

# OURAY COUNTY Plaindealer

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## Feds propose restrictions on Blue Lakes recreation



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Lower Blue Lake is located at the base of Mt. Sneffels in the Uncompahgre National Forest, southwest of Ridgway. A new plan unveiled by the U.S. Forest Service proposes limiting visitors in a newly created Mt. Sneffels Wilderness Zone and requiring permits for overnight use in some areas.

### With visitation up 300% in last decade, forest management plan calls for limiting camping, permits in some areas

By Erin McIntyre  
erin@ouraynews.com

The U.S. Forest Service is proposing use restrictions on the area around Blue Lakes, in response to impacts from increased visitation and impacts from more people using public lands.

The proposed management plan stops short of requiring permits for hiking the Blue Lakes trail, at the base of Mt. Sneffels, as has been implemented for some other popular trails. But it proposes limiting camping, requiring permits for overnight use in some places, requiring day-use permits in wilderness areas, and other ways to mitigate the impacts of visitation.

The Blue Lakes area receives around 35,000 visitors per year, with the majority of those visitors flocking to the trails from June to September, according to the Forest Service.

The increased visitation, which exacerbated during the pandemic, resulted in various recreation-related impacts,

including, "human waste (unburied waste and trash), vegetation loss from campsite expansion, dogs off-leash, illegal campfires, unintended wildlife encounters, social conflicts (loud music), overcrowding, and parking issues," according to the agency.

The plan proposes management of 16,200 acres within the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness and the surrounding areas – dividing the area into five zones that have different levels of restrictions, depending on the impacts in those areas and how they've been used for recreation. Those zones are referred to as the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness Zone, the Mt. Sneffels Peak Zone, the Yankee Boy Zone, the Lower East Dallas Zone (which includes the main access to the popular Blue Lakes trail) and the Blaine Basin Zone.

In all the zones, camping would be limited to designated sites or campgrounds to minimize resource damage. Camping near the lower and upper Blue Lakes has been of particular concern in the past.



Erin McIntyre — Ouray County Plaindealer

Vehicles crowd the parking area at the Blue Lakes trailhead last summer.

The plan also calls for permits and reservations in certain areas – including the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness Zone – from May 1 to Sept. 30. These permits would limit group sizes to 10, among other rules, and would be limited to no more than 40 permits per day for day use and 24 permits for overnight camping.

Permits would also be required for overnight camping in the wilderness zone with

an online limited permit, reservation and fee system from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day. Those permits would limit campers to two nights per stay, with no more than four nights total in a season for a permit holder. Only six people would be allowed per campsite, among other rules.

Permits would also be

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## Childcare, apartments eyed in Ridgway

Home Trust obtains \$360,000 state loan to buy vacant lot

By Liz Teitz  
liz@ouraynews.com

The Home Trust of Ouray County will receive a \$360,000 loan from the state to purchase a vacant lot in Ridgway, where the organization plans to build a childcare center and affordable rental apartments.

The State Housing Board voted last week to approve the land acquisition funds for Executive Director Andrea Sokolowski to buy the property at 660 Sherman St.

Sokolowski, who recently received a total of \$30,000 for operational funding from the Ouray County, Ridgway and Ouray governments, formed the Home Trust in 2019 and has been working toward its first housing project, a duplex on donated land in Ridgway.

She's still working to secure funding for that project, which will be built in partnership with Habitat for Humanity, while also moving forward on the mixed-use project on Sherman Street.

The loan from the Department of Local Affairs Operation Turnkey program will allow her to purchase the lot from the Robertson Family Revocable Trust at a discounted price.

The Home Trust plans to build a childcare facility with a playground and commercial space on the first floor. There will be 14 one- and two-bedroom apartments, which are intended for residents earning below 80% of the area median income (AMI). One unit will be an accessible apartment on the ground floor. Those plans are preliminary and could shift based on need, Sokolowski said.

