



# COLORADO

## Parks and Wildlife

Department of Natural Resources

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### Colorado Parks and Wildlife State Trails Program, Non-Motorized Grant Cycle 2023-2024 Southwest Region Grant Application Review

There are fifteen (15) Non-Motorized grant applications within the Southwest Region requesting funding from the State Trails Program for the 2023-2024 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 Peter Foote, 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 CPW published Planning Trails with Wildlife in Mind document 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.

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). 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, 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).

### **No wildlife specific comments were received on the following applications:**

C9 Delta County Miners Trail  
M14 South San Juan Wilderness Trail Maintenance  
TS14 Trail Maintenance SLV Public Lands  
TS15 Wilder Bunch Stewardship Crew  
P8 GMNC Trail Expansion Planning  
P13 Rito Seco Trail Expansion

The following are grant specific comments received from CPW Wildlife staff:

**SJMA Rio Grande National Forest Trail Stewardship Crew:** CPW field staff reviewed the application and noted that maintenance in the Rio Grande National Forest is greatly needed with issues of falling trees, wash-outs/erosion, and overgrowth to the point the trail can no longer be found.

Staff recommends that maintenance crews complete work in game management unit 76 (GMU 76) prior to the start of the fall archery season in September. GMU 76 is a high-quality hunting area that is a challenge license to draw, taking multiple years to be qualified to apply.

**2024 GFO Trail Stewardship:** After reviewing the grant application from the Gunnison Bureau of Land Management Field Office, CPW staff support this proposal with the following recommendation in mind. Local staff have seen the results of past trail clearing efforts in the Powderhorn Wilderness area and are aware of the need for more to be done. It is also clear that the trails leading to the fourteen thousand foot peaks within the Field Office's area need maintenance to make them more sustainable from future erosion.

CPW staff request that crews clean and decontaminate all equipment prior to being deployed for use to prevent further introduction and spread of invasive weed seeds. CPW can provide information on how to accomplish decontamination upon request.

**Durango Trails Stewardship Initiative:** After review of the Durango Trails application, CPW staff have the following recommendations:

- Access to the Dry Fork/Hoffheins trails will likely be done through the Perins Peak Special Wildlife Area (SWA) and that brings up multiple concerns and requests. First, CPW ask that any equipment that is taken through the SWA be cleaned and decontaminated to ensure the absence of any invasive or unwanted seeds and weeds. CPW can provide information on how to accomplish decontamination. Secondly, local CPW management would not allow any camping or storage of equipment, vehicles, outhouse, etc., on the SWA without permission. Thirdly, the SWA will be closed from December 01 to April 30 and CPW will not allow early access to the property. Finally, CPW asks that crews carpool when utilizing the SWA parking lot to keep availability open for other users.
- Local CPW staff feel it is of high importance that the Trail Stewardship Ambassadors be educated on the best practices regarding wildlife. CPW staff would happily provide that education to the ambassadors as well as education materials to hand out to the public. If ambassadors plan on setting up at the Dry Fork/Hoffheins trailhead or any other SWA in the Durango area, CPW staff would need to be notified in advance in order to approve the event.
- CPW staff's final request would be that the identification, decommissioning, and prevention of illegal trail building be incorporated into the application. By taking these steps and adding it into the work plan it can be a positive impact on wildlife and the habitat they reside in.

**2024 Crested Butte Conservation Corps:** Local CPW staff do not have any concerns with the Crested Butte Mountain Bike Association's (CBMBA) application. Staff feels CBMBA has effectively demonstrated how to conduct proper trail maintenance. They have paired it with good educational outreach offered to public land users on topics like Leave No Trace. They also provide additional

eyes on the ground and aid in, but are not limited to, cleaning up campsites and latrines, disassembling fire rings, etc.

**CDTC Colorado Regional Representative Support/CDTC Maintenance & Stewardship:** Local CPW staff reviewed the portion of the Continental Divide Trail Coalition's (CDTC) application that falls within the Southwest Region and has the following comments:

- Staff requests that any chainsaw work in the Big Meadows/Archuleta Creek/Archuleta Lake trail project area be completed prior to the start of the archery season. This project falls within the area of GMU 76 and is a high-quality hunting area that is a challenge license to draw, taking multiple years to be qualified to apply. CPW staff is not concerned with work conducted with hand tools within wilderness boundaries due to this level of impact is not expected to create conflicts.
- The application discusses that the crews will work with wildlife managers/biologists to understand existing concerns. CPW staff appreciates and looks forward to this collaboration and feels it will be beneficial to wildlife and habitats that bisect the Continental Divide Trail.

**Southwest Regional Trails Connector Project:** The Durango Trails planning grant encompasses a large area that it is looking at future new trail developments. Due to this large project scope encompassing many districts and habitats, multiple comments were provided.

