

# Blue Lakes Visitor Use Management Plan

## Details of Draft Proposed Action

April 8, 2022

### Introduction

The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests (GMUG) is proposing a Visitor Use Management Plan (hereafter referred to as ‘the plan’ or plan) for the Blue Lakes planning area. The Blue Lakes planning area includes areas within the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness as well as areas outside of the Wilderness. The planning area can be accessed from the south on County Road 7 about 20 miles outside of Ridgway, CO or from the north on Camp Bird Road in the Yankee Boy Basin about 20 miles outside of Ouray, CO. One of the most popular trails in the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness is the Blue Lakes Trail, an 8-mile heavily trafficked through-hike or out and back hike. The Blue Lakes Trail gets its name from the three cobalt blue lakes that are situated in the high alpine valley. Known for its wildflowers, close access to Mt. Sneffels, breathtaking views, and opportunities for viewing wildlife, the Blue Lakes hosts around 35,000 annual visitors. The bulk of this visitation occurs in the short summer season, between June and September, resulting in cumulative recreation-related impacts. Impacts include 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.

The plan will address visitor use management and stewardship of 16,200 acres within the Mount Sneffels Wilderness and surrounding areas. The plan will guide the creation of a visitor use management strategy to restore and preserve natural conditions by addressing the biophysical impacts that are occurring due to the increase of use within the planning boundary.

### Purpose and Need of the Plan

In response to increasing natural resource degradation issues and management challenges, the purpose of the plan is to provide for comprehensive management of visitor use within the Blues Lakes planning area. The plan seeks to balance the preservation of natural conditions by addressing biophysical/social impacts resulting from visitor use, while continuing to provide quality opportunities for recreation opportunities outside of the Wilderness and opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation within the Wilderness. Action needs to be taken to preserve wilderness character as required by the Wilderness Act of 1964, and to achieve desired conditions prescribed by the current LRMP direction. The purpose of the plan is to guide visitor use management in the Blue Lakes area within the legal framework of the Wilderness Act of 1964, United States Forest Service (USFS) policy and regulations and in conformance with the current direction found in the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests – (GMUG) LRMP as amended in 1991. The plan’s intent is to address visitor use within the planning area with an adaptable, long-term strategy to balance the preservation of natural conditions while continuing to provide quality recreation opportunities outside of the Wilderness and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation within the Wilderness.

## **Issues and Alternatives**

It is anticipated the environmental assessment (EA) will address the No Action and the Proposed Action alternative and any other reasonable alternative resulting from issues raised by the public and/or the Forest Service. Analysis will include the effects and cumulative effects associated with visitor use management. EA is expected to consider the effects of the proposed project on the following resources: economics, surface and ground water resources (including perennial streams), wildlife (including threatened, endangered, sensitive and management indicator species), soils and geologic hazards, vegetation (including impacts to riparian vegetation and associated habitat), cultural resources, existing land uses, including recreation, existing roads/facilities, visual resources, livestock management, air quality, climate change and cumulative impacts.

The Forest Service and public may identify additional indicators and triggers that will be needed to meet desired conditions for each zone as well as any additional design features.

## **Public and Tribal Consultation and Involvement**

The public will have two opportunities to comment one during the scoping period and another when preliminary EA is ready. There will be also be an objection period for those who provide comments during an official comment period.

Local tribes will be consulted about this project using government-to-government protocols.

## **Plan Proposal**

The proposed action is to adaptively manage visitor use in the Blue Lakes area for the reduction of biophysical/social impacts and to preserve opportunities for Wilderness recreation and related socioeconomic benefits in conformance with Wilderness Act direction and the LRMP. The Planning Area is within five LRMP Management Areas:

2A – Semi-primitive motorized recreation opportunities in a natural appearing environment.

2B – Roaded natural and rural recreation opportunities. Major travel routes maintained or improved visual quality.

3A – Semi-primitive non-motorized recreation opportunities.

8B – Primitive wilderness recreation setting. High levels of solitude, high opportunities for challenge, risk and self-reliance. Trail encounters will generally be low, less than 5 other parties per day. The area is closed to motorized vehicle use.

