



Photo: Efrain Padro/Alamy

The National Park Service (NPS) invites your input on the development of a Grazing Management Plan and Environmental Assessment (EA) to be prepared for the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (BLCA) and the Curecanti National Recreation Area (CURE), pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The release of this newsletter is the first opportunity for public involvement in this planning effort.

Currently, grazing in BLCA is administered through NPS-issued Special Use Permits (SUPs). Grazing in CURE is administered through a combination of interagency agreements with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the United States Forest Service (USFS).

The purpose of this effort is to provide approaches for grazing management that consider the NPS's management of livestock grazing and the impacts of livestock grazing on native species and sagebrush ecosystems within BLCA and CURE. Additionally, this plan would provide management consistency to align with current laws, regulations, and policies in order to ensure balance with natural and cultural resource management priorities, as directed by the NPS Organic Act (54 United States Code 100101).

Two preliminary alternatives are being presented at this time: the No-Action Alternative under which the NPS continues management of grazing under the current terms and conditions established by the NPS/BLM/USFS, but with the NPS administering all permits, and a Grazing Tools and Strategies Alternative under which livestock grazing could be modified to maintain or enhance resource protection. This newsletter includes further information about the preliminary alternatives being considered.

The NPS is initiating a public scoping period from August 19, 2024, to September 20, 2024. The NPS will host a virtual public meeting on August 27, 2024, and in-person public meetings on August 28 and 29, 2024. We invite you to participate in the planning process by providing public comments on the information contained in this newsletter. Thank you for your continued interest in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Curecanti National Recreation Area.

Sincerely,

Stuart West, Superintendent
Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park
Curecanti National Recreation Area

Public Meetings

Virtual Public Meeting

- NPS will hold the **August 27, 2024**, scoping meeting via the Zoom online platform from **6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Mountain Time**. During the virtual scoping meeting, attendees can join by computer or phone to learn about the Grazing Management Plan. Information about joining the meeting can be found on the project Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/BLCACUREGRAZING>.
- Please register prior to the meeting at:
https://empsi.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_3KJ1KHkeTMijQilSvpRTYg#/registration



In-Person Meetings

NPS will hold in-person meetings on **August 28 and 29, 2024**, at the below venues and times.

- **Gunnison, Colorado** – August 28, 2024, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Mountain Daylight Time
 - Fred Field Center, 298 S. Spruce St., Gunnison, CO 81230
- **Montrose, Colorado** – August 29, 2024, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Mountain Daylight Time
 - Montrose Police Department, 434 S. 1st St., Montrose, CO 81401

Current phase



OCT 2023 - JUL 2024	AUG - SEPT 2024	FALL - WINTER 2024	SPRING 2025	SUMMER 2025
Data Gathering and Planning Preparation	Initiate NEPA / Public Scoping Period *	Formulate Draft and Final Alternatives and Prepare EA	Release EA for Public Comment*	NEPA Decision Document

*Opportunity for public input

Background

Livestock grazing existed within the BLCA boundaries prior to its establishment as a National Monument in 1933. The 1999 Act establishing BLCA as a National Park (rather than a National Monument) provided for continued livestock grazing where authorized under existing permits or leases as of October 21, 1999.

Grazing within CURE was permitted prior to the transfer of management from the Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) to the NPS on February 11, 1965 (as one of the terms of a Memorandum of Agreement between the USBR and NPS).

In the past, the BLM permitted and managed grazing on NPS-administered lands in both NPS units. The NPS is currently managing grazing in BLCA through SUPs. The BLM and the USFS will continue to administer the majority of grazing on NPS-managed lands in CURE until this BLCA/CURE Grazing Management Plan/EA is complete. After this plan is complete, the NPS will issue livestock grazing and trailing SUPs for lands under NPS management in both units. Lands currently managed under the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forest revised Forest Plan are not subject to this potential NPS decision. The BLM and the USFS (in addition to other land management agencies) will be cooperating with the NPS in the development of this plan.

BLCA Purpose Statement:

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park preserves an area encompassing spectacular gorges, the Gunnison River, and breathtaking landscapes by protecting its natural, cultural, and wilderness integrity for public benefit, inspiration, and enjoyment.

CURE Purpose Statement:

Curecanti National Recreation Area protects an abundance of natural, historic, and archeological features in a western landscape encompassing canyons, pinnacles, cliffs, rivers, reservoirs, and mesas, while offering opportunities for recreation, public benefit, and personal reflection.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of the plan is to provide a long-term livestock grazing management plan that is consistent with relevant laws, regulations, policies, and interagency agreements. In developing a grazing management plan, the NPS will fulfill its commitment to preserve and protect the natural, cultural, and recreational resources as stated in the purpose of each park unit.

