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Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge
Integrated Resource Management
Plan

RECORD OF DECISION AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

U.S. Department of The Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Grand Junction District
Grand Junction Resource Area

March, 1998

Decision: To authorize and implement the Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge (RCBR) Integrated Resource Management Plan. The decision to implement this plan is in conformance with the 1987 Grand Junction Resource Area Resource Management Plan (RMP). Many of the management actions being proposed in the plan constitute an amendment of the RMP. This integrated resource management plan employs a “benefits based management approach” which expands our management focus beyond lands and resources to also address resulting outcomes as improved conditions. Plan implementation for the RCBR ecosystem will be done through an interdisciplinary ad-hoc committee which defines issues and prioritizes management actions. In addition, the vision statement developed by the ad-hoc committee will continue to provide guidance for the RCBR ecosystem for the next 10 to 15 years. The vision statement asserts, “The Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge Ecosystem will continue to contribute to the current quality of life for the Grand Valley and will be managed for a balance of sustainable use and preservation.”

Rationale for the Decision: The following major management actions will occur within the Ruby Canyon/Black Ridge Planning Area. Management actions #1-#4 are major decisions but do not represent an amendment to the RMP. They are in line with the intent of the RMP and reflect changes in BLM policy and management philosophy. The remaining management actions (#5-#13) represent those that will amend the management direction as contained in the 1987 RMP. The rationale for each decision and/or management action is given below.

1) Adoption of a Natural Ignition Fire Plan for the area south of the Colorado River

Rationale for this Management Action:
Completion and implementation of this plan provides managers with a valuable decision matrix to determine if fires should be suppressed or monitored, and provides specific information on management constraints. The Natural Ignition Fire Plan provides guidance for prescription parameters for all fuel types within the RCBR area. Most importantly, natural ignition fire and prescribed fire will be used as tools to help achieve the desired plant community within the area. This in turn will help meet the Colorado standards for public land health relating to the maintenance of healthy and
productive plant populations (standard #3). Completion of this plan will also serve to implement the national fire policy.

2) Adoption of management practices which promote healthy, diverse vegetative communities comprised of a mosaic of vegetative types and successional stages as described in the desired plant community.

Rationale for this Management Action:
In order to achieve the Desired Plant Community (DPC) goals as prescribed in the plan (Appendix E), a variety of management actions will be employed. Management actions include prescribed fire, grazing plans which incorporate dormant season use and/or spring use that provides periodic rest, reseeding and rehabilitating disturbed areas, physical removal and herbicidal treatment of non-native plant species. This management action directly contributes to meeting the Colorado standards for public land health relating to the protection of soils and maintenance of healthy and productive plant populations in this area (standards #1 & 3). The DPC described in the plan was developed by a wide range of interests, is ecologically, economically and socially sound and would be a plant community that will meet the needs for present and future uses of this area.

3) By the year 2000, manage eight specific recreation management zones to provide opportunities for visitors to engage in a wide variety of recreational activities to facilitate the achievement of a variety of psychological experiences and the realization of individual and other benefits.

4) Manage a diversity of physical, social and managerial settings to facilitate the delivery of benefits.

Rationale for the Above Two Management Actions:
At the center of the recreation management approach taken in this plan is the concept of 'benefits based management' (BBM). BBM requires that managers and collaborating partners target benefits through explicitly stated management objectives. The management objectives as prescribed in the plan identify areas where certain recreational opportunities will be provided for, as well as identifying the kinds of benefits to be achieved. When fully applied, these objectives directly influence the character of management actions, visitor information messages, and monitoring and evaluation strategies. Management actions outlined in the plan describe what the BLM and its service providers will do to produce these targeted recreation opportunities, to tell their customers about them, and to evaluate their actions over time to ensure implementation of the plan design. In order to facilitate the achievement of the benefits people desire, a diversity of physical, social and managerial settings have been identified. The settings that have been identified, are the ones that the Ad-Hoc committee and other members of the public have determined to be necessary to achieve our BBM goals.

