

Executive summary

**Scenarios and indicators for
Ouray County build-out analysis**

David M. Theobald, Ph.D.

Natural Resource Ecology Lab and Dept. of Natural Resources Recreation & Tourism

Colorado State University

Stakeholder working group members

John Clark, Ted Collin, Sara Coulter, Tom Harrington, Brian Kolowich, Ken Lipton, John Peters, Karen Risch, Rene Tegtmeyer

The goal of this study is to provide information to the citizens and decision makers of Ouray County about the relative effects of different patterns of residential growth. This information has been generated by conducting a build-out analysis in which a variety of indicators of effects are computed for a range of scenarios that reflect different assumptions about possible land use planning policies. This report focuses on residential development changes and planning processes, and does not address potential build-out or policies that affect commercial or other land use types. *Please note that the results from this build-out analysis are to be used as a planning tool and the data and information gained from it are intended to inform the planning process – not to set policy.*

To conduct this build-out analysis we followed a process that involved public presentations, stakeholder workshops, and spatial analysis. A diverse set of representative stakeholders were selected from the community, and members of the stakeholder workgroup identified working assumptions, a variety of indicators, and a range of scenarios to examine. The build-out analysis was conducted and the Board of County Commissioners, Ouray County Planning Director, and stakeholder members provided feedback to help refine and clarify the report. This document is the final report of these efforts.

Currently, roughly half of Ouray County is privately owned, about 30% of this private land acreage is owned by residents of Ouray County, 19% by residents of nearby counties, 18% residents of Colorado, and about 32% residents outside of Colorado. The annual growth rate in housing units was 4.7% between 2000-2005.

Seven scenarios were identified to reflect a range of reasonable planning policy alternatives: (A) existing zoning; (B) doubling of housing units (35 acres at 17.5 acres per unit); (C) modest increase in units (105 acres at 26 acres per unit); (D) concentrating growth around Urban Growth boundaries; protecting scenic corridors by (E) locating housing units at the bottom of the slope or (F) by transferring units to the urban growth boundaries; (G) clustering development on a parcel; and (H) lowering the density (70 acres at 70 acres per unit). The following working assumptions were made: we addressed the land use planning processes only within the *Alpine, High Mesa,*

and *Valley* zones, development within the other zones were presumed to occur according to existing zoning. Also, we assumed a 5 acre “footprint” of impact associated with each housing unit (a radius of 80 m).

Eight indicators were selected to represent a variety of possible environmental effects associated with development patterns: (1) number of housing units (each parcel can have 1 residential dwelling units; (2) number of accessory dwelling units; (3) acres of irrigated fields; (4) acres of agricultural land use; acres of (5) economically important wildlife and (6) rare & imperiled habitat; (7) acres of riparian & drainage areas; and (8) vehicle miles traveled per day.

Major findings

- The number of housing units in Ouray County will likely double to about 5,900 in the next 25 years or so if current growth rates continue and existing zoning and planning regulations remain.
- Of the 7 alternative growth scenarios, 4 would result in an increase of about 20% to 100% in the number of housing units, 2 would result in no net change, and 1 would result in a 15% reduction. The build-out scenarios forecast between 5,088 and 11,525 units.
- The acres of irrigated agricultural land lost to development would range from about 1,400 acres (7% of existing) in the cluster and low-density scenarios, to 2,300 (12%) acres for existing zoning and scenic corridor scenarios, to as much as 18,000 acres (90%) in the urban growth boundaries (note that with careful site planning this could be reduced significantly).
- The loss of habitat for economically-important wildlife species is dependent mostly on the dispersal pattern of housing– doubling housing density (35 ac at 17.5 ac/unit) results in roughly 2 to 3 times the loss of acres as the existing zoning scenario (~1 8,000 acres). The loss of rare & imperiled species habitat is relatively minor (<6% of existing habitat) and changes very little between scenarios. However, possible limitations on wildlife movement and fragmentation of habitat are likely due to increased automobile traffic. Vehicle miles traveled per day are projected to increase from 80% (low-density scenario) to 280% (existing zoning, urban growth boundary) to 480% (35 ac at 17.5 per unit and clustered scenarios).
- Maintaining the existing zoning would result in 5,900 total housing units (for the county), a moderate reduction (~1 0%) of current irrigated agricultural land and wildlife habitat, and 2.8 times the vehicle miles traveled (VMT). Doubling the number of housing units allowed on Alpine, High Mesa, and Valley zoning types would result in 9,500 units; a 15-20% reduction of irrigated ag land, wildlife habitat and riparian areas; and result in an estimated 4.8 times the current VMT. Steering growth towards urban growth boundaries would allow an estimated 11,500 housing units, have a large reduction (~90%) of irrigated ag land, moderate effects on wildlife habitat, and about 2.8 times the existing VMT. Scenic corridor scenarios would result in moderate effects on wildlife habitat and limit growth in highly-visible scenic corridors. The low-density scenario would result in about 5,000 housing units, minimize the irrigated land and wildlife habitat lost, and limit the VMT to about 1.8 times current levels. Note that estimates of VMT are likely to be conservative, because additional miles of new subdivision roads are not included.