



COLORADO

Parks and Wildlife

Department of Natural Resources

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Colorado Parks and Wildlife State Trails Program-Motorized Grant Cycle 2021-2022 Southwest Region Grant Application Review

There are twenty-nine (29) motorized grant applications within the Southwest Region requesting funding from the State Trails Program for the 2021-2022 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 Matt Thorpe, 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 and trail grant applicants. Additionally the newly released Planning Trails with Wildlife in Mind should be referenced and incorporated into trail planning and stewardship implementation. Finally, 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 trails influences 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).

2021-2022 Motorized Grant Comments: The following are grant specific comments received from CPW Wildlife staff.

No wildlife specific comments were received on the following applications:

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| #2 Box Canyon Trail Project | #4 OHV Trail Dozer Maintenance Program (Ouray USFS) |
| #5 Heavy Equipment Crew (Grand Valley USFS) | #6 Star Trail Heavy Maintenance (Gunnison USFS) |
| #10 GJFO Equipment Operations (BLM) | #11 COHVC0 Economic and Use Study |
| #17 Tres Rios OHV Crew (BLM) | #18 Canyon Creek Heavy Maintenance Project |
| #22 CCMR Trail Maintenance | #24 Supply and Equipment Grant 2022-2023 |
| #25 Trail Dozer Grant 2022-2023 | #26 Pilot Program for Subcontractor Trail Maintenance |
| #27 BLM Statewide OHV Law Enforcement | #30 Stay the Trail Education and Stewardship |

#31 Stay the Trail Travel Management Signage

#37 Italian Creek FS 759 Rehabilitation

GM07 OHV Statewide Trail Crew 2023

GM09 OHV Ouray Trail Crew 2023

GM11 Grand Valley Good Management Trail Crew (USFS)

GM12 BLM Gunnison OHV Trail Crew 2023

GM17 DENCA/MCNCA OHV Trail Crew (BLM)

GM19 2 Person OHV Trail Maint. Crew (USFS)

GM20 OHV Gunnison Trail Crew 2023 (USFS)

GM25 OHV Uncompahgre Trail Crew 2023 (BLM)

Wildlife specific comments on the following applications:

GM02 Good Management Trail Crew 19 (Dolores Forest Service District): Local CPW staff have dealt with compliance issues on 50-inch wide OHV trails in the Dolores District. Gates appear to have been cut and widened or gone around completely to access the trails with machines larger than the trails designation.

CPW requests that the damaged width restrictors be fixed and brought back to their proper width designation and asks for increase patrols. The grant includes a Forest Protection Officer and CPW would like to see that position utilized to the fullest capacity of the grant. More presence on the ground is an aid to protecting the resource and gaining compliance.

GM04 Columbine Forest Service District Good Management OHV Program: With the effects of the 416 Fire still being felt, CPW supports the ongoing work to bring the Hermosa Creek area back into good sustainable standings. CPW would ask the Columbine District to avoid working on the upper end of Jones Creek, Pinkerton-Flagstaff, and Dutch Creek trails until after June 30th. The portions of these trails fall within mapped elk production areas and per CPW guidelines, production areas usage times are May 15th to June 30th.

GM21 Divide Forest Service District Good Management Trail Crew 2023: CPW staff greatly appreciates the communication we have had with the Divide Ranger District (DRD) over the years. Game Management Unit (GMU) 76 is a high quality special draw hunting opportunity with limited availability and is an area where the Divide District conducts trail work. The two agencies have communicated the importance of this area over the years and CPW greatly appreciates the steps the Divide District has taken to limit work in GMU 76. CPW has the following recommendations for GMU 76:

- Attempt to have all work completed by August 31st. We would like to remind the DRD that archery hunting season starts the beginning of September and muzzleloader starts September 10th this year.

- If completion of work by August 31st is not possible, work at higher elevations of these trails should be completed as early as possible and work after August 31st should be focused to the lower 1/3 of the trails.

#01 Dozer 23 Project (Dolores & Pagosa Forest Service Districts): CPW has concerns with the development of the proposed Spring Creek Trail portion of this grant application in the Rico West area of the Dolores District. In addition to maintenance of existing trails, which CPW supports, the application includes the construction of 6.1 miles of the Spring Creek Trail. This new trail system will fall within CPW mapped elk production areas and summer concentration range.

CPW appreciates the Dolores District responses to follow up questions by CPW staff with respect to the new construction of Spring Creek trail, the abandonment of the existing alignment, and seasonal closures. CPW provided three comment letters to the USFS and had several discussions during the NEPA evaluation of the Rico Trails Environmental Assessment, which includes the Spring Creek Trail authorization. We are supportive of the overall concept of moving the trail out of the drainage to improve water quality and the cutthroat trout fishery.

However, the USFS has indicated that the reclamation of the existing trail would simply be to abandon the route through lack of maintenance and allow the trail tread to grow in with vegetation and tree fall. This raises several concerns. Without proper reclamation of the route, CPW is concerned that the water quality will not improve and thus negate the primary purpose and justification for a new trail. In addition, the trail will still exist on the ground. With no efforts to obliterate the route and the ingress or egress points of the alignment, there is a very high likelihood that it would continue to be utilized and maintained by the public. The combination of the creation of a new route and the existing alignment results in increased route density on the landscape and reduced habitat effectiveness for wildlife.

This elk population is in decline, and suffers from low calf recruitment. CPW has brought this issue to the attention of the USFS in our correspondence on the Spring Creek Trail and overall trail management in this area. We have requested a seasonal timing limitation to reduce disturbance to elk calving in this area. The USFS has chosen not to implement a seasonal closure on the new Spring Creek Trail.

The combination of lack of seasonal timing restrictions, increased route density, and no perceived benefit to water quality raises substantial concerns. Consequently, we conclude that there is no conservation benefit from an aquatic or terrestrial species standpoint with the construction of the Spring Creek trail as proposed.

To that end, we cannot in good faith support the portion of the funding request that includes new construction.

#15 Divide Forest Service District Heavy Maintenance Crew 2023: CPW appreciates the application from the Divide District to conduct maintenance work on its district. CPW feels that work is needed around the district and wanted to bring to attention Forest Service Trail 793.3. Local staff have noticed the trail tread is off-camber and is increasing as time goes on.

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