Certain resource and social indicators and standards, outlined in the plan, will also be used to assess the degree to which conditions prescribed for the recreation system are being met as well as the degree to which customers are achieving the desired activities, experiences, and benefits that are targeted in the plan. By managing a spectrum of recreational settings in the RCBR area so that selected indicators and standards of resource and social conditions are within the limit of acceptable change, visitor enjoyment of the RCBR area will be maintained or increased and will provide for quality visitor experiences and benefits in a variety of settings, while lessening impacts to the resource.

5) Protect the habitats of threatened and endangered wildlife species by
- Closing Chow Doggone Island in the Colorado River to overnight camping to maintain its suitability for nesting bald eagles.
- Closing trail use above cliffs and rock climbing on cliffs that are occupied by peregrine falcon eyries from March 15 to July 15.
- Opening the potential ferret habitat in the Rabbit Valley area and lands adjacent to the Grand Valley Desert to the north for the establishment of a viable population of black-footed ferrets.

Rationale for the Above Three Management Actions:
Nesting bald eagles (a threatened species) are disturbed by the continual presence of humans. Closing Chow Doggone Island to overnight camping is necessary to protect an area highly frequented by nesting bald eagles. Nesting peregrine falcons (an endangered species) are also disturbed by the frequent presence of humans. They are particularly sensitive to disturbance above their nests when they are raising and fledging young birds, usually during the period from March 15 to July 15. Closing trail use above occupied peregrine falcon eyries during this time period is necessary to reduce human disturbance as much as possible during a critical time in their life cycle.

The black-footed ferret is an extremely rare mammal that has all but disappeared from its original habitat. In order to recover viable populations of this species, the government has in recent years been undertaking reintroduction efforts in other states such as Wyoming, South Dakota, Montana and Arizona. Habitat suitable for the black-footed ferret exists in the Rabbit Valley area, north of I-70, and in the lands adjacent to the Grand Valley Desert. This management action opens habitat for the potential reintroduction of ferrets in these areas, thereby assisting efforts to recover this species on a national basis. Reintroduction would not conflict with current recreational use or existing grazing operations.

These management actions also will help meet the standard for public land health relating to the maintenance and sustainability of special status and threatened and endangered species (standard #4).
6) Manage the following lands as additions to the Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness Study Area: 200 acres of lands in Devils Canyon, 280 acres of land in Flume Canyon, and 290 acres in two separate areas along the Colorado River. Lands recognized as non-suitable additions to the Black Ridge Canyons WSA include: 440 acres in Devils Canyon and 40 acres in Flume Canyon.

Rationale for this Management Action:
In the past five years, several parcels of land have been acquired by the BLM in the RCBR area. These parcels are contiguous to the Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness Study Area. Whenever new parcels of land are added to the boundary of a WSA, the BLM studies these parcels to determine their suitability for wilderness. Once a determination is made, the parcels are either managed as suitable additions to the existing WSA or dropped from further consideration. The four parcels outlined above were studied and a determination made as to whether they should be managed as additions to the existing WSA. The parcels recommended as additions will improve the integrity and manageability of this WSA in an area that is receiving increasing pressures from non-compatible uses. In particular, the lands recommended for wilderness in Devils and Flume Canyons greatly enhance the wilderness characteristics of these canyons.

7) Implement travel management actions as follows:

A) Expand the designated route system to include the area between I-70 and M.8 road, the area north of the river between Salt Creek and Loma, the area south of the river and north of the WSA boundary in Kodels, Flume and Devils Canyons and the area on either side of the upper bench road.

B) Prohibit motorized and mechanized access to the river bottom on the newly acquired Horsethief properties.

C) Allow motorized vehicle use on the Upper Bench Road from April 15 to August 15 only.

D) Allow motorized vehicle use on the Lower Black Ridge Road from August 15 to February 15 only.

E) Prohibit motor vehicle use on the Upper Bench Road and Lower Black Ridge roads from February 15 to April 15.

F) Prohibit motor vehicle use in Flume, Devils and Kodels Canyons on a year round basis.