8C – Semi-primitive wilderness recreation setting. Moderate levels of solitude, moderate opportunities for challenge, risk and self-reliance. Trail encounters will generally be moderate to high, 5 to 20 other parties per day. This area is closed to motorized use.

The purpose of this plan is to refine and implement the existing management direction set forth and focus on impacts specifically related to the planning area. The planning area is divided into five zones: Mt. Sneffels Wilderness Zone, Mt. Sneffels Peak Zone, Yankee Boy Zone, Lower East Dallas Zone, and Blaine Basin Zone.

Following the completion of the NEPA document, a monitoring and implementation plan

including a communication plan would be completed.

If the Blaine Basin Zone is added to the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness (as proposed), a plan, or plan amendment would be developed to determine management direction within the area consistent with enabling legislation.

The GMUG is currently in process of a land and resources management plan revision.

### **Zone Desired Conditions**

**Mt. Sneffels Wilderness Zone** is fully within the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness. The zone will be managed in accordance with the Wilderness Act of 1964 and Colorado Wilderness Act of 1980. Management emphasis is to provide for the protection of natural bio-physical conditions, high scenic integrity, and provide for semi-primitive wilderness recreational opportunities. Settings would be managed for a relatively high degree of solitude, risk, challenge, and self-reliance. Recreational use is by primitive means and would be limited to non-motorized/non-mechanized activities.

**Mt. Sneffels Peak Zone** lies adjacent to the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness. Management emphasis is to provide for a self-reliant, challenging accent to the summit of Mt. Sneffels, a fourteener. Use will be managed to protect the quality and safety of the recreational opportunity. Management activities would not be visually evident or would remain unnoticeable. Recreational use would be limited to nonmotorized/nonmechanized activities.

**Yankee Boy Zone** lies within the Yankee Boy Basin. Management emphasis is to provide for semi-primitive motorized recreation opportunities. Use would be managed to provide technical motorized opportunities and non-motorized/nonmechanized access to the Mt. Sneffels Peak and Wilderness zones while protecting the historic, scenic, and biophysical resources to provide for quality recreational opportunities. Settings would be managed for high social interaction and provide support facilities such as restrooms and parking areas.

**Lower East Dallas Zone** is the main access to the Mt. Sneffels Wilderness and Blaine Basin Zones. Management emphases is to provide for a variety of quality recreational opportunities while protecting the biophysical resources and the scenic integrity of the area. Setting would range from places where social interaction predominates to places where interaction with other people is less frequent and the area feels somewhat remote – particularly those coming from and urban environment and provide support facilities such as restrooms and parking areas. Recreational use would include motorized and non-motorized activities where appropriate.

**Blaine Basin Zone** has been proposed in legislation as wilderness and lies within an upper tier roadless area. Management emphasis is to provide for the protection of natural biophysical conditions and scenic integrity and provide semi-primitive recreational opportunities. Social settings would be managed for a relatively high degree of solitude, risk, challenge, and self-reliance. Recreational use is by primitive means and would be limited to non-motorized/non-mechanized activities.

## **Management prescriptions for each zone:**

### **Applicable to All Zones:**

#### **Camping**

- All camping within the planning boundary will be limited to designated sites and/or campgrounds during snow free periods to minimize resource damage.
- Designated sites will not occur above tree line
- Rehabilitate closed areas and delineate designated campsites/campgrounds by:
  - Scarifying and stabilizing compacted soil
  - Translocating organic matter into denuded areas
  - Using visual or physical barriers such as partially buried rocks, dead down timber, seeding, transplanting vegetation, fencing, etc.
  - Installing signs and/or markers (as needed)
- Delineating pathways to walk-in campsites
- Designating and improving access to vehicle campsites/campgrounds
- Require food storage and livestock feed restrictions to minimize conflicts with wildlife

#### **Facilities/Trails/Travel Management**

- Dogs must remain on leashes in developed areas such as trailheads
- Outside of developed areas and outside the wilderness, dogs must be under direct verbal or physical control at all times
- Close areas in active rehabilitation, maintenance, and/or construction for public safety and to ensure successful rehabilitation.
- Close and rehabilitate redundant or unsustainable user created social trails and/or roads.
- Trail reconstruction and/or maintenance will be conducted
- Improve and/or maintain designated roads
- Reconstruct and/or realign designated roads and trails, where needed
- Install signs/markers, where needed and appropriate

