Plan recognizes the importance of the dramatic topography found here. "Ouray County contains some of the most unique and beautiful scenery in Colorado. The diversity of the landscape ranges from jagged mountain peaks and mesas to river valleys and irrigated fields. Preservation of this visual beauty is of utmost importance to the citizens of the County. The citizens want to be assured that future development will not hinder, impair or destroy Ouray County scenic beauty."

Ouray County has been actively involved in the GMUG forest plan revision process. We have participated in cooperating agency meetings and have provided written comments for cooperating agency and public feedback periods numerous times. Our comments dated 5/30/2019 and 7/23/2019 appear in the GMUG public reading room, but we have submitted many more comments since the beginning of the scoping and assessment phases. All of our previous comments are incorporated by reference into this comment letter. Because the August 2021 Draft Revised Land Management Plan (DRLMP) is very similar to the May 2021 cooperating agency draft DRLMP, all of our comments dated July 16, 2021, and related follow-up emails to the GMUG planning team are incorporated by reference here. The collaborative joint comment letter dated July 16, 2021, and signed by the entire Boards of County Commissioners for Ouray, Gunnison, San Miguel, and Hinsdale Counties is also incorporated by reference here.

1. The Species of Conservation Concern list should be amended to include RockyMountain Bighorn Sheep and other species. Expertise from State naturalresource agencies should be leveraged.A. The DRLMP in Appendix 9 appears to oversimplify the requirements and process for determining the Species of Conservation Concern. While Chapter 10 of the FSH is mentioned, Chapter 20 is not. Chapter 20 should be referenced.

FSH 1909.12 - LAND MANAGEMENT PLANNING HANDBOOK CHAPTER 20 [ndash] LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN3 21.22A provides that "The Regional Forester is the Responsible Official for identifying any species of conservation concern in a plan area."

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The Regional Forester has the authority and responsibility to:

1. Review the rationale and documentation for potential species of conservation concern provided by the Responsible Official (FSH 1909.12, ch. 10, sec. 12.52), and determining whether the best available scientific information indicates:

1. That the species is native and known to occur in the plan area, and
2. There is a substantial concern about the species' capability to persist over the long term in the plan area based on the guidance of FSH 1909.12, chapter 10, section 12.52c.

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1. Based on the review of the potential species of conservation concern, identify the species of conservation concern in coordination with the Responsible Official for the plan area. This authority to identify species of conservation concern may not be delegated.
2. Identify species of conservation concern early enough to expedite the planning process.
3. Leverage expertise of the public and local, State, Tribal, and other Federal natural resource agencies, for identifying species of conservation concern.
4. Engage the public and invite public input when identifying species of conservation concern, as part of the public participation strategy (FSH 1909.12, ch. 40, sec. 42).
5. Document the rationale for the selection of species of conservation concern.
6. Inform the Responsible Official and the public of the identified species of conservation concern.
7. Identify any species of conservation concern at times outside the planning process as appropriate.

FSH 1909.12 - LAND MANAGEMENT PLANNING HANDBOOK CHAPTER 20 [ndash] LAND MANAGEMENT

PLAN4 21.22A further provides in three separate places that either the Regional Forester or Responsible Official should "Leverage expertise of the public and local, State, Tribal, and other Federal natural resource agencies."

B. The Regional Forester and Responsible Official should leverage the expertise of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Colorado Division of Wildlife (CPW) which has been provided to GMUG throughout the plan revision process, including early in the assessment phase. Ouray County supports CPW Comments- List of Species of Conservation Concern for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests dated June 28, 2021 (attached as Appendix A), documenting that several species meet the SCC selection criteria in Chapter 10 of the Planning Handbook, especially the Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep.

C. The Regional Forester and Responsible Official should consider FSH 1909.12 - LAND MANAGEMENT PLANNING HANDBOOK CHAPTER 10 [ndash] THE ASSESSMENTS 12.52c5 satisfied by the information

provided by CPW and augmented by many other entities with expertise and knowledge of these wildlife species, especially the Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep.

D. Appendix 9 of the DLRMP oversimplifies Chapter 10 of the FSH. FSH 1909.12 - LAND MANAGEMENT PLANNING HANDBOOK CHAPTER 10 [ndash] THE ASSESSMENTS 12.52d says that first, only species native to, and known to occur in, the plan area are to be considered. Next, species with status ranks of G/T1 or G/T2 on the NatureServe ranking system must be considered.

