

# **Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Improvements**

## **Environmental Assessment**

**March, 2011**

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## Summary

The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest, Grand Valley Ranger District proposes to perform construction and reconstruction work associated with winter recreation trails and facilities on the Grand Mesa National Forest. The project areas are located on the Grand Mesa National Forest, adjacent to Hwy 65 and within the Skyway Ski Trail System. This action is needed to address current health and safety issues, reduce deferred and annual maintenance costs, and to improve the overall recreation experience throughout the area.

Since 1988, the Grand Valley Ranger District has conducted three different recreation visitor surveys specifically regarding winter use on the Grand Mesa National Forest. In addition, in 1996 the district completed a winter recreation capacity analysis on existing trailheads and trail systems. Survey results demonstrate that recreation use along the highway 65 corridor has grown more than 230% during the past 20 years. While the 1996 capacity analysis identified some overcrowding within the Skyway and County Line Ski systems, the primary concern and limitation was related to the parking lot capacities at many of the trailheads.

The Forest is currently proposing the relocation and/or reconstruction of trailhead facilities to address safety concerns and increase parking capacities. Trailhead improvements would also include the construction and/or reconstruction of facilities, many of which are in poor condition, to reduce deferred maintenance costs and improve visitor experience. In addition, this proposal includes the widening of existing ski trails to improve grooming operations and the construction of one new trail to increase capacities and improve the recreation trail experience.

In addition to the proposed action (alternative 2), the Forest Service has also considered the following alternative:

- a) Alternative 1, No Action: Continue to maintain and operate the winter recreation facilities as is and replace and/or remove facilities as they become inoperable and as funds allow.

The document will help identify current issues and concerns associated with existing winter recreation facilities and trail systems well as potential issues and necessary design guidelines associated with the proposed alternative.

Based upon the effects of the alternatives, the responsible official will decide the overall future management goals for the Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Ski System and the priority of potential project work projects for each identified trailhead and trail system within the area.



# Introduction

## Document Structure

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The Forest Service has prepared this Environmental Assessment in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This Environmental Assessment discloses the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action and alternatives. The document is organized into four parts:

- **Introduction:** The section includes information on the history of the project proposal, the purpose of and need for the project, and the agency's proposal for achieving that purpose and need. This section also details how the Forest Service completed public involvement and their responses.
- **Comparison of Alternatives, including the Proposed Action:** This section provides a more detailed description of the agency's proposed action as well as alternative methods for achieving the stated purpose. These alternatives were developed based on key issues raised by the public and other agencies. This discussion also includes design features that may be incorporated into the project to address identified issues and/or concerns. Finally, this section provides a summary table of the environmental consequences associated with each alternative.
- **Environmental Consequences:** This section describes the environmental effects of implementing the proposed action and other alternatives. This analysis is organized by resource area, significant issues and environmental effects. Within each section, the affected environment is described first, followed by the effects of the No Action Alternative that provides a baseline for evaluation and comparison of the other alternatives that follow.
- **Agencies and Persons Consulted:** This section provides a list of preparers and agencies consulted during the development of the environmental assessment.
- **Appendices:** The appendices provide more detailed information to support the analyses presented in the environmental assessment.

Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of project-area resources, may be found in the project planning record located at the Grand Valley Ranger District Office in Grand Junction, Colorado.

## Background

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The proposed project identifies winter recreation improvements associated with cross country ski trails and trailheads on the Grand Mesa National Forest along the Highway 65 corridor. State Highway 65 is the only road across the Grand Mesa that is maintained throughout the winter. The project is located on the Grand Valley Ranger District of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest.

The Grand Mesa is renowned for providing a full range of premier winter recreation opportunities in the Nation.