#### **Human Waste**

- Require burial or removal of human solid waste consistent with Leave No Trace ethics outside of wilderness zone

#### **Design Features\***

- Plant surveys will be conducted prior to implementation in areas with new disturbance

- Wildlife and archeological surveys will be conducted prior to implementation
- Designated camp sites:
  - In sustainable locations with sustainable access
  - In existing impacted areas where possible
    - If within 100 ft of water, the following design features will be utilized to protect water quality:
      - Soil stabilization
      - Hardened recreation access
      - Vegetative buffer
  - New designated areas will be:
    - Visually screened from the road and other sites with vegetation or topography
    - Located 100 ft from water
- All road and trail construction and maintenance will adhere to Forest Service Manual and Forest Service Handbook guidance
- Realignments would be contained within 500 ft either side of a currently designated route
- Heavy equipment operators will be encouraged to travel and work on existing roads and disturbed areas where possible
- As necessary, all disturbances that will be seeded will be native plant species indigenous to the project area in a certified weed-free mix.
- No perennial water bodies or streams discharging into water bodies will be impacted by equipment, dredge, fill or contaminant of any kind
- No wetland or riparian habitat will be impacted
- All heavy equipment, UTVs, and trailers entering Forest Service lands will be power washed to remove noxious weed seeds prior to entering the forest
- Noxious weeds will be eradicated, and the sites will be monitored for the life of the plan to ensure weeds have been eliminated from area
- Levels of treatments may include:
  - Ripping/scarification and/or seeding of road prism and/or hardened campsites (e.g., user created spur routes; hardened campsites that are too compacted to revegetate unassisted)
  - Installing drainage controls on road prism (e.g., water bars, out-sloping)
  - Using heavy equipment to reinforce campsite closure to restrict camping

and vehicle access which were not successful in the initial implementation

### Wilderness Zone:

- Day use online limited permit, reservation, and fee system per person will be required from May 1 through September 30 annually
  - Group size would be limited to 10 people
  - Parties of more than 10 people must break into multiple groups no larger than 10 and always remain at least one mile apart
  - Permit holder must be present, and permits are non-transferable
  - Maximum four permits per person per year
  - Require solid human waste to be packed out
- Overnight use online limited permit, reservation, and fee system per person will be required from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day weekend annually
  - Max two-night stay limit and no more than four nights total in a season per permit holder
  - Overnight use will be limited to designated sites only with maximum group size limit according to the size of the site without enlarging it. Group size shall not exceed six people.
  - Designated sites will be a minimum of 100 ft away from any water and/or trails
  - Designated sites will be a minimum of 300 ft from another designated campsite
  - Permits are non-transferable
  - Require solid human waste to be packed out
- Permits will be limited to no more than 40 permits per day for day use and max 24 permits for overnight (4 sites with up to 6 people per site)
- No building, maintaining, attending, or using fire, campfire, or woodburning stoves allowed
- Prohibit recreational stock use
- Prohibit dogs, or requirement to be physically controlled on a leash; except for working stock dogs or dogs used for legal hunting purposes.
- Provide a hardened ford on the outlet of the lower lake

