



COLORADO

Parks and Wildlife

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Colorado Parks and Wildlife State Trails Program- Non-Motorized Grant Cycle 2020-2021 Southwest Region Grant Application Review

There are a total of thirteen (13) Non-Motorized grant applications within the Southwest Region requesting funding from the State Trails Program for the 2020-2021 process. These applications were sent to the CPW Area Field Staff (Area Wildlife Managers, District Wildlife Managers, and Biologists) for review and comment. In addition, the comments were reviewed and discussed by SW Region Staff including Regional Manager, Cory Chick, Deputy Regional Manager, Heath Kehm, Regional Land Use Coordinator, Brian Magee, and Regional Trails Coordinator, Josh Stoudt.

The background information provided below is not intended to be comprehensive discussion on the best available science regarding trail development, trail use, and the subsequent impacts to wildlife. It is, rather, a brief overview of the wildlife management issues CPW Staff considers when evaluating the individual trail grant proposals with the intent to inform and educate the Statewide Trail Committee members. In addition, the individual grant comments and CPW Staff recommendations are detailed below.

Background information on trail related impacts to wildlife

Overall, the public and trail users are poorly informed on the potential impacts of non-motorized trails on wildlife, and how those impacts can manifest themselves into complex management issues for CPW. A recent study found that approximately 50% of recreationists felt that recreation was not having a negative effect on wildlife. Furthermore, recreationists tend to blame other recreation groups for adverse impacts to wildlife rather than themselves (Taylor and Knight 2005).

Big Game winter habitats and migratory corridors are known to be limiting factors on big game populations in western Colorado and other high mountain areas of the western United States (Sawyer et al. 2009, Bishop et al. 2009, Bartman et al. 1992). The protection and conservation of mule deer and elk winter range habitat is one of the foremost management objectives for CPW. These habitats are important for a variety of reasons, including:

1. Deer and elk tend to concentrate at lower elevations during winter months as snow accumulates at higher elevations.
2. Mule deer and elk typically display strong site fidelity to winter range, preferring to use the same areas year-after-year. CPW maps these areas as winter range, severe winter range and winter concentration areas for elk and deer.
3. Winter habitats for big game provide essential forage and thermal cover to help mule deer and elk minimize energy expenditure. Mule deer and elk are in a nutritional negative energy balance during the winter months, making energy conservation critical for calf and fawn survival and adult female reproductive fitness.



Trail Use Impacts

Outdoor recreation associated with trail influence a variety of wildlife species in multiple ways. Impacts to wildlife from trail use are often negative and are associated with increased direct disturbance and displacement from optimal habitat due to the avoidance of human activities (Larson et al 2016). Elk and deer increase their daily activity levels and movements in the presence of mountain biking and hiking which reduces the time spent feeding and resting (Naylor et al 2009, Wisdom et al. 2004). This increased energy demand occurs simultaneously with decreased forage intake and displacement to areas with poorer quality forage. The net result is a decrease in body condition, which affects individual health, survival and reproduction (Bender et al 2008). Higher energy demand effectively decreases the carrying capacity of an area (Taylor and Knight 2003) and increases stress on individual animals. Many wildlife species also avoid areas of human disturbance completely, which decreases the amount of available habitat (Taylor and Knight 2003). Elk and deer generally do not become habituated to hiking or mountain biking (Wisdom et al. 2004, Wisdom et al 2018, Taylor and Knight 2003). Cumulatively, this leads to both immediate and long-term effects on individual animals and populations by decreasing the available energy for winter survival, growth, and reproduction, reducing the fitness of wildlife, and by displacing wildlife into marginal habitats (Miller et al 2001, Anderson 1995).

There is a large body of evidence documenting displacement of big game from roads and trails (including non-motorized trails) and a decline in habitat effectiveness from big game as road and trail densities increase (Wisdom et al. 2018, Preisler et al. 2013, Sawyer et al., 2013, WAFWA 2013, Rogala et al. 2011, Wilber et al. 2008, Rowland et al. 2005, Rowland et al. 2000, Phillips and Alldredge 2000). The presence of a dog with a recreationist is likely to result in a greater area of negative influence from trail use, including amplified avoidance distances of mule deer movements (Miller et al 2001).

2020-2021 Non-Motorized Grant Comments: The following summary are grant specific comments received from CPW Wildlife staff.

