Data Submitted (UTC 11): 9/27/2024 6:00:00 AM
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Comments: 710 10th Street, Suite 200Golden, CO 80401September 15, 2024USDA-Forest Service Southwest Region ATTN: Objection Reviewing Officer 333 Broadway Blvd. SEAlbuquerque, NM 87102To Whom It May Concern,Thank you for the opportunity to be involved in the development of the Gila National Forest Land Management Plan. We are happy to be involved in this process and to help Gila National Forest strive for the highest quality outcome possible.Representing approximately 5,000 members nationwide, the Continental Divide Trail Coalition (CDTC) is the 501(c)(3) national nonprofit organization formed in 2012 to work with the federal land management agencies to complete, promote, and protect the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDNST), which was designated by Congress in 1978. This 3,100-mile trail follows the Continental Divide and traverses nationally significant scenic terrain and areas rich in the heritage and life of the Rocky Mountain West.The CDNST passes through Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico, and is administered by the U.S. Forest Service in cooperation with the NPS, BLM, and Tribal, state, and local governments, as well as numerous partner groups including the CDTC. In May 2014, CDTC signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish our role as a national organization working in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service on behalf of the CDNST. To date, CDTC has been successful in coordinating more than 350,000 hours of volunteer stewardship to maintain and improve the CDNST, building positive relationships with federal land managers and local trail-focused groups, organizing special events to help educate the public about the CDNST, implementing Trail Adopter and Gateway Community programs, and encouraging Congress to continue to appropriate funding for the CDNST in the Forest Service budget.BackgroundThe Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan was approved by the U.S. Forest Service and set forth as policy in 2009. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan establishes that the nature and purposes of the CDNST are [ldquo]to provide high-quality, scenic and primitive hiking and horseback riding opportunities and to conserve natural, historic and cultural resources along the CDNST corridor.[rdquo] This overarching policy direction serves to implement Congress[rsquo]s direction in the National Trails System Act, and should be incorporated into planning direction and project proposal evaluation. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan also incorporates FSM 2353.42 and 2353.44b, which provide guidance on the management of the CDNST.Upon review of the Gila National Forest Land Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement, the Continental Divide Trail Coalition offers the following feedback:Statement of ObjectionWith these factors in mind, and upon review of the Environmental Impact Statement and Land Management Plan for the Gila National Forest, the Continental Divide Trail Coalition is submitting the following objections regarding the Gila National Forest Plan and associated documents. The relevant objections are as follows:Objection 01: The length-of-stay limit established in the plan risks being inconsistent with the intent of guidelines for management of the CDNST established in the CDNST Comprehensive Plan.Objection 02: Some CDNST plan components described in the LMP do not align with the intended nature and purposes of the CDNST as established in the CDNST Comprehensive Plan, guided by the National Trails Act. Specifically, the stated Standards and Objectives for the CDNST do not align with the CDNST Comprehensive Plan, which is the established management plan for the trail under which all Forest Service plan components should align.Objection 03: The description provided in the LMP does not sufficiently describe the CDNST gap in the Burro Mountains or provide enough information to ensure that trail relocation will occur as planned in this area. Maps of the Burro Mountains identify the ROS Class for the area as motorized, but the CDNST in this area is not open to motorized use, a conflict that is not addressed or resolved in the LMP.Objection 04: CDTC urges Gila National Forest to inventory cultural resources in the CDNST corridor to ensure that they are adequately protected.Objection 05: Significant details are missing regarding motorized and mechanized use of the CDNST in the Gila National Forest, which will need to be resolved in the Sustainable Outdoor Recreation Action Plan development process.Standing: CDTC has standing as we submitted substantive comments on the Gila National Forest Draft Land Management Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement.Issue and Statement of Explanation: CDTC Objection 1: The LMP establishes a restrictive length-of-stay limit throughout Gila National Forest that will create stark challenges for CDNST

through-hikers. The length-of-stay limit is as follows:[ldquo]The default length-of-stay limit will be 14 cumulative days within a 30-day period unless the forest supervisor or delegated agent grants an exception. Exceptions must be documented in writing and granted on a case-by-case basis to individuals or groups that agree to mitigation terms and demonstrate a high proficiency for Leave No Trace ethics.[rdquo]Two primary justifications are offered for this length-of-stay limit, neither of which present any reason that CDNST thru hikers cannot be categorically excepted from this rule.The first justification offered for the stay limit is that it is [ldquo]the same as it has been in recent years.[rdquo] However, the current length-of-stay limit listed on the Gila National Forest website states that [ldquo]the Gila National Forest has a 14-day stay limit, in any 30 day period, on all camping.[rdquo] The newly proposed length-of-stay limit includes additional language that makes it much more restrictive, particularly the addition of the word [ldquo]cumulative.