Rationale for the Above Six Management Actions:
The expansion of the designated route system currently in place only in Rabbit Valley is needed to prevent the further proliferation of unauthorized routes occurring in other areas of the RCBR ecosystem. While the plan does not make explicit travel management decisions regarding which routes to designate for all areas outside of the WSA, it does recommend travel restrictions in several key areas where critical resource concerns are present. Prohibiting motorized and mechanized access to the river bottom on the newly acquired Horsethief properties is needed to maintain the recreational setting desired by floaters in Horsethief Canyon. The Upper Bench and Lower Black Ridge roads are being managed to protect the wilderness resource while still accommodating traditional users such as 4 wheelers and big game hunters as well as reducing the likelihood of trespass onto private lands.

The year round closure of Flume, Devils and Kodels Canyon's to motor vehicles is needed to better manage the WSA and to prevent the further proliferation of unauthorized routes in these areas. Since most of Flume Canyon is being recommended for wilderness, only foot and horse travel is appropriate in this area. Management of Flume, Devil's and Kodel's Canyon for hiking, equestrian and limited biking use only will provide visitor benefits through management of the canyons for primitive backcountry experiences. As the canyons are adjacent to the community of Fruita, the benefits will only increase as further urbanization occurs in this area. Given current and future levels of use, designated trails for hiking, biking and horseback use are also critical to protect resource values. These management actions will also serve to help meet the standards for public land health that relate to upland soils, riparian systems, and the maintenance of healthy plant and animal communities (standards #1, 2 & 3).

8) Limit camping in the Rabbit Valley area to no more than 7 consecutive nights

Rationale for this Management Action:
Rabbit Valley has in recent years become an extremely popular place to camp. A seven day camping limit restriction is needed in this area to allow a greater number of visitors to enjoy the available camp sites.

9) Limit the size of groups travelling in the canyons south of the river to no more than 25 people.

Rationale for this Management Action:
The restriction on group size is needed to protect wilderness values and help visitors realize the targeted benefits identified for this area.
10) Limit the size of groups travelling to the arches to no more than 12 people.

Rationale for this Management Action:
The restriction on group size for visitors to the Arches is needed to protect the area around the Arches from overuse by large groups and to provide a social setting consistent with the nearby wilderness study area.

11) Prohibit parking and camping along the Ute Trail (Rattlesnake Arches Road) and prohibit overnight parking at the Rattlesnake Trailhead

Rationale for this Management Action:
The land on either side of the cherry stem road to the Rattlesnake Arches is part of the Black Ridge Canyons WSA. In the past, visitors have driven off of this route in search of potential campsites. This activity has in some areas caused unacceptable impacts to the WSA. Overnight parking will not be allowed at the trailhead. This management action is needed in order to protect the wilderness resource while still allowing visitors reasonable access to the arches without overloading the small parking area.

12) Prohibit overnight camping on the bench below and the mesa top above the arches

Rationale for this Management Action:
This is a new management action that was not initially proposed in the draft RCBR Plan. In the past, overnight visitors to the area have camped in close proximity to the arches. This activity has created in some areas unacceptable impacts to the WSA in the form of damaged vegetation, fire scars etc. It is an action the Bureau has for several years been encouraging visitors to adhere to. It is needed to protect wilderness values and help visitors realize the targeted benefits identified for this area.

13) Establish a no shooting zone on all BLM lands south of the river and north of the WSA between the Horsethief State Wildlife Area and Hwy 340.

Rationale for this Management Action:
The canyons west of Fruita have in recent years experienced a marked increase in the number of people recreating. A wide variety of activities are now occurring on the roads and trails in Kodels, Devils, Flume and Pollock Canyons. This restriction is needed in order to eliminate the possibility of a visitor being injured or killed from a stray bullet from target shooters. This restriction does not apply to the lawful taking of game. This restriction is also consistent with the City of Fruita restrictions on target shooting on City of Fruita lands within this zone.

Recommended Changes to the Draft Plan

Along with the above mentioned addition of a management action that prohibits overnight camping on the mesa above and the bench below the Rattlesnake Arches, the following changes to the final RCBR Plan are recommended.