AMI is calculated annually by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and varies by family size: under the newly released 2022 limits, an individual earning up to \$49,600 and a family of four earning up to \$70,850 would qualify for apartments at 80%.

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# BLUE

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required for the Mt. Sneffels Summit Zone – but those permits would not be limited.

During the pandemic, locals who were concerned about overuse and preserving the natural resources at Blue Lakes launched a campaign to help educate visitors about "leave no trace" principles. Volunteers staffed the trailhead during heavy-use periods of the summer, providing information on everything from proper human waste disposal to other best practices to lessen the impact of their recreation. The "Save the Blues" campaign, launched in partnership with the Ridgway-Ouray Community Council and the San Juan Mountain Association with the Forest Service's blessing, had a goal of educating the public to lessen impacts, as the federal agency collected more information and started drafting a proposed plan.

Last year, Western Colorado University master's student Abraham Proffitt conducted a study on usage and impacts to the area. He recently finalized the report, and its findings include:

- Roughly 300% increase in visitor numbers at the Blue Lakes trail since 2011.
  - Approximately 3,000 monthly vehicles were observed on off-road trails in the area. The busiest route is Camp Bird Road, and the highest recorded number of vehicles was on July 3, with 5,051 vehicles counted in one day at the summits of Camp Bird Road, Black Bear Pass, Corkscrew, Imogene Pass and Ophir Pass.
  - The Blue Lakes Trail has an average of 164 hikers per day, with the busiest traffic on Saturdays. The highest recorded number of hikers was 509, on Sept. 5, and the total number of hikers counted from June through October was 22,402.
  - There was a 740% increase in the number of campsites from 2010 to 2021, in dispersed camping areas in the Blue Lakes areas.
  - Trash and human waste are significant problems at Blue Lakes. Proffitt documented several examples of found items, including: feces, sleeping bags, a family-sized tent, socks, plastic bottles, soda cans, cotton balls, food wrappers and a hammock.
- Proffitt used infrared trail cameras, campsite inventories and water tests to help inform his report. His research found "a substantial increase in ecological damage in the Blue Lakes area and the OHV trails system compared with prior smaller-scale studies." His work is the most tangible evidence the Forest Service has of current usage and impacts on the area. His recommendations included instituting a permit

system; restricting areas for rehabilitation; updating infrastructure, including better parking, toilets, campsites and signs; and increasing backcountry education.

Proffitt noted in his report that he also collected comments from users, many of whom were surprised there wasn't a permit system already in place.

"Nearly every visitor I spoke with, whether on the trail or virtually, was unhappy with the conditions of the trail and its impacts on the camping area," he wrote. "Many people commented on the abundance of human waste and trash scattered throughout the campground and often asked why we did not have a compost toilet at the campground."

He also noted there was a divide between hikers who said they lived here and others, in regard to opinions about a possible permit system.

"Most people in favor of a permit system claimed to be residents of the area and argued that only tourists should be required to buy a permit," he wrote. "While this might limit the influx of visitors to the Blue Lakes area, I am not sure preferential treatment is the best solution because it could cause resentment between tourists and residents."

The public has until May 20 to comment on the Blue Lakes Visitor Use Management Plan #61979, available online at [www.fs.usda.gov](http://www.fs.usda.gov). There will be another opportunity for public comment later, when a preliminary environmental assessment is ready for review.

Comments on the proposed plan can be made online or sent to Ouray District Ranger Dana Gardunio, 2505 S. Townsend Ave. Montrose, CO 81401. Anyone with questions can contact Natural Resource Specialist Julie Jackson at 970-240-5429.