[rdquo] This additional word creates conditions under which CDNST thru hikers who did not have an exception from the rule would need to complete the entire Gila National Forest portion of the CDNST in 14 nights or camp outside of the forest for any remaining nights.The second justification offered for the rule is that it promotes consistency across national forests in the Southwest Region. However, as the rule is written, it is more restrictive than the length-of-stay limits at other national forests in New Mexico. Cibola, Santa Fe, and Carson National Forests do not include the word [ldquo]cumulative[rdquo] in their length-of-stay limits, which, as discussed above, fundamentally alters the conditions created by the length-of-stay limit.Additionally, establishment of length-of-stay limits and permit requirements that differ across USFS units along the length of the CDNST could quickly lead to a patchwork of restrictions that will be unduly burdensome for through-hikers to navigate. Due to the length of the CDNST through GNF, CDNST thru-hikers will have little option but to obtain an exception from the length-of-stay limit, and as such the length-of-stay limit will function as a de-facto permitting system for CDNST through-hikers to pass through GNF. The CDNST was created for the purpose of providing high-quality recreational experiences, which may be compromised by the length-of-stay limit, as it will negatively impact the sense of connection that is sought after by many through-hikers. Regarding administration and coordination of permits, the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan establishes the following policy regarding permitting: [ldquo]Use by long distance trekkers and commercial guides and outfitters will be facilitated by the development of a coordinated system of issuing and honoring use permits on an interagency basis. Permit requirements should be as uniform and concise as practicable.[rdquo] In establishing this length-of-stay limit and requiring CDNST thru hikers to obtain an exception, GNF risks being inconsistent with the intent for and comprehensive management of the CDNST as established in the CDNST Comprehensive Plan.The official route of the CDNST through Gila National Forest is nearly 250 miles, often through challenging terrain. A thru hiker attempting to cover this distance in fourteen nights may be forced to hike longer distances than they would otherwise choose to hike, increasing the risk of injury or other emergency situations. Alternatively, the length-of-stay limit may inadvertently encourage thru hikers to take shorter unofficial [ldquo]alternate[rdquo] routes through GNF in an effort to pass through GNF in fourteen nights. Because they are not congressionally designated trails, these alternate routes do not have the same protections and maintenance resources as the official CDNST route. Therefore, increased use of these alternate routes may lead to degradation of ecosystems and water sources, with few resources available to remedy these issues.In response to CDTC[rsquo]s comments in previous steps of the LMP development process, which expressed concern over the impact of the length-of-stay limit on CDNST through-hikers, Gila National Forest Staff wrote [ldquo]CDNST thru hikers traveling through GNF are not being targeted.[rdquo] In an effort to ensure that our protest was relevant and substantive, CDTC then reached out toGNF staff for more clarity regarding the intention behind the rule, to which we were directed back to the LMP and not provided with any additional information with which to inform our comments. While the rule may not have been initially directed at CDNST through-hikers, it nonetheless has the impact of singling them out and substantially impacting them.FEIS, Volume 1, Page 351 states:[ldquo]Through-hikers on the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail need more than 14 days to traverse the length of the trail in the forest. It may take a strong hiker 16 days just to cross the wilderness portion of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail. This user group is intent on covering distance each day and generally demonstrates a proficiency for Leave No Trace[reg] ethics. Through-hikers could be specifically excepted from the closure order with written permission. Unfortunately, the way the direction is written, it would require each individual or group of hikers to request written permission and forest leadership and staff time to consider and issue written permission. This could be a substantial workload for all involved

considering the volume of through-hikers the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail attracts each year.[rdquo]Solution: The length-of-stay limit should be rewritten to exempt all CDNST through-hikers within the text of the LMP.CDTC maintains a hiker hangtag program, through which CDNST through-hikers register their hike with the CDTC, demonstrate an understanding of Leave No Trace principles, and receive a tag to hang on their pack to identify them as a registered hiker. As the above quote from the FEIS recognizes, CDNST through-hikers (whether they register their hike through the CDTC hangtag program or not) generally demonstrate a proficiency for Leave No Trace Ethics and are crossing GNF with a focus on their through-hike, not a focus on lingering in one location (which could cause degradation of that specific location). Providing an exception to all CDNST through-hikers is well within the spirit of the length-of-stay limit, would reduce work for GNF staff, and would align GNF with other USFS units along the CDNST.Violations of Law, Regulation, or Policy: 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive PlanIssue and Statement of Explanation: CDTC Objection 2:A. Standard 1: FSM 2353.44b states that [ldquo]the land management plan for an administrative unit through which the CDNST passes must provide for the nature and purposes of the CDNST.[rdquo] The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan establishes that the nature and purposes of the CDNST are to [ldquo]provide for high-quality scenic, primitive hiking and horseback riding opportunities and to conserve natural, historic, and cultural resources along the CDNST corridor.