

# **FINAL EA**

## **Environmental Assessment for Watershed and Fisheries Conservation Treatments**

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**Abstract:** The Public Lands Center in south central Colorado, consisting of the Rio Grande National Forest and the San Luis Resource Area of BLM, have proposed to utilize a number of watershed and fisheries conservation treatments so that soils, watersheds and fisheries can be improved or maintained in productive capacity. When a project is proposed, a checklist would be completed by resource specialists to assure resources are protected. For example, when bare soil is eroding into a stream, seeding, mulching and fertilizing conservation treatments might be done to stop erosion and protect water quality and fisheries. Conservation treatments are beneficial in nature and seek to protect and restore resource values. This analysis would allow a more expedient application of these necessary treatments to be applied to lands administered by the Rio Grande Forest and San Luis Resource Area of BLM toward the beneficial protection of soil, water and fisheries resources.

This document follows the format established in the Council of Environmental Quality regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations). It is consistent with and tiered to both Land Management Plans of the BLM San Luis Resource Area and Rio Grande National Forest.

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## **Introduction**

Under the Service First Initiative, the US Forest Service and US Bureau of Land Management have coordinated to develop more efficient land management programs. The Rio Grande National Forest and San Luis Resource Area of the BLM have been combined administratively in the San Luis Valley of Colorado under the Service First initiative. This environmental analysis analyzes watershed treatments that could benefit the management of BLM and Rio Grande Forest lands (Public Lands of the San Luis Valley, hereafter Public Lands). The Forest Service is the lead agency in this analysis.

The Rio Grande National Forest's Revised Land and Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement (Revised Forest Plan) as amended describes goals and desired conditions for soil, water and fisheries resources. It states that the Forest shall improve watershed conditions to restore favorable soil relationships and water quality. It also states to conserve, protect and restore important terrestrial and aquatic habitats. The proposed action is consistent with the Revised Forest Plan. The Record of Decision for selected Plan alternative G specifically emphasizes protecting and improving watershed health.

The Resource Management Plan for the San Luis Resource Area, BLM and Record of Decision 1991 (BLM RMP) as amended, directs the Bureau of Land Management to manage lands toward important watershed goals. It states that monitoring and evaluation of water quality and quantity, as well as control of erosion and sediment production, will remain high priority management goals.

More recently, BLM Resource Management Plans throughout Colorado were amended to include Standards for Public Land Health, 1996, which added emphasis to protection and enhancement of soil and watershed values, including riparian areas and uplands. Erosion control structures are allowed with the primary purpose of stopping erosion. Examples are gully plugs and contour furrows. Structures are generally considered as one of a variety of management actions that are implemented to improve soil and water conditions, including grazing management guidelines.

There have been efforts between the FS and BLM that call for a unified approach to watershed assessment. While that effort is broad in scope, this EA proposes a consistent and unified approach to soil, water, and fisheries improvements done at the ground level.

In order to achieve efficiency, the watershed and fisheries treatments of the BLM and Forest Service are analyzed in the same analysis. Both agencies allow the use of conservation treatments, but encourage overall watershed and soil health through appropriate management actions over large areas. All of the conservation treatments would apply to Public Lands of the San Luis Valley.

Soil erosion and sedimentation control measures are well documented in the literature. Erosion and sedimentation can be greatly reduced from forest roads and other systems through the use of mulches, surfacing, seeding, applying filter strips, hydromulching, fertilizing, and other conservation treatments (Burroughs and King, 1989). Their summation of studies found that erosion and sedimentation could be reduced by 36 to 88 percent depending on practices applied. They also found that about half of the sediment production from hillslopes occurs in the first summer after disturbance. They concluded that erosion control measures that can be put in place immediately after construction have the best potential to reduce sediment production.

This EA proposes to facilitate a more timely response to necessary watershed conservation measures. In the past, watershed projects have been approved after appropriate environmental analysis. This resulted in many units duplicating efforts by analyzing similar watershed treatments. This environmental analysis will serve as a programmatic analysis, upon which specific projects will be tiered and analyzed. This analysis will document the environmental consequences of various soil, water, and fisheries conservation treatments that would be applied across the Public Lands of the San Luis Valley.

Soil, water and fisheries conservation treatments are land and structural treatments that help restore or improve watershed, soil and fisheries health. They include measures that would help stabilize soils, apply revegetation, reduce sedimentation, and create or improve fish habitat in streams and lakes. It should be understood that conservation treatments are intended for streams, riparian areas and upland ecosystems. It is anticipated that watershed treatments would be applied to land where management changes are improving lands on a large scale.

## **Chapter 1 - The Purpose of and Need for Action**

This chapter describes the proposed action, purpose of and need for action, Plan direction from each agency, analysis area, Plan management prescriptions, decisions to be made, issues associated with the proposed action, opportunities, and background information.