CPW understands that in this early stage of pre-planning information and maps are limited. If the application were to be funded, CPW request that more detailed maps be produced for staff to review and provide feedback on the specific areas as this planning process occurs. The current application map overview shows conceptual construction occurring along highway corridors. However, within the grant, it discusses public lands and also looking towards alternate corridors. If trail layouts were to move away from being co-located within highway corridor, then higher wildlife impacts would occur. CPW would also like to acknowledge and re-state the importance of partnership and collaboration among the grantee/consultant and CPW, land managers, and stakeholders involved. This includes interested parties and parties where this trail layout intersects their property.

CPW requests that the following questions and concerns be addressed:

- If plans are proposed to build new trails through CPW mapped high priority habitats, will there be a mitigation plan that includes seasonal closures?
- The Forest Service currently struggles with the maintenance and enforcement of existing trails. Who will maintain these trails and are there plans to collaborate with CDOT, the Forest Service and the BLM?
- There is currently a problem with social trails (illegal) popping up across the southwest with little decommissioning or enforcement of those trails. Will these plans include a density analysis, for a density of one miles of trail per square mile, in

order to analyze impacts and will there be a plan for how to decommission on a 1 to 1 basis of existing trails for new trails if this density is exceeded?

- Research shows trail users with dogs, especially those not under physical control, have a greater impact on wildlife than trail users without dogs. If allowed on the trail, CPW recommends dogs be under physical control to minimize impacts to wildlife and have a plan for compliance/enforcement of such a regulation.
- Invasive weed management also creates a large ecological impact. CPW would like to see a weed management plan incorporated into the planning process and that includes but is not limited to, decontamination of equipment during construction to minimize further invasive weed and seed introduction.
- Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) is working with CPW to plan wildlife highway crossings in this grant applications proposed area. CPW would like to stress the importance of proper planning with CDOT and CPW to ensure these multi-million dollar structures maintain their effectiveness and plan to keep the public away from them.

With the new Habitat Management Plan objectives that CPW is proposing, a planning effort that would result in a trail system of this size will impact already stressed wildlife herds. Our public lands are already heavily fragmented by roads and trails. Research into existing trail densities and impacts that are currently existing on the landscape would benefit all user groups. This analysis would further our understanding of trail system impacts and if new trails can be added to our landscape without impacting wildlife habitats.

The Southwest Region realizes this is a lengthy response with multiple requests and recommendations. This conceptual layout covers a large area, which in return could have a large impact on wildlife. Large projects with a variety of impacts require a high level of collaboration. CPW wanted to share its initial thoughts and be as transparent as possible with where we currently sit with the application. CPW appreciates the early engagement between staff and Durango Trails and looks forward to future collaboration.

**Paths to Mesa Verde- 160/160b crossing:** The Montezuma County grant application falls into the Highway 160 corridor and is an overlapping area of the Southwest Regional Trails Connector Project and shares similar comments as stated above.

- Research shows trail users with dogs, especially those not under physical control have a greater impact on wildlife than trail users without dogs. If allowed on the trail, CPW recommends dogs be under physical control to minimize impacts to wildlife and have a plan for compliance/enforcement of such a regulation.
- The introduction and spread of non-native, invasive vegetation by trail users and equipment used on the trail is of concern. Invasive species often outcompete native vegetation and degrade habitat. The applicant on the non-federal environmental form chose “not applicable” regarding the introduction or promotion of non-native species. CPW staff feel this should be an identified issue. Specific actions to prevent the introduction and spread of non-native, invasive weeds need to be included to project wildlife habitat and rangelands along the trail corridor.
- Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and CPW are working together to identify and install wildlife crossing structures along Highway 160 including the portion of highway from Mancos to Cortez. These structures provide necessary

habitat connectivity for wildlife and increase highway safety by decreasing wildlife/vehicle collisions. Because the Paths the Mesa Verde construction falls within this corridor, how will the effectiveness of these multi-million dollars structures be maintained with trail layout in mind to ensure wildlife use? In addition, what will be done to keep the public from entering these wildlife-crossing structures?

**Trail Expansion-Ridgway Area Trails Network:** After reviewing the Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Association application, CPW staff has the following requests and recommendations:

- Winter closures mirror the trail closures currently in place for this trail network. All trail closures should be in effect from December 1st through April 30th for the entire RAT system.
- All access gates are closed and locked during the winter timing closure.
- CPW staff recommend putting trail cameras on the gates (especially the pedestrian gate off County Road 10) to monitor rates of non-compliance during the winter closure. This will allow for better data on compliance rates and provide insight into how to address non-compliance issues.
- The increase of trails within this area and expected increase in use will also increase the conflict between hunters and non-hunting trail users in the fall. Staff recommend signage that explains all allowed uses, including hunting. Signs with general hunting season dates would also be beneficial for minimizing conflict.

### Literature Cited

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