[rdquo] Standard 1, as it is currently written, is too permissive of extractive activities within the trail corridor to effectively protect the nature and purposes of the CDNST.Currently, Standard 1 for the CDNST reads [ldquo]No surface occupancy for geothermal leasing activities will be authorized within the corridor.[rdquo] The USFS Land Management Plan Requirements and Recommended Plan Components for the CDNST recommends that this standard read [ldquo]No surface occupancy for oil and gas or geothermal energy leasing activities shall occur within the CDNST corridor.[rdquo] Furthermore, oil and gas leasing is not discussed in any of the Guidelines established for management of the CDNST. In failing to mention oil and gas, the GNF LMP leaves the CNDST corridor highly vulnerable to extractive activities and ancillary development (such as road building) that could easily interfere with the ROS Classification of this stretch of the CDNST.Solution: Standard 1 should be rewritten to read: [ldquo]No surface occupancy for oil and gas or geothermal energy leasing activities occur within the CDNST corridor.[rdquo]Violations of Law, Regulation, or Policy: 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan, FSM 2353.44bB. Regional Consistency in Standards: Consistent standards and guidelines for the CDNST in nearby land management units is critical to seamless management of the CDNST as a whole. Cibola and Santa Fe National Forests both include the following standard for the CDNST in their most recent LMPs (both developed in 2022): [ldquo]Management of the CDNST must comply with the most recent version of the 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan. Best available science can be used in lieu of the comprehensive plan if the plan is out-of-date with science.[rdquo] In addition to ensuring that all management decisions made about the CDNST are compliant with the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan, this standard also ensures that all plans developed regarding the CDNST meet the requirement of the 2012 Forest Planning Rule to utilize the best available science.Solution: In order to promote regional consistency and the use of best available science, the following standard should be added to the LMP: [ldquo]Management of the CDNST must comply with the most recent version of the 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan. Best available science can be used in lieu of the comprehensive plan if the plan is out-of-date with science.[rdquo]Violations of Law, Regulation, or Policy: 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan, FSM 2353.44bC. Objectives: The sole objective established for the CDNST ([ldquo]Restore or relocate at least 5 miles of the CDNST within 5 years of plan approval, and every 5-year period thereafter until desired conditions are achieved.[rdquo]) is not sufficiently ambitious. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan states that the CDNST should be located on a road [ldquo]only where it is primitive and offers recreational opportunities comparable to those provided by a trail with a Designed Use of Pack and Saddle Stock.[rdquo]Various sections in the LMP and the FEIS note that approximately 33 miles of the CDNST in GNF needs relocation away from motorized routes. Page 373 of the FEIS notes that motorized use within these locations is [ldquo]not in alignment with trail objectives[rdquo] and is [ldquo]detrimental to the experiences of hikers and horseback riders.[rdquo] At the rate established in the objective, it could take over 30 years to relocate the CDNST off of motorized routes in GNF. As the site of one of the major gaps in the CDNST (the Mangas Valley Gap, which requires through-hikers to walk for 19 miles along US Highway 180), GNF must

commit to and prioritize a more ambitious plan for relocating the CDNST off of motorized routes.The established objective for management of the CDNST along motorized routes does not strive for compliance with the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan. Location of the CDNST on motorized routes, and particularly on highways, is not an inevitability of the trail. Rather, it is a necessary condition in some locations, but in such locations it should always be a priority to relocate the trail to bring it closer to the nature and purposes of the CDNST. Furthermore, this unambitious goal is at odds with other mentions in the plan of the very successful co-stewardship relationship between CDTC and GNF, which has enabled successful trail projects in the past and could be utilized to achieve a more ambitious goal.Solution: A much more ambitious objective for management of the CDNST should be established. CDTC requests that the objective be amended to: [ldquo]Relocate all portions of the CDNST on Gilan National Forest off of motorized routes within the next five years.[rdquo]Violations of Law, Regulation, or Policy: 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive PlanIssue and Statement of Explanation: CDTC Objection 3:A. CDNST Reroute in the Burro Mountains: Page 259 of the LMP discusses the CDNST and includes the following language: [ldquo]Forest leadership and staff continue to identify and pursue opportunities to acquire the necessary rights-of-way to address management issues, especially the gap between the Burro Mountains and the rest of the forest.