

## Land, Water and People

### Rio Grande National Forest Joins the Centenarian Club

By Vince Spero

On July 1, 2008, the Rio Grande National Forest will officially turn 100 years old. How time flies! Before officially becoming a National Forest, the Rio Grande was part of three Timber Reserves. In 1891, an Act of Congress authorized the establishment of Timber Reserves in order to conserve the nation's timber, range and water resources. Fourteen Timber Reserves were designated in Colorado by President Theodore Roosevelt including the San Isabel in 1902, the San Juan in 1905, and the Cochetopa in 1905.

Coert DuBois outlined several reasons for establishing timber reserves in a 1903 report on the proposed San Juan Reserve. These reasons included:

*Farming around the base of the mountains is dependent on irrigation, and the irrigation water all rises in the mountains. Therefore, to prevent floods in spring and drought in the summer, the forest on the heads of these streams must be preserved.*

*To insure a steady supply of timber for developing the mineral resources of the country, the forest in the mining districts should be protected from fire and theft.*

*To prevent the overstocking of the range and total destruction of the forest floor, and to regulate the disputes between sheep and cowmen, and between Colorado and New Mexico sheepmen, the summer range should be under Government supervision.*

*To prevent and control the repeated forest fires, reserve management and administration is necessary.*

*To insure a steady supply of timber to the local markets and prevent the control of the supply from passing into the hands of large companies, a reserve is necessary.*

Public sentiment pertaining to formation of the original Forest Reserves was varied. Farmers wanted protection of the watershed from fire to insure water for irrigation, miners desired a continuous supply of timber for their mines, and cattlemen wanted the reserves to protect their ranges from overuse by sheep. Local business people were in favor of whatever was good for the general welfare of the community. Sheep grazers opposed the formation of the reserves because they felt that, possibly, the summer range would become closed to sheep grazing altogether. Lumbermen were also worried about restrictions on cutting, although some realized the benefit in the long run.

Theodore Roosevelt, in Executive Order Number 887, officially created the Rio Grande National Forest on July 1, 1908. It was formed by combining 1,102,800 acres from the existing San Juan National Forest and 159,360 acres from the existing Cochetopa National Forest. In 1944 the west side of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range and the Saguache Creek area were added and the Mount Blanca area was added in

1954. Total land area within the Rio Grande National Forest is now nearly 1.9 million acres.

*Vince Spero is the archaeologist for the SLV Public Lands Center. Vince will soon be retiring since he has now worked on the Rio Grande National Forest for 1/3 of its official existence.*