The grazing management plan is needed to:

- Meet NPS's obligation to manage authorized grazing operations in coordination with the BLM and USFS.
- Use adaptive management principles to provide ecosystem resiliency in the face of drought, ecological degradation, and climate change.
- Address conservation measures for Gunnison sage-grouse (GUSG) consistent with the Endangered Species Act of 1973.
- Manage livestock grazing to protect wilderness character qualities in the BLCA per the 2022 BLCA-CURE Wilderness and Backcountry Management Plan.



Description of Preliminary Alternatives

No-Action Alternative

Under the no-action alternative, the NPS would manage and administer grazing activities within CURE and BLCA boundaries. The NPS would issue livestock SUPs that maintain the existing terms and conditions found in active BLM and USFS allotment permits. The NPS would coordinate directly with grazing and trailing permit holders to address range management activities (for example, timing and usage) and range projects on a case-by-case basis. The no-action alternative would reflect the NPS assumption of administrative duties and the adoption of the current BLM and USFS management approaches and fees.

Grazing Tools and Strategies Alternative

Under a preliminary action alternative, the NPS would develop and implement a Grazing Management Plan at BLCA and CURE to guide authorization and administration of livestock grazing and trailing activities. The NPS would issue livestock SUPs for allotments on NPS-administered lands in both park units. SUPs would include mitigation measures developed by the NPS to reduce impacts on natural and cultural resources. Additional livestock management strategies may be specified for allotments and/or trailing routes that include riparian areas, wet meadows, GUSG habitat, bighorn sheep populations, rare plant communities, and designated wilderness. These strategies would consider annual drought forecasts and ecosystem conditions.

Under a preliminary action alternative, the NPS would develop and maintain a monitoring program. The monitoring program would be developed to collect a variety of upland and riparian data. The park units would work with permit holders to develop and implement allotment-specific monitoring plans. Adaptive management based on monitoring results would address the relationships among livestock grazing and other resources within the park units. Monitoring and evaluation of livestock grazing would be used to determine if range conditions are being maintained at—or are moving away from—desired conditions. Monitoring results would be used to adjust grazing management strategies and use. The NPS could alter the timing, duration, intensity, or stocking rate, or change the class/kind of livestock permitted to graze in order to maintain or prevent further degradation of resources. Adjustments to timing and duration of grazing could include changes to on-and-off dates or alterations to pasture rotation. Likewise, trailing routes could be adjusted in response to forage and range conditions or impacts on other park resources. To maintain and improve GUSG habitat quality, the NPS would implement annual monitoring of livestock grazing and long-term habitat monitoring to document the effectiveness of management actions and conservation measures.

In the BLCA, consistent with Public Law 106-76, Section 4(e), grazing would continue for the lifetime of the permit holder. Permit transfers, sub-letting, or sub-permitting would not be allowed in either occupied or unoccupied GUSG habitat in the BLCA.

In CURE, after 5 consecutive years of vacancy, the allotment would be retired. In CURE, grazing permits could be transferred and/or re-issued, but not sub-let or sub-permitted. Transfers and re-issuance of permits would be allowed in unoccupied GUSG critical habitat; however, NPS would not allow permit transfers and would not re-issue permits in occupied GUSG critical habitat.



Potential Tools and Management Strategies

- *Forage Use, Herd Number, and/or Animal Unit Months (AUM) Adjustments*

Managers will use historical data and ongoing range monitoring to adjust forage take, livestock numbers, and/or AUMs assigned to a permittee.

- *Pasture Rest Periods*

In any year, vegetation conditions or previous season use on allotments may require that selected pastures be rested. Monitoring results and projected climate conditions will be used to determine if rest periods are appropriate.

- *Fencing*

Wildlife-friendly fencing may be selectively used to prevent livestock from entering riparian and wet meadow areas and recreational facilities.

- *Intensive Herd Management and Virtual Fencing*

NPS managers may incentivize the use of intensive herd management or virtual fencing (or similar tracking-and-control technologies) to manage the timing, location, and residence periods of herds on portions of allotments. This also may be adopted as part of fencing removal projects. This also may include ongoing monitoring of herd location by range riders.

- *Season of Use Adjustment*

Season of use could be adjusted as needed to protect GUSG. This could include implementing livestock grazing closures through the breeding season (March 15 – May 15) in GUSG critical habitat.

- *Drought Contingency Planning*

The NPS may implement annual revised SUPs under drought conditions. The NPS may alter the timing, duration, intensity, or stocking rate, or change the class/kind of livestock permitted to graze. Adjustments to timing and duration of grazing could include changes to on and off dates and alterations to pasture rotation.

