December 5, 2017

Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests

Attn: Plan Revision Team

2250 South Main Street

Delta, CO 81416

Re: Draft Forest Plan Assessments Comments

Dear Mr. Scott Armentrout and GMUG Forest Planning Team:

Thank you for the opportunity to participate as a cooperating agency in the GMUG Forest Planning effort. We appreciate the significance and scale of the project undertaken by the GMUG Planning Team. Gunnison County is particularly interested in the Forest Plan revision process because of the significant interlinkages between activities and resources on the Forest and the economy, recreation, and landscape of Gunnison County.

The goals of Gunnison County include maintaining a strong agricultural industry and community and maintaining a high quality recreation experience for residents and visitors. Designate wilderness areas are an anchor of our region that protect watersheds, agriculture, air quality and flora and fauna. We are participants in the Gunnison County Public Lands Initiative and believe the collaborative effort of that group is critical for our local success. We are supportive of multiple uses utilizing the forest and its resources.

The Gunnison County Commissioners and Gunnison County staff have reviewed the GMUG's draft Assessment Reports and have the following comments.

General

We appreciate that there are significant differences between each of the three forests that make up the GMUG. These individual forest areas have different impacts, needs and challenges. We encourage the GMUG Planning Team to develop as much specificity and recommendations for each area as possible, rather than treating the entire GMUG as a homogenous area with similar needs and challenges. We respect that other communities issues may be different than those we are experiencing locally and do not wish to impede on those needs. We would like to receive more information about how those differing needs can be addressed in the Forest Plan.

Recreation

Recreation and tourism and significant economic industries in Gunnison County. Residents of the County place a high value on the landscape, views, access to nature and outdoor recreation. We have experienced significant growth in visitors and recreationists in the past five years, and along with that growth we have also experience some negative impacts related to sanitation, overcrowding, lack of infrastructure and resource damage.

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Participation rates for the GMUG's top ten outdoor recreation activities noted in Table 17 in the Recreation draft assessment noted that in 2014 may not reflect significant growth in use that seemed to spike in 2015. The summer of 2015 saw a significant increase in visitors and resource damages in areas around Crested Butte that were cause of significant concern.

There appears to be some conflicting statements in this Assessment. Table 17 of the Recreation draft assessment notes that there was no increase in motorcycle use between 2009 and 2014, while there was a 5% increase in bicycle use in that same time period. Page 57 of the Recreation draft Assessment states, "Mountain biking, born in Crested Butte, is slowly losing ground in popularity to dirt bike use (where such use is allowed)." This statement seems to conflict with the survey data and it would be beneficial to cite a source for this statement.

Our experience is that there is a heavy motorized use in the Taylor Canyon and Taylor Park area, while there is heavy mountain bike use in the Crested Butte area. Areas, such as Cement Creek, are used similarly by both user groups. We believe it will be beneficial to plan for increases in both uses. The Gunnison-Crested Butte Tourism Association has focused much their summer marketing efforts around mountain biking in the Gunnison Valley and we do not see that this activity is shrinking or being outpaced by motorcycles. We agree that there are significant numbers of motorcycle users that would like to see their experience improved and maintained on the Forest.

There seems to be conflicting statements in the Recreation draft assessment related to camping in established campgrounds and dispersed sites. Part of the Assessment notes that fewer visitors seek to camp in campgrounds another section states that the demand for developed sites in close proximity to services and safety are increasing. We see a demand for all types of camping—established campgrounds and dispersed sites. There are not enough camping sites in the Crested Butte area to accommodate current demand and we expect this problem to continue to grow.

Rather than close camping sites that do not meet Forest Service health and safety standards we urge you to seek collaborative partnerships to improve facilities that likely provide much needed camping sites on the Forest. We see a need to add bathroom facilities at many locations in Gunnison County.

We agree that the recreation and visitor experience is being degraded by the lack of adequate facilities at many day use areas, campgrounds and trailheads, along with lack of maintenance and the continued growth in visitors to many of these sites.

We believe that it is critical that the Forest Plan begin to address prioritization of the most pressing issues where impacts are greatest and can also be mitigated through maintenance, installation of new infrastructure or amenities. Many of the areas that are being impacted most heavily (Crested Butte and Taylor Park) in Gunnison County area appeared to receive equal treatment in the Assessment as areas that receive very limited use (Sargents Mesa). Areas being impacted by heavy use should have higher priority for maintenance and funding over other areas with fewer impacts.

The need for change in how we address growing numbers of visitors and their increasing demand for higher level services and amenities is important for mitigation of those impacts. The population of Colorado is projected to continue to increase and each year our public lands seem to welcome more visitors—some that are good stewards of the land and others that may not have the information to be good stewards. Education, communication and infrastructure are critical elements to protect our public

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lands from degradation and to maintain the high quality user experience that our residents and visitors expect.

Timber

We support timber as an industry that supports the economies of communities on the GMUG Forest and forest health. There are particular benefits at this time with salvage of materials from the Forest that can then be utilized as a wood product while also mitigating some of the negative impacts of declining forest health.

We encourage the GMUG Planning Team to consider how timber planning and management can be utilized over the long term as an even better management tool to promote forest health.

Benefits to People

We support the 2012 Planning Rule that the new plan "explicitly consider the Forest's role and contributions to social and economic sustainability as well as ecosystem services." The solitude, industry, jobs, recreation, view-sheds and other assets that the Forest provides are critical to the residents and visitors of Gunnison County. Residents of the County place a high value on their quality of life which includes access to the outdoors, recreation and a high value on our connection to nature. We look forward to more information in the next phases of the process to understand how this role is considered.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and your consideration. We appreciate the hard work, time and energy that is required to update a plan of this magnitude.

Sincerely,

Gunnison County Board of Commissioners

Phil Chamberland, Chair | Jonathan Houck | John Messner

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