- Over 156 miles of marked snowmobile trails with approximately 75% of which is routinely groomed. This system includes the state designated SP (Sunlight to Powderhorn) trail. The trail system can be accessed from any one of the eight trailheads designated for snowmobile parking.
- There are currently five different Nordic areas providing access to over 46 miles of system cross-country ski and snowshoe trails offering a range of experiences from backcountry to extensively groomed networks.
- The Grand Mesa hosts 10 to 14 winter recreation events each year including ski and dog sled races, snowmobile, ski and/or snowshoe demos, poker runs, training sessions (avalanche, survival) and a Klondike Derby. In addition, Artic Cat Manufacturing, under special use permit, has historically used the Grand Mesa for equipment research and testing. Almost all of the above events originate off of the Highway 65 corridor.
- Powderhorn Ski area is located on the North side of the Grand Mesa providing downhill ski and snowboarding activities.
- There are two areas used extensively by the public for general “snow play” such as tubing and undeveloped snowboarding. These areas are located on each the North and South slopes of the Grand Mesa just above the forest boundary and adjacent to Highway 65.

The Grand Valley Ranger District has agreements and/or special use permits in place to with The Grand Mesa Nordic Council and with three different Snowmobile Organizations to authorize the maintenance and grooming of trails associated with many of the above many of the above routes.

The following is a list of all facilities located on the Grand Mesa National Forest along the Highway 65 corridor that are maintained throughout the winter to provide public amenities (Listed in order from North to South):

- Powderhorn Ski Area: Access road, parking area, lodge/restaurant and condos are all located on private land. The majority of ski runs, lifts and patrol shacks are on the National Forest.
- Old Mesa Ski Hill (snowplay area): Includes paved parking area for approximately 30 vehicles and a double toilet building.
- Jumbo: Paved parking area immediately adjacent to the Highway can accommodate approximately 22 vehicles and include one double toilet building. Provides primary access to Mesa Lakes Backcountry Nordic area including the West Bench Ski Trail and the lower Griffith Ski loop, aka “Waterdog”.
- Mesa Lakes Lodge: Authorized under special use permit to provide lodging and restaurant services. Parking area for lodge patrons.
- Upper Griffith: Paved pullout providing parking for approximately 6 vehicles and access to the Upper Griffith Ski Loop, aka “Lake of the Woods”.
- Skyway Ski: A pull in graveled parking area for approximately 40 vehicles with double toilet building. Accesses the highly groomed and maintained Skyway Ski System used extensively by general public and used to host the majority of the Grand Mesa Nordic Council events.

- Mesa Top: Newly developed and paved pull in parking area to accommodate up to 80 vehicles and trailers provides direct access to the Western part of the S-P Snowmobile Trail System. Parking area includes two double toilet buildings and two double unit change rooms.
- County Line: Paved pullout located immediately adjacent to Highway 65 designed to accommodate approximately 21 vehicles and includes a double toilet building. Additional plowing sometimes occurs further along the sides of Highway 65 to provide increase parking. Parking area provides access the groomed Crag Crest Ski System, more commonly known as “County Line Ski System”.
- Grand Mesa Lodge: Authorized under special use permit to provide lodging and small store. Also authorized to conduct winter Outfitter and Guide services (snowmobile tours). Parking area for lodge patrons and clients.
- Grand Mesa Visitor Center: Provides heated restroom and visitor information. Recent services have also included a fishing store and guide services (snowmobile and fishing), authorized under special use permit, throughout the 2010/2011 winter. Paved parking is plowed to accommodate approximately 10 vehicles. Parking area also used by Colorado Dept of Transportation for equipment storage.
- Cobbett: Paved parking area near intersection of Hwy 65 and FDR 121 primarily used by snowmobilers to access the S-P snowmobile trails. Parking lot is located along FDR 121 directly across from the Grand Mesa Visitor Center.
- Thunder Mountain Lodge: Located approximately ½ mile from Highway 65 off of FDR 121. Authorized under special use permit to provide lodging and restaurant. Also authorized to conduct winter services (snowmobile tours and rentals). Parking area for lodge patrons and clients.
- Ward Creek: Southern most paved parking area along Highway 65 plowed to allow parking of approximately 40 vehicles. Parking area and double toilet building used by recreationists accessing the lower Ward Ski System and the Ward Creek Snowplay Area.

With the exception of the Powderhorn Ski area and the three lodges, plowing of the above parking areas are conducted by the Colorado Department of Transportation. The parking capacities listed above are “approximates” and can vary greatly dependent upon snow conditions and available equipment and personnel. All restrooms associated with public parking areas along Highway 65 are maintained (shoveled, cleaned and stocked) by the Forest Service.