- *Riparian Area and Wet Meadow Protection*

There will be no water developments, bedding, resting, or other concentrated livestock use within 0.25 miles of a stream or other riparian area. This may include installing fencing or otherwise restricting livestock access to riparian areas to maintain proper functioning condition of riparian areas. NPS would take actions to improve and protect wet meadows. This could include fencing to restrict livestock access to wet meadows or collaborating with permittees to target invasive plant species and soil erosion prevention and removal in and around wet meadows.

- *Two-Track Roads and Other Infrastructure*

Two-track roads at CURE would be permitted for use through SUPs, in accordance with the Motorized Vehicle Access Plan (NPS 2010). In BLCA, two-track roads would be permitted through SUPs only outside of wilderness, and existing range improvements would continue to be permitted. New range improvements and range infrastructure would only be permitted on a case-by-case basis, and only with project-level compliance separate from the Grazing Management Plan. In both park units, abandoned infrastructure, such as two-track roads, stock ponds, watering tanks and wells, and irrigation ditches, will be removed or reclaimed. The NPS and permittees will work cooperatively to actively remove unneeded fences. Any new fences will be required to use wildlife-friendly fence designs. All fences in GUSG habitat areas with priority in high collision risk areas, such as near leks (breeding display grounds), will be flagged or use high-visibility top wires.



Photo: Evan Barrientos/Audubon

Primary Resources of Concern

Gunnison Sage-grouse

Gunnison sage-grouse and their habitat can be impacted by poorly managed livestock grazing through alterations of the composition and productivity of plant communities. In line with the Recovery Implementation Strategy for Gunnison Sage-Grouse (USFWS 2020), grazing management strategy modifications may include but are not limited to adjusting the timing of grazing to reduce impacts on all seasonal habitats, removing or adjusting fences, modifying infrastructure development, or adjusting livestock timing and/or numbers.

Bighorn Sheep

Livestock grazing primarily impacts bighorn sheep through disease transmission. Pathogens such as *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* are carried by domestic sheep and goats and can cause individual death, catastrophic pneumonia outbreaks, and prolonged suppression of lamb survival in bighorn populations. Management on NPS lands would be consistent with State of Colorado management (2009) and recommendations of Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (Wild Sheep Working Group 2012). When authorizing or permitting grazing or trailing plans, the NPS could implement actions to provide spatial and temporal separation of domestic sheep and bighorn sheep to mitigate potential interspecies disease transmission and ensure healthy bighorn sheep populations. The NPS will follow previously developed BLM guidance to reduce the risk of contact between domestic sheep and bighorn sheep. New strategies to reduce the risk of contact between the two species may be used as new information becomes available (e.g., GPS collar locations, seasonal habitat use/home range).

Wilderness

The presence of grazing operations and unauthorized rangeland infrastructure can impact the naturalness and other characteristics of designated wilderness. Specific actions in designated wilderness will be consistent with the BLCA and CURE Wilderness and Backcountry Management Plan (NPS 2022) and may include virtual fencing to prevent trespass livestock, and removing two-track roads, trailing routes, and unauthorized infrastructure such as stock ponds, fences, stock tanks, and irrigation lines. Authorized grazing of livestock in wilderness will be permitted to continue subject to such reasonable regulations, policies, and practices as the Secretary of the Interior deems necessary, consistent with the Wilderness Act and other applicable laws and NPS regulations.

Recreation

Conflicts between recreationists and livestock can impact grazing operations, such as improperly closed gates or damage to fences. The proposed grazing management plan could control livestock access in high recreation use areas. Developed campgrounds and boat launch areas could be fenced to exclude livestock, with the goal of reducing visitor conflicts with livestock. Fencing could also be added adjacent to Colorado Department of Transportation and Gunnison County maintained roads to reduce vehicle collisions with livestock. Cattle guards may be placed where roads enter grazing allotments. Walk through access braces could be installed where hiking trails enter allotment boundaries. Fencing repair, new fencing, and virtual fencing are potential control measures that would prevent escape and trespass livestock.

How to Comment

Public participation is an important element of the planning process, and we welcome your comments, concerns, issues, suggestions, and potential topics for consideration. You are invited to submit comments on the information in this newsletter, the preliminary alternatives, and topics that the Grazing Management Plan/EA should address and analyze. Comments that provide relevant and new information with sufficient detail are most useful. The most valuable comments are those that present information that can be used when developing management alternatives, or present information that can be used when the NPS considers impacts of alternatives.

Please share your comments no later than **September 20, 2024**, online through the PEPC website (preferred method) at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/blcacuregrazing>



Or in writing to:

Superintendent
Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Curecanti National Recreation Area
102 Elk Creek
Gunnison, CO 81230

Written comments will also be accepted at either of the in-person public meetings.

Comments will not be accepted except as specified above. Bulk comments in any format (hard copy or electronic) submitted on behalf of others will not be accepted. Please note that your entire comment, including your personal information, may be made publicly available at any time. You can request that we withhold your personal identifying information from public view, but we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