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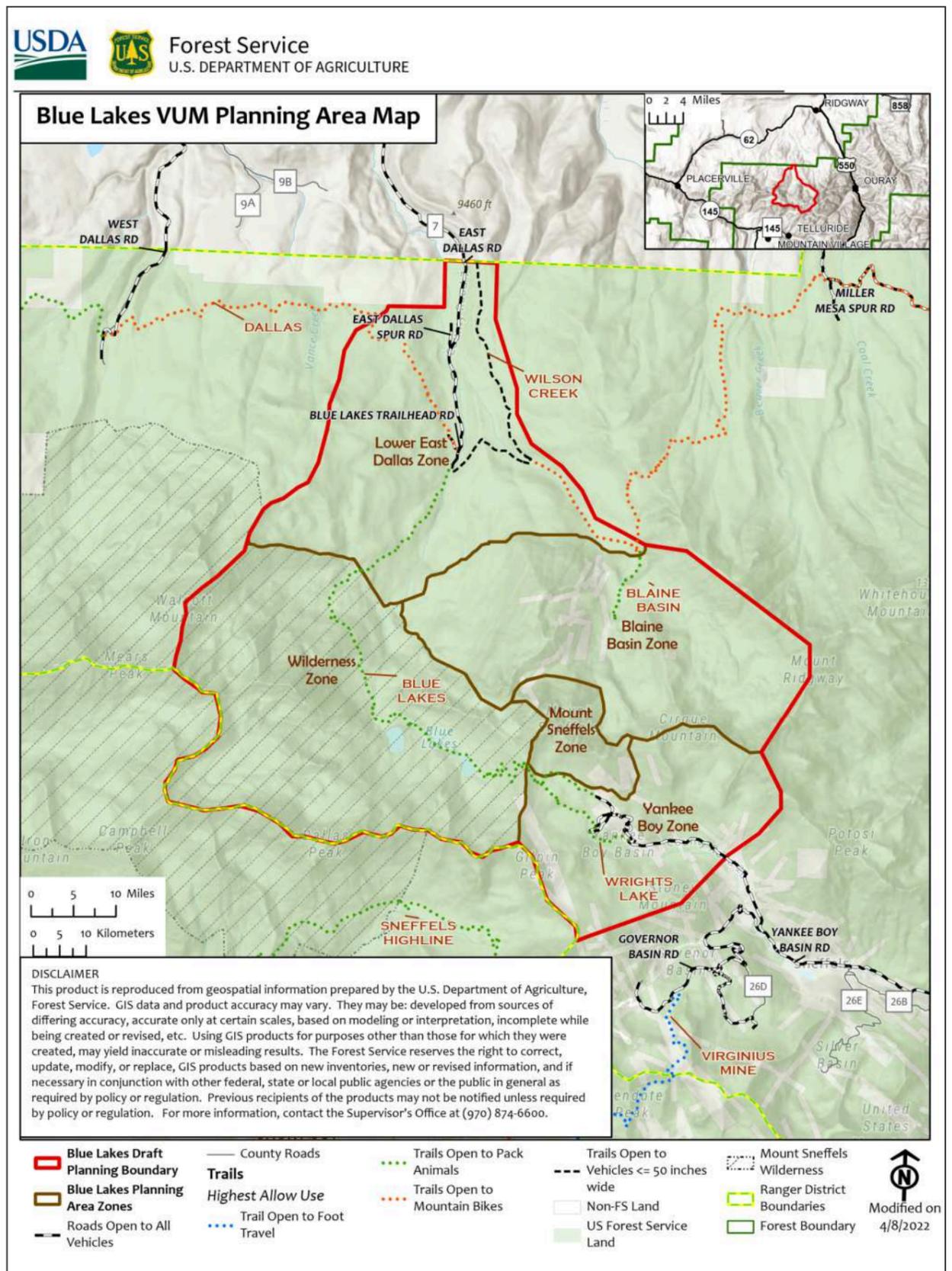


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Map courtesy U.S. Forest Service  
The U.S. Forest Service is proposing to divide management of the 16,200 acres within the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness and the surrounding areas into five zones that have different levels of recreational restrictions. Camping would be limited to designated sites or campgrounds in all zones.