In addition to the above parking areas, there exists 5 five trailheads, not located directly off of Highway 65, that provide parking and access to the Grand Mesa National Forest during the winter. These trailheads; Bonham, Vega, Hightower, Surface Creek and Leroux Creek, are all located at or below the Forest Boundary and are accessed by County maintained (gravel) roads. Each of these areas are used to access one of the lateral trails connecting to the main S-P Snowmobile corridor. There are currently no restroom facilities provided in conjunction with any of these outlying trailheads.

## **Purpose and Need for Action**

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The primary purpose of this project is to address existing safety concerns associated with the parking, loading and unloading of winter recreationists immediately adjacent to Highway 65. The project would also address existing capacity issues, improve grooming operations and trail experiences through the widening, reconstruction and/or construction of trails within the ski trail systems. The project will reduce deferred maintenance costs, improve the overall recreation experience and to provide additional services to better meet the public's need.

This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, the Grand Mesa Byway Corridor Plan, helps address issues and concerns as identified through winter recreation surveys and capacity analyses and is consistent with the Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Plan.

## **Proposed Action**

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The action proposed by the Forest Service to meet the purpose and need is to conduct construction and reconstruction work associated with a variety of winter recreation trailheads and trail systems. The project proposal includes the following:

- 1) Relocate the existing County Line parking area/trailhead to an area further off Hwy 65 to address current safety concerns and to increase parking to accommodate approximately 60 vehicles (see design, attachment A). This new construction would include replacing the existing dilapidated toilet building thus decreasing deferred maintenance costs and, dependent upon funding, include the addition of new changing rooms and/or a warming hut.
- 2) The reconstruction and construction of ski trails within the Skyway Ski Trail System including (see map, Attachment B):
  - a. The widening of approximately 8.2 miles of trail, currently 12 to 14 ft wide, to accommodate a 16 ft wide groomer.
  - b. The construction of approximately 1.3 miles of new trail located on the Northeast side of the trail system to provide a connector loop between the Sunset and Vista Trails.
  - c. The above trail work would involve the construction of 2.3 miles of temporary road to facilitate the removal of timber for the trail corridor and the removal of hazard trees located within 200 ft. along the trail corridors.
- 3) Increase parking capacity by 10 to 20 vehicles at the Skyway Trailhead by removing the existing toilet building located in the center of the lot and expanding the trailhead and installing new restrooms to the East of the current parking area. This area would also provide the location for a equipment storage and a possible warming hut.

- 4) Enlargement of the upper parking area located off of FDR #121 to accommodate an additional 5 to 10 vehicles and increase service and access for the Ward Lake Ski System.
- 5) Install additional signing and trail indicators on Nordic Trails throughout the Mesa Lakes Backcountry Nordic Area.

## **Decision Framework**

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Given the purpose and need, the deciding official reviews the proposed action and the other alternatives in order to make the following decisions:

- The overall area boundaries and scope of work to be conducted within the area.
- How each site within the project area should be operated and managed in the future to meet both the public's needs and in a manner that will be sustainable, both environmentally and financially, for years to come.
- The type of work to be conducted in each developed site to meet the above goals and objectives.
- The priority of work projects that will be conducted at this time vs. projects that will be identified for work in future years (funding dependent).

## **Public Involvement**

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The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions beginning in 2009. Public scoping was conducted and input sought through a news release in June, 2010. The proposal has been and is still available to the public and other agencies for comment. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the agency will provide copies of the complete Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Project folder, including Project Cost Estimates, Designs and Maps.

Using the comments from the public and other agencies the interdisciplinary team has developed a list of issues related to the project alternatives.

## **Issues**

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The Forest Service separated the issues into two groups: key and non-key issues. Key issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-key issues were identified as those: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations require this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "...identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3)..." A list of non-key issues and

reasons regarding their categorization as “non-key” may be found at Grand Valley Ranger District in the project record.

As for key issues, the Forest Service identified \_\_0\_\_ items raised during scoping that have are considered as key issues.

## **Alternatives, including the Proposed Action**

This chapter describes and compares the alternatives considered for the Grand Mesa Winter Recreation Improvement project. It includes a description of each alternative considered. A map of the project area showing the proposed action has been attached to the end of this document (attachment 1).