12.52d [ndash] Species to Consider when Identifying Potential Species of Conservation Concern

1. When identifying potential species of conservation concern, the Responsible Official shall consider only species native to, and known to occur in, the plan area.
2.
Species in the following categories must be considered:

1. Species with status ranks of G/T1 or G/T2 on the NatureServe ranking system. See exhibit 01 for description of NatureServe Conservation Status Ranks.

Note: Species with NatureServe G/T1 or G/T2 status ranks are expected to be included unless it can be demonstrated and documented that known threats for these species, such as those threats listed for the species by NatureServe, are not currently present or relevant in the plan area.

b. Species that were removed within the past 5 years from the Federal list of threatened or endangered species, and other delisted species that the regulatory agency still monitors.

E. Appendix 9 of the DLRMP oversimplifies Chapter 10 of the FSH. It does not mention the whole of 12.52d.3, which says:

Species in the following categories should be considered:

1. Species with status ranks of G/T3 or S1 or S2 on the NatureServe ranking system. See exhibit 01 for description of NatureServe Conservation Status Ranks.
2. Species listed as threatened or endangered by relevant States, federally recognized Tribes, or Alaska Native Corporations.
3. Species identified by Federal, State, federally recognized Tribes, or Alaska Native Corporations as a high priority for conservation.
4. Species identified as species of conservation concern in adjoining National Forest System plan areas (including plan areas across regional boundaries).
5. Species that have been petitioned for Federal listing and for which a positive "90-day finding" has been made.
6. Species for which the best available scientific information indicates there is local conservation concern about the species' capability to persist over the long-term in the plan area due to:

1. Significant threats, caused by stressors on and off the plan area, to populations or the ecological conditions they depend upon (habitat). These threats include climate change.

2. Declining trends in populations or habitat in the plan area.
3. Restricted ranges (with corresponding narrow endemics, disjunct populations, or species at the edge of their range).
4. Low population numbers or restricted ecological conditions (habitat) within the plan area.

12.52d.3.f does NOT use punctuation or the word "and" to indicate that all four of the "indicators" listed in 12.52d.3.f.(1-4) have to be met, nor does a species have to match all six categories in in 12.52d.3.a through in 12.52d.3.f to be designated as a species of conservation concern. In the case of the Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep, the species also is qualified by category 12.52d.3.d above because it is listed as a species of conservation concern in the Rio Grande National Forest Land Management Plan and Volume 1 of its FEIS6. The Regional Forester and Responsible Official for the Rio Grande National Forest Land Management Plan and FEIS did not require 12.52d.3.f.(1-4) all to be met to qualify as a Species of Conservation Concern. The GMUG National Forest is one of the largest in the nation, so where a species' range (12.52.d.3.f.(3)) intersects the GMUG is due to political and not scientific boundaries. Species cannot control what parts of their ranges intersect what parts of national forest boundaries.

F. Ouray County respectfully requests the Regional Forester and Responsible Official to reconsider their requirement that all four indicators in FSH 1909.12.52d.3.f.(1-4) be met for a species to be considered a species of conservation concern in the GMUG LRMP and EIS. We request that when there is expertise from Colorado natural resource agencies like CPW and Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP) providing the best available science that native species are present and have substantial concerns with a scientific basis, that the species be identified as Species of Conservation Concern. Especially if 2 or 3 of the indicators in FSH 1909.12.52d.3.f.(1-4) are met, which is similar to how we understand Rio Grande National Forest's Plan and SCC list was developed. The risk of relying on the absence of indicator FSH 1909.12.52d.3.f(3) while there is evidence of significant threats, declining trends or habitat, low population numbers or viability, and extreme vulnerability at the GMUG project level is severe, especially with climate change and increasing demand for multiple uses on the forest.

G. Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep should be included as a Species of Conservation Concern.
1. Scientific documentation on Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep (RMBS) has been provided to GMUG by CPW, and several of our citizens, including Robyn Cascade of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness and Jennifer Cram. The evidence is that they are vulnerable to disease and habitat fragmentation. Ouray County and the GMUG Ouray Ranger District intersects the Tier 1 herd called RBS-21 by CPW.
2. Herds without CPW Tier designations can be just as vulnerable and genetically pure as Tier 1 herds. Our understanding is that herds without a specific management plan have not yet been assigned a Tier, but plans are being developed.
3. CPW has designated RMBS as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) in Colorado's State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP 2015)7. The RMBS is the only ungulate listed as an SGCN. The SWAP states that the highest priority threat to RMBS is pathogen transmission by livestock and that the best protection is to maintain total spatial and temporal separation of domestic sheep from RMBS. CPW says it has to manage RBS-21 for stable population size and distribution, forgoing management to increase the population or utilize significant portions of its suitable habitat due to risks of contact with domestic allotments.8 CPW provides information about documented contacts between RMBS and domestic sheep that required euthanasia of the RMBS to protect the remainder of their herd from a major disease die-off. CPW has documented respiratory disease susceptibility and risk through chronic or sporadic suppressed lamb recruitment, bighorn mortalities from respiratory disease after contact with domestic sheep, and all-age die-off events. CPW has documented dozens of stray domestic sheep occurrences, bighorn foray events, and several comingling events. CPW maintains that documented bighorn