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Threshold</b>	<b>Management Actions**</b>
Compliance with campsite restriction	Within 3 years of full implementation, no more than 1 violation of campsite restriction over an entire season of monitoring (assumption would be there would be at least one patrol/week)	Phase 1: Increase education/enforcement; increase rehab efforts for closed areas and further delineation of campsites  Phase 2: No overnight camping allowed
Compliance with solid waste containment	Within 3 years of full implementation, no more than 2 violations will be observed over an entire season of monitoring (assumption would be there would be at least one patrol/week)	Phase 1: Increase education/enforcement; provide additional ways to get solid human waste bags such as at the lower lake and at the office; provide trash receptacle for solid waste only at the trailhead  Phase 2: No overnight camping allowed  Phase 3: Provide pit toilet(s) at the lower lake (or reduce number of permits)
Encounters before and after permitted season	Within 3 years of full implementation, average daily use does not exceed the permitted use when permits are required	Phase 1: Implement a mandatory unlimited permit system (no fee or reservation)  Phase 2: Extend the limited permit, reservation, and fee system/person to the shoulder seasons
Actual encounter rate during permitted season	Within 3 years of full implementation, average actual encounter rate is less than 20 encounters with other groups per day	Phase 1: Increase number of permits per day for day use only
Campsite Impact Rating	Within 3 years of full implementation, no designated campsite will exceed a site impact rating of 4 using national protocol	Phase 1: Increase education/enforcement; increase rehab efforts for closed areas and further delineation of campsites  Phase 2: No overnight camping allowed

\*\* If desired conditions are not being met as documented by indicators, additional

phases of implementation will occur to reach desired conditions.

**Lower East Dallas and Yankee Boy Zone:**

**Facilities/Trails/Travel Management**

- Improve and/or delineate existing parking/trailhead areas
- Restrict parking to designated parking areas only
- Construct new parking/trailheads (where needed)
- Designate roads/trails to designated campsites
- Replace existing toilets within the Lower East Dallas Zone
- Evaluate the need for new/replacement toilets on a case-by-case basis

**Camping**

- Designated campsites will include a permanent campfire ring
- Overnight use limited permit, reservation, and fee system/group will be required from May 1 through September 30 annually

Indicators	Threshold	Management Actions**
Compliance with campsite designations	Within 3 years of full implementation, no more than 2 violation of campsite restriction over an entire season of monitoring (assumption would be there would be at least one patrol/week)	Phase 1: Increase education/enforcement; increase rehabilitation efforts for closed areas and further delineation of campsites  Phase 2: Extend overnight use limited permit, reservation, and fee system/group to shoulder seasons  Phase 3: Contain all camping within a developed campground; close designated sites or closed to overnight use
Compliance with solid waste burial	Within 3 years of full implementation, no more than 3 violations will be observed over an entire season of monitoring (assumption would be there would be at least one patrol/week)	Phase 1: Increase education/enforcement; encourage use of solid human waste to be packed out  Phase 2: Require solid human waste to be packed out  Phase 3: Provide solid human waste bags and provide trash receptacle for solid waste at toilet locations  Phase 4: Construct developed campground(s) and restrict camping to campground(s) only; close all other designated sites

\*\* If desired conditions are not being met as documented by indicators, additional phases of implementation will occur to reach desired conditions.

**Blaine Basin Zone:**

**Camping**

- No building, maintaining, attending, or using fire, campfire, or wood burning stoves allowed
- No overnight recreational stock use

Indicators	Threshold	Management Actions**
Parking violations	Within 3 years of full implementation, an average of no more than 2 violations of parking restriction over an entire season of monitoring (assumption would be there would be at least one patrol/week)	Phase 1: Increase education/enforcement Phase 2: Implement a mandatory unlimited permit system (no fee or reservation) Phase 3: Implement a limited permit, reservation, and fee system/person
Compliance with solid waste burial	Within 3 years of full implementation, no more than 2 violations will be observed over an entire season of monitoring (assumption would be there would be at least one patrol/week)	Phase 1: Increase education/enforcement; encourage use of solid human waste to be packed out Phase 2: Require solid human waste to be packed out Phase 3: No overnight camping allowed Phase 4: Provide pit toilet(s) (or reduce number of permits)

\*\* If desired conditions are not being met as documented by indicators, additional phases of implementation will occur to reach desired conditions.

**Mt. Sneffels Summit Zone:**

- Implement a mandatory non-limited permitted system
- Designate the maintained approach route as a National Forest System Trail
- Prohibit recreational stock use

Indicators	Threshold	Management Actions**
Safety	Number of people for level of safe use, as determined by an engineering study conducted within the 3 years of full implementation	Phase 1: Go to limited permit, reservation, and fee system per person

\*\* If desired conditions are not being met as documented by indicators, additional phases of implementation will occur to reach desired conditions.