### **Alternatives**

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#### **Alternative 1**

##### **No Action**

Under the No Action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. No reconstruction or construction work would occur and existing trailheads would remain unmodified, in the same location and associated facilities would not be replaced. In addition, the winter trails would not be widened nor would any new trail segments be incorporated into the trail system. The Forest would continue to conduct basic maintenance on the existing sites to meet health and safety standards and the sites operated and managed for the public as in the past. The project would not be implemented, thus the number and associated cost of identified deferred maintenance items within each site would not be addressed.

#### **Alternative 2**

##### **The Proposed Action**

The Forest has currently identified the scope and priority of the proposed action in the following order:

- 1) Safety: Relocation of the County Line parking Area/Trailhead to an area further off of Hwy 65 to decrease the number of people who currently park, unload and load immediately adjacent to Highway 65. Minor realignment of the Skyway Parking Area to improve traffic flow and to reduce opportunities for vehicle collisions.
- 2) Improve visitor experience: New restroom facilities and change rooms at both the County Line and Skyway Trailheads will greatly improve visitor experience. The current trail system is at capacity and the number of mixed uses as increased greatly

during the past several years. The construction of a new trail segment and the widening of the existing trails will address capacity issues and will allow additional grooming to accommodate the various uses.

- 3) Improvement of the infrastructure: Replacing existing facilities will directly improve the existing infrastructure and will decrease the amount of deferred and annual maintenance required at each site.
- 4) Operation efficiency: The widening of trails will also improve the ability to safely and effectively provide grooming at the County Line and Skyway Ski Areas. The construction of the new trail will allow the GMNC to groom in a loop manner thus increasing the total miles of maintained trail without increasing the number of miles the groomer is driven.

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**Attachment 1: [County Line Parking Area Design](#)**

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**Attachment 2: [Skyway Ski Trail Improvement Map](#)**

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## Environmental Consequences Winter Recreation Improvements EA

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### WILDLIFE AND FISH

#### **Affected Environment – General Wildlife Habitat**

The Project area contains high elevation (9,500-10,500') vegetation and wildlife habitat including spruce-fir, aspen, and large open meadows. All of these habitats also contain riparian areas and wetlands, with their associated vegetation.

Mule deer and elk are the most common big game species in the Project area, with the moose population growing since their introduction in 2005. The project area lies within Colorado Division of Wildlife's designated Game Management Units (GMU) 421 and 52. These GMU's are heavily hunted, and elk numbers are within the population objectives for elk as determined by the Colorado Division of Wildlife. Other mammals common to the area are pika, pine squirrel, yellow-bellied marmot, beaver, coyote and snowshoe hare.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has compiled a list of migratory bird species which appear to be declining in numbers or distribution (USFWS 2002). Of the bird species of conservation concern (BOCC) in the Southern Rockies/Colorado Plateau region, the species that may occur in the project area are limited due to the high elevations. They are: golden eagle, flammulated owl, Williamson's sapsucker, Swainson's hawk and northern harrier. Common raptors in the project area are red-tailed hawks, Cooper's hawks and northern harriers.

#### **Direct and indirect effects: General Wildlife habitat**

The direct effect of trail construction and widening, as well as new parking lot and facilities construction is the reduction of forage availability and habitat for elk, deer and moose. However, summer forage is not a limiting factor for elk populations and other wildlife species that occur in the area. Since the current elk populations within the Game Management Units in the analysis area are within population objectives, the effect from a very small loss of habitat within the project area would be minimal.

The indirect effect of construction of new recreation improvements is the potential increase in human use of the area. Additional human use could displace wildlife species not tolerant of a certain threshold of human activity, although given the heavy existing use, any additional displacement would be minimal.

### **Threatened, Endangered, Proposed and Sensitive (TES) Species**

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) require the assessment of potential effects of proposed agency actions on species that are listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, or Proposed for listing. Forest Service policy requires species designated as Sensitive by the Regional Forester (FSM 2670) will also be analyzed in this section.