### **1.1 The Proposed Action**

The Agencies managing the Public Lands of the San Luis Valley propose to utilize a variety of soil, water and fisheries conservation treatments that will help restore, reclaim and protect soil, water and fisheries resources. The conservation treatments include construction of rolling dips and waterbars (also called cross drains), check dams, streambank stabilization, fisheries structures, soil subsoiling/aeration measures, erosion control structures, sediment traps, revegetation, fertilization, mulching, topsoiling, bioremediation, wetland enhancement or creation, and applying organic materials. The treatments also include practices that address road and trail issues, such as ripping, subsoiling, waterbarring and removing, installing, or maintaining culverts, correcting drainage problems, applying gravel on roads to harden crossings, applying buffer strips

and physical barriers. Fisheries treatments include, among others, rock placements, jetties and fish barriers.

The Proposed action also includes a more efficient analysis approach. This programmatic environmental analysis provides consistent analysis across Public Lands. Specific projects would be tiered to this analysis and evaluated through a resource checklist. The checklist assures that site-specific review is done by appropriate specialists, who provide clearances before watershed projects are initiated. This approach ensures resource protection and ensures legal site specific requirements are met. A more efficient improvements program allows more acres to be treated under a constrained budget.

### **1.2 Purpose of and Need for Action**

The *purpose* of the proposed action is to analyze alternatives to correct watershed problems on Public Lands in a timely and efficient manner. The action is *needed* so that the soil, water and fisheries objectives and goals of the Management Plans of each agency for watershed restoration, can be accomplished in a timely and efficient manner.

### **1.3 Land Management Plan Direction**

The Rio Grande National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan was signed and approved in 1996. On March 29, 2001, the Acting Deputy Secretary of Agriculture (hereafter referred to as the Secretary) made a ruling on the review conducted by the Chief of the Forest Service, and directed the Rio Grande National Forest to conduct additional analysis pertaining largely to management indicator species in the 1996 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan. The Forest has completed those analyses. This EA is consistent with the Forest Plan, as amended.

A forest-wide objective of the Revised Forest Plan is to protect the basic soil, air, water, and land resources. It states that the Forest shall improve watershed conditions to restore favorable soil relationships and water quality. It also states to conserve, protect and restore important terrestrial and aquatic habitats. The proposed action is consistent with the Revised Forest Plan direction.

The Proposed Resource Management Plan for the San Luis Resource Area (SLRA), BLM and Record of Decision 1991 (BLM RMP) directs the Bureau of Land Management to manage lands toward important watershed goals. It states that monitoring and evaluation of water quality and quantity, as well as control of erosion and sediment production, will remain high priority management goals. This EA and analysis is consistent with SLRA goals.

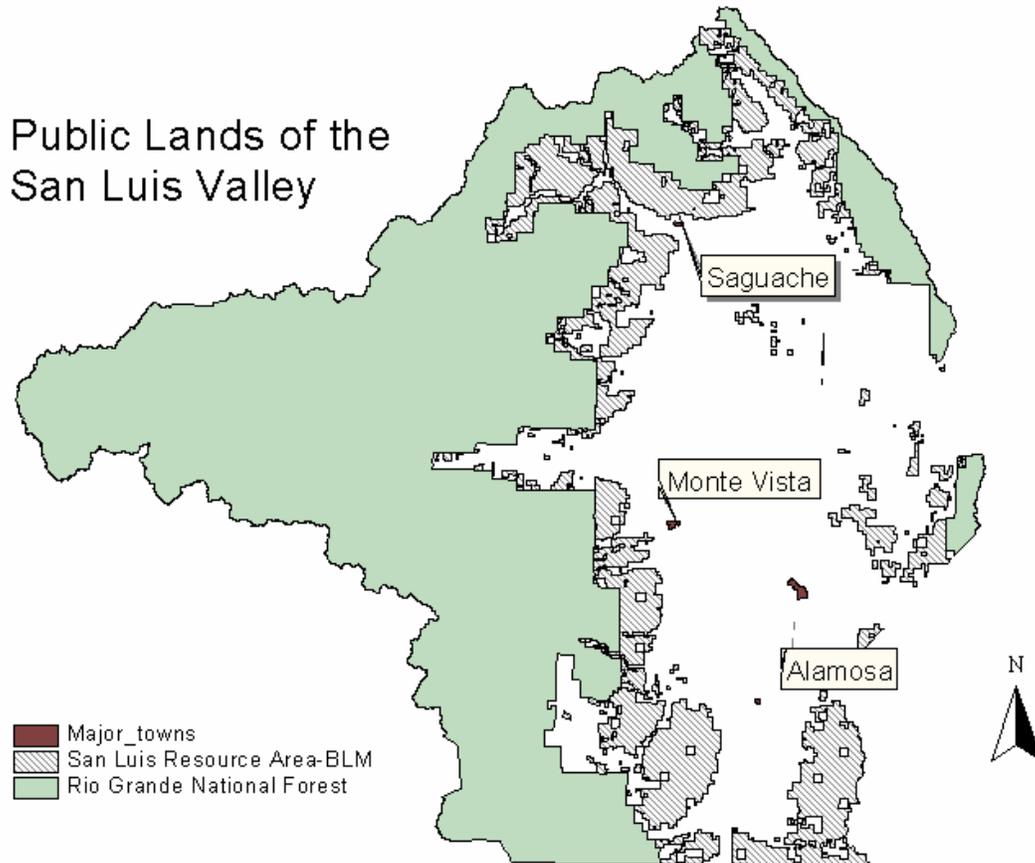
In 1997, the BLM, Colorado's recommendations for healthy public lands were approved by Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt. The following standards were adopted including 1) Ensure healthy upland soils 2) protect and improve riparian areas 3) Maintain healthy productive plant communities 4) Maintain or enhance special status,

