

**Off-road advocate says BLM closure plan flawed**

**Agency undervalues recreational spending, organization chairman tells Club 20 session**

By DENNIS WEBB

Dennis.Webb@gjsentinel.com

The Bureau of Land Management is sharply underestimating the value of recreation on its lands in western Colorado, according to a motorized vehicle advocate who is concerned about its proposals to significantly reduce travel routes in the region.

Scott Jones, chairman of the Colorado Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition, said Saturday during Club 20's spring meeting that the agency is proposing to close about 4,500 miles of its routes, or 50 to 70 percent of the total, in its Grand Junction, Colorado River Valley and Kremmling field office draft management plans. Those plans cover about 2 million acres in total.

"It's a pretty significant part of the state that we're talking about," he said.

He questions the economic analysis that is contributing to what he says are "kind of scary" proposals by the agency.

The Grand Junction plan estimates average daily recreational spending of \$10.17 per user day related to its acreage. That compares to an estimated average of \$62 per day that the Forest Service has calculated for its visitors in Colorado, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife has said in-state hunters spend an average of \$106 per day, he said.

"Ten dollars. I can't even get a sandwich and a couple of sports drinks for that," said Jones, who said the Colorado River Valley office arrived at average spending of \$16.27 per day, and Kremmling, \$15.66. "As you can see there's some valuation concerns," he said.

The Grand Junction plan projects total recreational spending of just \$7.2 million on local BLM lands by 2029, whereas Colorado Parks and Wildlife says hunting and fishing alone already account for almost \$130 million in spending in Mesa and Garfield counties, he said.

The BLM completely excludes local spending from its Grand Junction analysis, and attributes only 90 jobs in

See CLOSURE, page **6A**



Brad Guth, of Grand Junction, rides his all-terrain vehicle in the desert north of Grand Junction on land administered by the Bureau of Land Management. During the spring Club 20 meeting Saturday at Colorado Mesa University, a BLM official acknowledged public concern over the agency's proposal to close some off-road vehicle routes in three management areas on the Western Slope.

**CLOSURE: Recreational economic impacts worthy of more study, BLM official says**

➤ Continued from Page One

the area to its recreation opportunities, when Cabela's alone employs more people than that, he said.

Katie Stevens, manager of the Grand Junction Field Office, acknowledged in her own Club 20 presentation that a lot of people have raised concerns about the economic analysis in the plan.

“We’ll consider whether we need to do some additional economic analysis there,” she said.

She said she recognizes the potential for local BLM lands to be a regional and even international draw. “We get that, we know that we have that opportunity, and we’ve been that (draw) for some of our recreational uses in the past,” she said.

In an interview, Stevens said recreational economic impacts are more complex to measure than things such as grazing and oil and gas drilling. Although she thinks the BLM can provide more clarity on the basis of its analysis, “the type of cost-benefit analysis that we are directed to do with these plans doesn’t get at some of the economic benefits of outdoor recreation as an industry that I would like,” she said.

She said she could see value in doing a study that incorporates all local public land, including national forests and Colorado National Monument, and considers things such as Fruita’s draw as a mountain biking destination and even people choosing to work in the area because of the outdoor recreation that it offers.

Jones said activities such as hunting, camping and motorized vehicle use result in two to three times as much spending as other uses.

“If we’re going to drive the economy why don’t we go after the people who are spending the money?” he said.

The Grand Junction Field Office is considering keeping open about half of its roads with current legal access. It’s looking at the possibility of closures in cases such as when multiple roads go the same place, or when there are significant wildlife, safety, water quality or other concerns.

She said the agency also has concerns about the high density of roads in places such as the North Fruita Desert and Gateway. The Gateway roads stem from a long history of uranium development.

“We want to talk with the public about which of those roads are important for recreation and access,” she said.

Some BLM roads and trails were developed by users, without agency planning. Stevens said the goal of the travel portion of the field office’s resource management planning process is to transition to a recognized system that can be maintained into the future. Once the basic framework of what routes are good enough to keep has been established, then the agency can look at what ones will be needed in the future, she said.

The agency is continuing to take public comments on its Grand Junction draft plan.