foray events support a 35 km buffered analysis area. CPW supports allowing inter-herd movements of bighorn to take place naturally and states that manual population augmentation will not be occurring in the near future. CPW considers unreported and undetected contact events to be highly probably due to the presence of stray domestic sheep, foraying bighorn behavior, contact events, and vast, rugged, and remote terrain characteristics. CPW considers it conceivable that a major disease die-off event could indeed influence the entire meta-population.
4. Ouray County citizen Jennifer Cram's November 2021 comments to GMUG on this DLRMP and DEIS describe overlaps between the Ruffner and Bear Creek domestic grazing allotment boundaries and CPW's summer bighorn sheep range. iNaturalist compiles citizen-scientist observations of bighorn and domestic sheep encounters, which show many on the Bear Creek drainage in Ouray County. The latest Mountain Studies Institute annual report, which summarizes the iNaturalist sheep observations, includes a mention of an RMBS near domestic sheep on 7/20/2020 on the Ruffner allotment.9[9 Mountain Studies Institute. (March 3, 2021). 2020 Colorado Bighorn Sheep Monitoring Report [Report]. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53bc5871e4b095b6a42949b4/t/60409b5b4ed0cf0c581c69d7/1614846813445/Colo rado+Bighorn+Sheep+Monitoring+Report+2020.pdf]
5. RBS-21 intersects the Rio Grande National Forest, where the 2020 Rio Grande National Forest Land Management Plan and Volume 1 of its FEIS10 name the RMBS as an SCC, and the GMUG National Forest, where the DLRMP and DEIS do not. There is no change in vulnerability to disease or habitat fragmentation for this herd when it crosses the USDA USFS's administrative boundaries. RMBS meets at least 3 of the 4 indicators in 12.52d.3.f.(1- 4) and several other categories listed in FSH 1909.12.52d.3.
6. STND-SPEC-13: this separation requirement must remain a standard, but DLRMP and DEIS components should be strengthened to ensure separation between domestic and RMBS.
7. GDL-SPEC-14: please change this guideline to a standard. Please change "Should" to "Must."

H. Ouray County BOCC supports the comments submitted by the Colorado Native Plant Society dated November 18, 202111, regarding sensitive and globally or state imperiled plant species that should be included as Species of Conservation Concern.
a. Please see Attachment B to this letter for the Species of Conservation Concern comments prepared by Botanist Peggy Lyon, CNHP Botanist, Colorado Native Plant Society, Education Leader; Great Old Broads for Wilderness, Northern San Juan Broad Band; Gay Austin, Retired Botanist and Rangeland Management Specialist with USDA Forest Service & BLM, Colorado Native Plant Society.

Thank you for considering our comments that further consultation with State agencies and refinement of the Species of Conservation Concern is needed. We are concerned about omissions of white-tailed ptarmigan, black swift, pinyon jay, Rocky Mountain and Desert Big Horn Sheep, Townsend Big-eared bat, hoary bat, and little brown bat. We are concerned about the omissions of state and globally imperiled species. We will continue to work with the GMUG collaboratively and productively throughout the rest of the planning process. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions about our comments.

Respectfully submitted,

Ben Tisdel, Chair

Lynn M. Padgett, Vice-Chair

Jake Niece, Member

Attachments:

[THE FOLLOWING ATTACHMENTS ARE NOT REPEATED HERE DUE TO BEING CODED WITH THEIR ORIGINAL SUBMISSION BY ORIGINAL AUTHORS].

1. Appendix A: CPW Comments- List of Species of Conservation Concern for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests dated June 28, 2021.
2. Appendix B: Comments submitted by the Colorado Native Plant Society dated November 18, 2021, regarding sensitive and globally or state imperiled plant species that should be included as Species of Conservation Concern.

cc. John Whitney, Western Slope Regional Director, U.S. Senator Michael F. Bennet; Helen Katich, Southwest Regional Representative, U.S. Senator John Hickenlooper