threatened and endangered species, and other plants and animals officially designated by BLM, and 5) Ensure that water quality meets minimum Colorado standards. These standards apply to all BLM-administered lands in Colorado. The proposed treatments in this analysis would be used to promote and achieve those standards as listed.

The Forest Service's Watershed Conservation Practices (WCP) Handbook describes practices on the land that are necessary to achieve long-term soil, fisheries and watershed health. This EA analyzes treatments that would be used to achieve the WCP conservation practices.

#### 1.4 Analysis Area/Project Area

The project area consists of all of lands throughout the Rio Grande National Forest and San Luis Resource Area, BLM, where soil, water and fisheries improvements or enhancements are necessary.



#### 1.5 Management Area Prescriptions

The proposed conservation treatments would be utilized where they do not conflict with management area prescriptions. When site-specific projects are planned, management areas would be reviewed through use of a checklist to assure that no conflicts exist. For

example, land treatments using motorized implements would not be done in Wilderness areas or Backcountry areas where motorized uses are prohibited. Actions will meet scenic integrity objectives and recreation opportunity spectrum for management areas.

Treatment proposals on BLM lands would need to meet the goals, standards, and guidelines of the SLRA Resource Management Plan. When site-specific projects are proposed on BLM lands, a “Determination of Land Use Plan Conformance and NEPA Adequacy” form would be completed.

### **1.6 Decisions to be Made Based on the Analysis**

The Authorized Deciding Officer will make the decision relative to BLM and NFS lands. The Forest Supervisor and BLM Area Manager would make a decision for their respective lands, unless through co-delegation, one Deciding officer could decide for both Agencies. The decisions for each Agency’s lands are subject to appeal or protest regulations of each Agency.

### **1.7 Scoping and the Issues Associated with the Proposed Action**

The quarterly scoping document issued from the Rio Grande National Forest contained public notice that this project was being analyzed. It invited comments on the proposed project and received wide distribution. This analysis was listed in the Rio Grande Forest’s Schedule of Proposed Actions bulletins, issues May 26, 2000, November 8, 2000, October 15, 2001, through 2004.

A scoping letter was sent to potentially affected interest groups in March 2002. It described in brief the proposed analysis and invited comments. A number of letters were received.

The Interdisciplinary Team for this project consisted of both FS and BLM specialists. The **key issue** to this analysis is whether conservation treatments should not be implemented or whether they should be analyzed and implemented in a more consistent and efficient manner that would allow a more timely response to soil, water and fisheries problems.

Other issues raised during the course of this analysis include:

- ◆ There is the need to meet the permit requirements of the Army Corp of Engineers.
- ◆ There is the need to develop unified approaches to watershed management between BLM and FS. This is National direction from the Departments of Interior and Agriculture as per “The Unified Federal Policy for Ensuring a Watershed Approach to Federal Land and Resource Management”.
- ◆ The analysis must be protective of resource values and done in a manner that is consistent with each Agency’s land management and other plans.

- ◆ The analysis shall consider protection of Heritage Resources. Consultation with American Indian Nations shall occur.
- ◆ The analysis shall consider noxious weeds and promote methods that reduce or limit the spread of those weeds.
- ◆ The analysis must protect Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive and Management Indicator Species.

### **1.8 Opportunities**

The proposed action would help both the Forest Service and BLM meet important watershed goals. It also offers the opportunity to gain management consistency and efficiency across agency boundaries.

In addition, the BLM Resource Management Plan, 2001-2005 Strategic Plan of Serving Current and Future Publics, Restoring and Maintaining the Health of the Land will be achieved.

### **1.9 Non-discrimination Clause**

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