#### **Existing Condition**

A Biological Assessment (BA) for federally listed species and Biological Evaluation (BE) for Forest Service sensitive species has been completed for the project area and can be found in the project record. These documents contain a complete description of habitat, life history, and

effects. In this section, the potential impacts are summarized and displayed with the remaining specific information regarding the direct and indirect effects of each Alternative being included in the BA and BE.

**Threatened, Endangered and Proposed Species**

**T & E and Proposed Species with no habitat in the Project Area: No Effect**

- Mexican Spotted Owl
- Bonytail Chub
- Colorado Pikeminnow
- Humpback Chub
- Razorback Sucker
- Uncompahgre Fritillary Butterfly
- Colorado Hookless Cactus
- DeBeque phacelia

**Table 1- T&E Species with Habitat in the Analysis Area, and Effects Determination**

Species	Alternative 1 No Action	Alternative 2 Proposed Action
Canada Lynx	NE*	NLAA**

NE\*=No Effect

NLAA\*\*=May effect, but not likely to adversely affect

Additional information can be found in the BE and is part of the administrative record for this project.

**Sensitive Species**

**Table 2- Sensitive Wildlife Species with No Habitat or do not Occur in the Analysis Area: No Effect**

River Otter	Columbian Sharptail Grouse
Spotted Bat	Gunnison Sage-grouse
Desert Bighorn	Loggerhead Shrike
Black Swift	Sage Sparrow
Rocky Mountain Bighorn	Brewer's sparrow
Lewis woodpecker	Townsend's big-eared bat

**Table 3- Sensitive Species with Habitat in the Analysis Area, and Effects Determination**

Species	Alternative 1	Alternative 2
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Fringed myotis	NI**	NI
American martin	NI	NI
Pygmy shrew	NI	MAII*
Wolverine	NI	NI
American peregrine falcon	NI	NI
Bald eagle	NI	NI
Boreal owl	NI	MAII
Flammulated owl	NI	MAII
Northern goshawk	NI	MAII
Northern harrier	NI	NI
Olive sided flycatcher	NI	MAII
Purple martin	NI	NI
Boreal toad	NI	MAII
Northern leopard frog	NI	MAII
Bluehead sucker	NI	NI
Colorado River cutthroat trout	NI	NI

\*MAII = May Adversely Impact Individuals, but is not likely to result in loss of viability in the planning area, nor cause a trend to federal listing.

\*\*NI = No Impact.

**Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive (TES) Plant Species**

The following sensitive plant species were evaluated and analyzed in the Biological Evaluation (BE):

**Table 4- Sensitive Plant species with habitat in the analysis area, and effects determination**

Species	Alternative 1	Alternative 2
Lesser-panicked sedge	NI	MAII
Lesser bladderwort	NI	MAII
Slender cottongrass	NI	MAII
Sphagnum moss	NI	MAII

\* = May Adversely Impact Individuals, but is not likely to result in a loss of viability on the Planning Area, nor cause a trend to federal listing.

\*\* = No Impact

Additional information can be found in the BE and is part of the administrative record for this project.

**Management Indicator Species (MIS)**

This analysis discusses Management Indicator Species (MIS) and MIS wildlife habitat found in the Project Area.

Four MIS species, the Abert’s squirrel, red-naped sapsucker, Brewer’s sparrow, and Merriam’s wild turkey were eliminated from analysis in the MIS report because suitable habitat for it was not identified within or immediately adjacent to the Project Area.

The following species were evaluated and analyzed in the MIS report:

Species
Rocky Mountain elk
American marten
Northern goshawk
Colorado River cutthroat trout
Rainbow trout
Brown trout
Brook trout

The proposed action may have slight impacts to marten and goshawk habitats, but would not result in a defined change in population numbers or trends for any of these species at the project and forest scales.

## **Consultation and Coordination**

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, and local agencies, tribes and non-Forest Service persons during the development of this environmental assessment:

**ID Team Members:** \_\_\_\_\_

- Loren Paulson – ID Team Leader
- Julie Grode – Wildlife Biologist
- Sally Crum – Archeologist
- Christie LaDue - Timber

**Federal, State, and Local Agencies:** \_\_\_\_\_

- Colorado Department of Transportation
- United State Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service

Colorado State Historic Preservation Office

**Others:** \_\_\_\_\_

Grand Mesa Nordic Council

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