

Rio Grande National Forest Model CAA Draft Proposal

The San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council (SLVEC), working in partnership with Quiet Use Coalition (QUC), The Wilderness Society (TWS), Southern Rockies Conservation Alliance (SRCA), Colorado Mountain Club (CMC), Rocky Mountain Recreation Initiative (RMRI), Center for Native Ecosystems (CNE) and contractor Julia Kintsch will support the development, including organizing and outreach components, of an ecologically based model Citizens Access Alternative (CAA) for the Rio Grande National Forest. The Travel Management Planning process is expected to begin in 2009 and will probably continue through 2011.

The Rio Grande National Forest is made up of 1.8 million acres of public land, containing some of Colorado's most remote wilderness. According to the last RGNF 1995 Management Plan revision, almost half of this acreage has been designated as wilderness, roadless areas, or backcountry prescription areas. This provides a tremendous opportunity for ecologically based travel management planning by developing a model CAA using a "GIS-based Assessment to Prioritize Routes for Decommissioning Based on Wildlife Habitat and Watershed Qualities." SLVEC will assist the model CAA in the following ways:

***Goal & Objectives:** SLVEC will usher in the model CAA as a viable alternative in the Rio Grande National Forest Travel Planning Process. SLVEC will engage key members of the public to stay involved in the RGNF NEPA Travel Management Planning process. SLVEC will maintain communication with RGNF Supervisor Dan Dallas. SLVEC will engage our local expert, agency and congressional delegation.*

Travel management is the process governing motorized use – including off-highway vehicles and snowmobiles – of roads and trails on our public lands. Through this process, planners analyze all of the roads and trails on a public lands system with the goal of minimizing resource degradation, and identify which routes should be open for motorized use, which types of vehicles are permitted on each to minimize resource degradation, and appropriate road densities in areas of sensitive habitat. In addition to ecological considerations, this process must also take into account economic and social costs.

In general, there are four different options that can be considered for road management: 1) current level of (inadequate) maintenance, 2) full road maintenance, 3) abandonment of road with no maintenance, or 4) road decommissioning. Travel management planning should seek to manage the transportation network in a sustainable manner such that routes can either be fully maintained, or they are decommissioned if no longer needed or if they cause significant resource degradation. Abandoned or unmaintained routes provide the fewest benefits to ecosystem health and are generally more costly and difficult to address over the long-run.

In practice, travel management on public lands is greatly complicated by a lack of funds to adequately maintain the network of authorized roads and trails – typically, only about 20% of the routes within a system are maintained to Forest Service standards. Additional miles of illegal user-created routes further contribute to the management problem, which is then further exacerbated by a seven-fold increase in off-road vehicle use over the past 30 years.

These limits on the Forest Service's ability to adequately manage and maintain travel routes underscores the need for comprehensive travel management planning to identify a network

that meets access and recreation needs, while minimizing maintenance demands and impacts to Forest resources. An ecologically-based travel management plan is one which defines such a network based on a set of ecological criteria to ensure that ecological needs are addressed holistically rather than on a case-by-case basis, if at all. To meet this need for the Rio Grande National Forest, we propose to conduct a GIS assessment of wildlife habitat and watershed values resulting in a prioritization of areas and routes for decommissioning based on these ecological values. We will augment this GIS assessment with expert input from Forest biologists and hydrologists, CDOW biologists, and other local experts to refine the ecological prioritization and create a comprehensive database to inform transparent decision-making. These data will guide the development of specific recommendations for recreation zones and motorized routes and trails to produce a travel management proposal that minimizes ecosystem impacts and restores key and sensitive habitats.

Project Director

Julia Kintsch is the President and Senior Ecologist of ECO-REsolutions, L.L.C., a private consulting firm committed to providing clients with the ecological data, assessments and information networks needed to implement appropriate conservation strategies in land and natural resource planning and management. Prior to starting this company, Julia spent five years as the Program Director at the Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project (SREP). In this position, Julia oversaw and implemented *Linking Colorado's Landscapes* – a statewide assessment of wildlife linkages that was designated a 2007 Exemplary Ecosystem Initiative by the Federal Highway Administration. Julia also developed and led a three-year wildlife monitoring project engaging trained citizen scientist volunteers. Prior to her position at SREP, Julia was the Conservation Planner at the Michigan Chapter of The Nature Conservancy.

GIS Analyst (subcontractor)

Connor Bailey is the GIS Director at the Center for Native Ecosystems (CNE), a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation and native species and ecosystems in the Greater Southern Rockies Ecoregion. From 2002 – 2008, Connor provided GIS services for the Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project (SREP), the last four years serving in the role of GIS Director. Both at SREP, and now in his role at CNE, Connor provides the 27-member Southern Rockies Conservation Alliance with mapping, GIS analysis and database services, while dramatically increasing the use of GIS among these conservation groups. In this role, Connor developed and maintains an Internet Map Server with over 200 layers of data for use by the Alliance member groups, and maintains the Alliance's Roadless Area Database, which contains records for 500 roadless areas in Colorado and Southern Wyoming, including over 35,000 photo-points and 7,000 routes.