No wildlife specific comments were received on the following applications:

- #11 Eastern San Luis Valley Trails Expansion
- #12 Naturita Town Park Perimeter Trail
- #34 Elk Creek- Colorado Trail Avalanches
- #35 Ouray Ranger District Trail Maintenance
- #36 Statewide 14er Trail Maintenance Project (2021-2022)
- #48 Pioneers Redefined- West End Trails Master Plan Phase 2
- #49 Nature Connection Pathways: Backyards to Backcountry
- #50 Riparian Park to Refuge Trails Master Plan

Wildlife specific comments on the following applications:

#47 Rio Grande Southern Dolores Place Connection: Clearing or other disturbance of willows, cottonwoods, alder and other woody vegetation in the riparian zone should be avoided May 15th -July 15th to avoid disturbance or destruction of nests.

#33 Bear Creek Trail Maintenance Project: Clearing or other disturbance of willows, cottonwoods, alder and other woody vegetation in the riparian zone should be avoided May 15th – July 15th to avoid disturbance or destruction of nests.

#51 GMUG Snow Rangers: The geographic area of this grant request covers both the Northwest and Southwest Regions. CPW would like to work with the Snow Ranger Program to address specific program educational needs, such as moose sightings and avoiding moose conflicts.

Applications with outstanding and unresolved concerns:

#6 Shavano Gateway Recreation Area Electric Hills Trails: Grant #6 requests funding for the construction of new non-motorized trails on BLM lands near Montrose. COPMOBA applied for and obtained a State Trails planning grant in 2017-2018 to identify opportunities for expanded non-motorized trail development. All of the areas that COPMOBA identified are within critical winter ranges for deer and elk. CPW staff worked diligently with COPMOBA to develop the Uncompaghere Single Track Plan (US Plan) to address the wildlife related issues with expanded trail networks and use. The US Plan identifies avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures necessary to ensure that the area remains functional wildlife habitat while accommodating new trail development.

Electric Hills is one of several areas identified in the US Plan. BLM approved the Electric Hills trails project in the fall of 2019 with modifications. During our review of the grant request, we discovered several discrepancies between the US Plan and the BLM approved trail system. CPW engaged with COPMOBA and BLM to discuss the details of these changes. As it currently exists the Electric Hills trail system is out of compliance with the US Plan that was developed collaboratively with CPW and will not sufficiently protect wildlife resources once full trail development is realized. All parties have a strong desire to resolve these discrepancies for the benefit of wildlife and recreation users. We believe that this can and will be accomplished.

To that end, we recommend that this grant be funded conditional to COPMOBA, BLM, and CPW resolving the discrepancies and bringing the Electric Hills project back into compliance with the US Plan. These issues include:

- Evaluating and addressing the comprehensive seasonal wildlife closures to all trail users;
- Preparing and adopting a route reclamation and habitat improvement operational plan;
- Evaluating and accounting for the increased mileages within the Electric Hills area and the overall mileages and density within US Plan.

On its face, it could be easy to conclude that funding for this project should not occur at this time. However, we believe that this approach will not help proactively resolve the discrepancies between BLM's approved trails project and the US Plan. Thus, CPW recommends that this grant or a modified version of this grant be conditionally approved with final funding released by CPW upon satisfaction of the conditions described above.

#46 CDTC Muddy Pass & Cochetopa Hills Project Planning: These comments apply only to the Cochetopa Hills portion of CDTC's application. For future applications, we would encourage applicants to submit separate applications when proposed projects span significantly disparate geographic areas and materially different deliverables.

This grant request is to fund facilitated communications between trail advocates and stakeholders to create a plan with alternatives for the USFS to review regarding the Cochetopa Hills realignment of the existing Continental Divide Trail (CDT). An environmental assessment (EA) was completed for the project in 2013 by the USFS. The EA analyzed various alternatives, one alternative was selected, decision made, and approved. However, due to procedural matters internal to the USFS the Decision was subsequently withdrawn and project construction has not taken place. This project was and continues to be controversial between various user groups and interested stakeholders.

The USFS is currently completing a supplemental information report to determine if the NEPA analysis conducted in 2013 is still valid for the CDT reroute. CPW provided extensive comments on the CDT realignment project dating back as early as 2010. CPW's main concerns continue to be direct loss of habitat, fragmentation of habitat, and changes in habitat effectiveness and wildlife use resulting from new trail construction and increasing use of the CDT.

The USFS is not a party to this grant-funding application, nor has the USFS informed CPW that they are supportive of funding a decision support process on the USFS's behalf. Therefore, the grant request would potentially fund an unsolicited and duplicative process that could be in direct conflict with the USFS review process or even their subsequent decision. CPW will continue to engage with the USFS in providing the most up to date information and data for their supplemental EA report, and their existing process to evaluate and analyze potential impacts of the CDT reroute. At this time, utilizing the existing infrastructure in the Cochetopa Hills will continue to accommodate a diverse trail user experience, while preserving the current wildlife values along undeveloped portions of the Continental Divide.

This request for funding is out of step and unnecessary. In our view, these funds could be put to better use and we recommend not award funding for this request at this time.

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