COLORADO PARKS & WILDLIFE

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February 14, 2013

Ms. Cathie Pagano
Gunnison County Community Development
221 N. Wisconsin St. Suite D
Gunnison, CO 81230

Re: Monson Creek Ranch, Inc. Land Use Change

Dear Ms. Pagano,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed land use change for the Monson Creek Ranch Inc. property. This 465 acre parcel is located at 59005 Highway 50, approximately 19 miles east of the City of Gunnison.

Monson Creek Ranch's request would allow for two current on-site dwellings to be utilized for year-round commercial lodging. The applicant also proposes the site to be a staging area for guided horseback rides, jeep tours, and hay/sleigh rides which will originate from the property. All activities are proposed to depart from a 3.59 acre staging area on the applicant's privately owned land before entering onto Federally-owned, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administered lands. Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) offers the following comments for your consideration.

Gunnison Sage-grouse

Details of the project were discussed in depth at a December 10th, 2012 meeting between representatives from Gunnison County, BLM, and CPW. A letter provided by the Gunnison County Wildlife Coordinator to the Gunnison County Community Development Department, dated January 8th 2013, summarized the potential impacts to Gunnison Sage-grouse and their habitat with the approval of this permit. CPW supports the Gunnison County Wildlife Coordinator's recommendations provided in that letter aimed at helping avoid and minimize impacts to existing grouse populations.

On January 11, 2013, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) published in the Federal Register a proposal to add the Gunnison sage-grouse to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife protected under the Federal Endangered Species Act [16 U.S.C.A. §§ 1531-43]. The listing of this species as Endangered or Threatened will make it unlawful to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect any individuals of this species without prior authorization from the USFWS. The listing proposal includes maps identifying "critical habitat" essential to the conservation of the species. The Monson Creek Ranch project falls within an area mapped by the USFWS as proposed critical habitat for Gunnison Sage-grouse. CPW recommends that

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the project proponent contact the USFWS prior to initiation of the activities outlined in their proposal, in order to ensure compliance with the Endangered Species Act.

Big Game Issue

CPW also recognizes that the applicant has, or will be requesting a BLM permit to allow the utilization of the Federal land currently supporting their seasonal horseback tours to include hay and sleigh rides year-round. The Tomichi Dome area is arguably the most critical winter range located in game management unit (GMU) 551. According to CPW's species activity mapping (SAM), this site is identified as a winter concentration area, and severe winter range for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn.

CPW is concerned that increased activity on/near Tomichi Dome during the winter months would most likely result in displacement of animals to less desirable habitats. Recent research suggests that this displacement to sub-optimal habitats can cause population level effects on ungulates by potentially decreasing survival and recruitment (Sawyer et al. 2006, 2009, Sawyer and Neilsen 2010). Displacement of wintering animals from public lands may also increase or create conflicts with agricultural producers resulting in game damage issues for the surrounding landowners.

In addition, the south-facing aspect and abundance of mountain big sagebrush provide winter habitat for Gunnison sage-grouse. CPW recommends that during the critical winter months (December 1– April 15), the public lands surrounding Monson Creek Ranch be specifically managed for wildlife such as the above listed big-game species and Gunnison sage-grouse.

Weeds

The spread of noxious weeds may result in the degradation or elimination of preferred wildlife habitats. CPW recognizes that the disturbance of soils generally increases the potential for noxious weed growth and the inherent spread through increased travel over the landscape. CPW recommends Monson Creek Ranch actively manage noxious weeds occurring on their property to reduce potential spread along travel routes and onto important, adjacent wildlife habitat.

Thanks again for the opportunity to comment on the Monson Creek Inc. land use change proposal. Please feel free to contact our office at (970) 641-7060 if you need any additional information or clarification.

Sincerely,

J Wenum
Area Wildlife Manager-Gunnison

Cc: Patt Dorsey, SW Region Manager
Nick Gallowich, DWM-Gunnison East
Nathan Seward, CPW Wildlife Biologist
Brandon Diamond, CPW Terrestrial Biologist

References

Sawyer, H. and R. Neilsen. 2010. Mule deer monitoring in the Pinedale Anticline Project Area. Pinedale Anticline Planning Office (PAPO), Pinedale, WY. 19 pp.

Sawyer, H., Kauffman M.J., and R.M. Nielson. 2009. Influence of well pad activity on winter habitat selection patterns of mule deer. Journal of Wildlife Management 73:1052-1061.

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