1) On Page 5-7 in the draft plan, under “Human Use and Occupancy”, delete item “b” which states “To provide a social setting consistent with the character of the area, the size of groups traveling through the area will be limited to 25 people per group through education and informational signing”. This management action pertains to the Mary’s and Lion’s Loop area of the Kokopelli Trail.

Rationale for Recommended Change

Currently there is not a problem with large groups on this section of the Kokopelli Trail. During the Fruita Fat Tire Festival and during occasional competitive events, group use of greater than 25 people is currently permitted under a “Special Recreation Use Permit”. The area has been developed for competitive events and that is consistent with local community benefits. This restriction will do very little to maintain the desired social setting recommended for this area, and therefore is not needed.

2) On Page 5-32 in the draft plan, change the wording under the Service Delivery System, item “b” to read – “Designate the Colorado River corridor as a “Special Area” and compile a business plan and conduct a study on the feasibility of charging all users a fee for the use of this area.”

Rationale for Recommended Change

The wording in the draft plan merely had the BLM considering the possibility of designating the River Corridor as a “Special Area”. This wording was not strong enough, and at this time, warrants a “Special Area” designation. There has been discussion of charging a fee for the use of this area. The idea has merit, and a study, with further public involvement and participation, should be undertaken to determine if this course of action is feasible. Authority for this action is contained in the Code of Federal Regulations (43 CFR, 8372).

3) On Page 5-33 in the draft plan, add as item "n" the following. “To promote the achievement of targeted benefits, limit the number of commercial float outfitters to current levels (34), and do not issue additional permits if existing outfitters relinquish their permit.”
Rationale for Recommended Change

To date there are 34 commercial river outfitters permitted by the BLM offices in Grand Junction and Moab to operate on the Colorado River between Loma and Westwater. This number is too high and the number of commercial outfitters on this stretch of the Colorado River needs to be reduced. The Bureau has received input from other commercial operators as well as members of the general public that the number of float outfitters on this portion of the Colorado is too high. This moratorium on the number of river outfitter permits will help to keep the number of outfitters from growing even further and will eventually reduce the number of commercial permits on this stretch of the Colorado River.

4) On Page 5-44 in the draft plan, change the wording under Human Use & Occupancy-- Social Setting: , item "b." to read--“Manage for day-use of the area. No parking or camping would be permitted along the Ute Trail and no overnight parking would be permitted at the Rattlesnake Trailhead (see Map 9.). All backpackers will be required to leave their cars on the upper bench or at the Mee Canyon trailhead.” (See rationale for item #11 above)

Rationale for not Adopting ALTERNATIVE A - Primitive Recreation Emphasis

Alternative A is the same as the proposed action with the exception of several key management actions. The rationale for not implementing these management actions is summarized below.

Rationale in favor of not imposing a group size limit on the river

- While not imposing a group size limit on the river, the plan proposes a group size limit of no more than 25 persons hiking in the canyons on shore to protect wilderness values.
- There already exists a group size limit of 25 persons plus guides on the Westwater portion of the river (a third of all users that float Ruby Canyon, go on to float Westwater as well). Roughly a third of all users travel with an outfitter. Roughly a third of all commercial trips also float Westwater Canyon.
- Very few parties using this portion of the river exceed 25 people per day (2 or 3 per year). The average party size is currently 14-16 people.
- To date the Bureau has received virtually no unsolicited complaints from floaters regarding float groups that are too large.

- While a group size limit will not be imposed on the river, certain thresholds will be established that will define the acceptable level of social encounters on the river. Using the “Limits of Acceptable Change” process, indicators and standards are being proposed that will define, in a quantifiable way, the appropriate amount of use on the river. If the standards set cannot be maintained, certain management actions will be employed to try and bring the indicators back within standard.

Rationale in favor of continuing to allow mountain bikes on Pollock Bench Trail

- While mountain bike use will be allowed to continue on the trail, BLM and its community service partners will not market or promote the trail in any way.
- While use of the trail by mountain bikers has increased in recent years, this use has not created unacceptable resource damage to the WSA.
- This is not a precedence setting situation. Other BLM offices in the country currently allow mountain biking in some of their WSA’s.
- In order to better manage the mountain bikers that make use of this trail, we are proposing a permit system to (1) better educate the bikers about protecting wilderness values, and (2) get a better idea of the number of bikers currently using the trail.