[rdquo] CDTC appreciates the inclusion of this line and Gila National Forest[rsquo]s collaborative efforts with CDTC to close this gap. However, the plan does not mention the CDT Optimal Location Review document, which establishes best practices for CDNST reroute projects.CDTC also appreciates that the planned location of the CDNST is marked on Figure 11 in Appendix B of the Land Management Plan. However, the specific locations reflected in this map are not discussed anywhere in the text of the LMP and the map is not referenced. Furthermore, acquiring land or rights-of-way within or adjacent to the CDNST corridor is not listed as a Management Approach for the CDNST. This management approach will be crucial to relocating the portion of the CDNST that currently follows US Highway 180, bringing that portion of the CDNST into closer alignment with its nature and purpose.Solution: CDTC requests that the LMP specifically cite and include the CDT Optimal Location Review document, which establishes the best practices for relocating the CDNST, to ensure these guidelines are utilized in the Burro Mountains reroute project.CDTC requests that the proposed CDNST alignment that is marked on Figure 11 in Appendix B of the Land Management Plan also be mentioned in the text of the LMP, in order to facilitate USFS acquisition of land or easements to achieve this relocation.CDTC also requests that discussion of acquiring land or rights-of-way within or adjacent to the CDNST corridor be added to the section on Management Approaches for the CDNST.Violations of Law, Regulation, or Policy: 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive PlanB. ROS Classification: On Figure 16 in Appendix B of the Land Management Plan, the Desired Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Setting for much of the Burro Mountains is identified as semi-primitive motorized on and around the CDNST. This is not a motorized portion of the CDNST. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan states that where possible, the CDNST should be located in primitive orsemi-primitive non-motorized ROS classes, provided that the CDNST may have to intermittently travel through more developed ROS classes in order to provide for continuous travel.Solution: If the Burro Mountains are designated as semi-primitive motorized on the ROS spectrum, special attention must be given to ensuring that the CDNST corridor in this area is managed to provide for the nature and purposes of the CDNST. In particular, GNF staff must be conscious that within semi-primitive motorized ROS classes, the CDNST itself is not de-facto open to motorized recreation, and primitive roads or motorized routes may access the trail no more frequently than one-half mile intervals and be no closer than one-half mile from the trail.Violations of Law, Regulation, or Policy: 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive PlanIssue and Statement of Explanation: CDTC Objection 4: One purpose of the CDNST established in the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan is to protect cultural resources within the CDNST corridor. CDTC knows that as CDNST use increases, cultural resources along the trail must be properly identified and protected to ensure that CDNST users are not impacting historical and cultural resources.Solution: CDTC requests that Gila National Forest conduct surveys of cultural resources in Gila National Forest, both within and outside of the CDNST corridor, and undertake robust tribal consultation to ensure that all locations with cultural significance are correctly identified and protected.Violations of Law, Regulation, or Policy: 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive PlanIssue and Statement of Explanation: CDTC Objection 5: FSM 2353.44b.2.c requires that unit plans for the CDNST [ldquo]establish the Trail Class, Managed Uses, Designed

Use, and DesignParameters for the segments of the CDNST that traverse that unit and identify uses that are prohibited on the segments of the CDNST that traverse that unit.[rdquo] CDTC believes that the discussion of motorized use of the CDNST on page 256 of the LMP is in accordance with the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan but is unnecessarily confusing. Similarly, discussion of mountain biking on the CDNST throughout the LMP and FEIS is challenging to understand. CDTC recognizes that development of the Sustainable Outdoor Recreation Action Plan is an opportunity to clarify where motorized and mechanized use of the CDNST is appropriate.Solution: CDTC requests that GNF staff ensure that the language used in that planning process accurately and clearly reflects section six of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan, which outlines the limited situations in which motorized and mechanized use of the CDNST is authorized.Beyond simply meeting the minimum standards, CDTC encourages Gila National Forest to consider that, even where it[rsquo]s permissible, motorized and mechanized use can have significant adverse effects on the nature and purposes of the CDNST. Gila National Forest staff should use the outdoor recreation and trails strategy development processes to consider opportunities to relocate motorized use off of the CDNST, or relocate the CDNST off of motorized routes.Violations of Law, Regulation, or Policy: 2009 Continental Divide National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan, FSM 2353.44bConclusionCDTC commends Gila National Forest staff for recognizing shortcomings in public engagement in the development of the previous sustainable outdoor recreation action plan and committing to robust public involvement throughout the update process. CDTC requests to be involved in all steps of this development process, and in particular in the development of the sustainable trails strategy. CDTC values the relationship we have built with Gila National Forest and looks forward to the opportunity to work together to develop trails and outdoor recreation strategies that promote optimal outcomes for the CDNST.CDTC appreciates the opportunities for public engagement throughout the Gila National Forest planning process. We strongly urge Gila National Forest staff to direct attention towards the biological diversity concerns presented by our partners throughout this planning process.We look forward to continuing to work with Gila National Forest staff and ensuring that the CDNST remains a high quality recreational and scenic resource across the Gila National Forest. Questions or follow up requests may be sent via email to Claire Cutler, CDTC Trail Policy Specialist at ccutler@cdtcoalition.org or by phone at 303-996-2759.Sincerely,Teresa Ana MartinezExecutive DirectorContinental Divide Trail Coalition