Rationale in favor of not closing the cherry stem portion of the Ute Trail to motorized use

- The Arches are a nationally significant, geologic attraction that should be accessible to the general public.
- The issue of allowing motorized use in the cherry stem was decided in the Wilderness EIS.
- No permanent facilities or development of any kind are being proposed for the trailhead area thereby keeping Congressional options open for potentially designating the area as wilderness.
- Overnight car camping will be prohibited at the trailhead and on either side of the cherry stem road to the arches thereby limiting the potential for unacceptable impacts to occur in this area. We are currently meeting IMP guidelines in this area of the WSA.
- To reduce the chances for unacceptable resource and social conditions, groups travelling to the arches will be encouraged to limit their group size to no more than 12 people.

- The four wheel drive experience the Black Ridge Road provides is part of the total experience of "The Arches".

Rationale in favor of not closing the lower Black Ridge road to motorized use year round

- The lower road will be closed to motorized use half of the year Feb 15 - Aug 15) to minimize impact to the WSA while still allowing hunters access into the area in the fall to harvest mountain lions and other big game. Access for hunters to specifically harvest mountain lions is in direct support of the DOW's goal of reducing the number of lions in this area to reduce the incidents of predation on big horn sheep.

- Snowfall usually closes the road in mid December, hence in reality the road would be open to motorized vehicles for only four months.

- Keeping the lower road open during the hunting season markedly reduces the potential for trespass onto private lands from the upper bench road.

Rationale in favor of not restricting motorized watercraft in Ruby Canyon

- The main boat launch site accessing Ruby Canyon (Loma Boat Launch) was originally purchased and built by DOW for duck hunters to launch their motorized watercraft.

- The BLM does not own/control the river put-in points. BLM has no legal authority to restrict motorized use if the users launched somewhere other than on BLM and never touched the bed and banks of the river.

- While some conflicts currently exist between the motorized and non-motorized users, they are not yet severe enough to warrant an outright ban on motorized craft (even during the primary float season). Focused educational efforts directed towards river users will serve to reduce the level of conflicts between motorized and non-motorized river boaters.

- Motorized watercraft use during the primary float season is sometimes important for search and rescue, river patrol and trash pick up purposes. The BLM occasionally uses small horse power motors when patrolling with their rafts.

- While the BLM has an interest in maintaining the natural and primitive values present in the Canyons, there already exists intrusions into this setting from other motorized sources, i.e. trains, and activities on private land.

Rationale in favor of allowing new trails to be constructed inside of the WSA

- While at first glance it might seem that a policy of no new trail construction in the WSA would serve to protect the primitive values of the area. In reality, as more and more users seek out the wilder portions of the area, new trails will be pioneered by these users to reach remote areas of the WSA. In many instances these new trails will be poorly located and subject to erosion and resource damage.

- New trails will only be constructed if use levels warrant and/or if resource damage is occurring from user pioneered trails.

Rationale for not Adopting ALTERNATIVE B- No Action

The no action alternative, or the continuation of existing management was not selected to guide management in the RCBR area because it does not address the vision statement developed by the ad-hoc committee, it does not meet objectives set for the RCBR area by the ad-hoc committee, nor does it help to better meet the standards designed to maintain or achieve healthy public lands.
FINDINGS OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts pertaining to those actions that would **not amend** the Grand Junction Resource Area, Resource Management Plan (items 1, 2, 3, & 4 in the record of decision and all other actions proposed in the RCBR plan), impacts are not expected to be significant and therefore an environmental impact statement is not required.

Approved by: [Signature]
Catherine Robertson
Area Manager
March 1998

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts pertaining to those actions that would **amend** the Grand Junction Resource Areas Resource Management Plan (remaining items #5 thru #13 in the record of decision), impacts are not expected to be significant and therefore an environmental impact statement is not required.

Approved by: [Signature]
Ann Morgan
Colorado State Director
March 1998