



Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Partnership Peaks

San Juan National Forest Partner Stories, Opportunities, and Updates

Winter 2023



Snow-capped peaks in the Upper Piedra Watershed

WINTER IN THE SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS

By Christy Garrou - Visitor Information Services Lead

After last week’s snowfall I looked around my backyard wondering whether a few tasks would get done before another storm rolls in. Perennials and boulders turned into anonymous white mounds. It felt good accepting nature’s call to let it go. The simplicity and quiet of winter bring fewer options, the snow muffling sounds like it blankets some of our activities, while creating a magical world for others.

As weather brings some of us in from the field, we pause to reflect on the busy year; all that got done, and work that will roll into 2024. Reporting, audits, and planning keep us on point while we shift to winter projects. Rec crews button up facilities and turn to winter recreation. Fuels reduction, Christmas tree sales and fuelwood projects are in full swing. And coordinating with our neighbors doesn’t slow down.

Enjoy reading about partnership work happening on the San Juan, and peace to you during the holidays!

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Leadership Corner



It is hard to believe that it has been just over a year since joining the San Juan National Forest; and what a year it has been! That also means it has been a year since the Winter 2022 Partnership Peaks Newsletter where I shared my deep and sincere appreciation for the diversity of perspectives, variety of work, and additional capacity that partners bring to solving the complex natural resource issues we face. My experiences over the past year interacting and collaborating

with the great partners and employees of the San Juan has certainly strengthened that sense of gratitude.

It was another busy year on the Columbine Ranger District, and the San Juan as a whole! There was a lot of transition on the forest as we said goodbye and congratulated our colleagues as they embarked on new adventures. We also greeted many new employees. As one of those “new” employees, I am grateful for the inclusive nature of the San Juan and its partners and the grace and patience that was shown to me as I transitioned. This reaffirmed to me that it is the people and relationship that make our work possible!

Speaking of work--we got a lot done over this last year! Whether it was responding to real or proverbial fires, our staff and partners completed a tremendous amount of work. It is always remarkable to see what can be accomplished when a group of people with diverse interests work toward the common goals of shared stewardship and restoration of public lands!

I am thankful for and proud of all the hard work on the Columbine RD and the San Juan this year. We have a lot of work out in front of us in the years to come, but I am excited and confident that our success will continue. Thank you for all that you contribute!

~ Nick Glidden, Columbine District Ranger



Site visit to Silver Crown mine



IDT fieldtrip to Durango Hills Fuel Break

Connecting Habitat for Cutthroat Trout

New structures will let trout cross Hermosa Park Road at Sig & Relay Creeks



Clay Kampf, Cody Jones, Tucker Bowman, and Gina Bodnar survey the “reference reach,” identifying characteristics to be replicated

By Abe Proffitt - Partnership Coordinator

Colorado River Cutthroat Trout (CRCT) in the Hermosa Creek drainage are about to expand their reaches, thanks to upcoming culvert projects where Sig and Relay Creeks cross Hermosa Park Road. The current culverts do not allow fish passage to the upper reaches of Hermosa Creek tributaries, so they will be replaced in summer 2024 with structures that will.

This extensive project will require closure of Hermosa Park Road (NFSR 578) during construction, but the public will receive ample notification of the timeframe once dates have been selected. Upon completion of the culvert replacements, the rebounding CRCT population will once again be able to pass upstream.

“Right now, CRCT habitat is fragmented, and the fish can’t pass between their normal upstream and downstream ecosystems,” said Clay Kampf, Supervisory Aquatic Biologist on the San Juan NF. “You could have the best aquatic habitat in the world on any drainage of the forest, but if the species that normally use that habitat can’t access it, then that drainage is not fulfilling its potential.”

According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, fish passage is the ability of aquatic species to move through aquatic systems among all habitats necessary to complete their lifecycle. When watersheds are fragmented by dams, culverts, or other diversions, they become congested. These

Connecting Habitat for Cutthroat Trout

aquatic barriers have the same effect as roadblocks on a busy highway. But unlike roadblocks that can often be avoided, fish can't simply take a detour when their path is blocked. Instead, they become separated from their breeding grounds, cut off from food sources, and are trapped in unsafe waters.

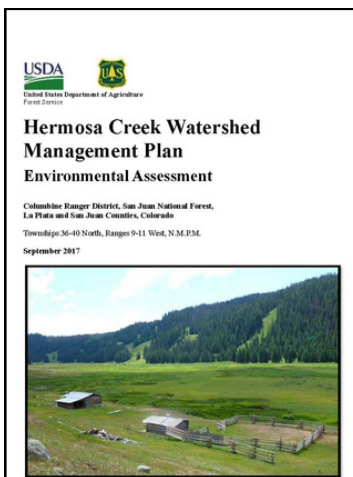
The CRCT have enjoyed a substantial rebound thanks in large part to over 35 years of work to reestablish their populations. A long series of



Existing culvert structures limit access

projects beginning in the 1990s have included construction of fish migration barriers and instream improvements such as boulder clusters, log structures, and bank stabilization. This work, done in partnership with the San Juan National Forest, [Colorado Parks and Wildlife](#), [Trout Unlimited Five Rivers Chapter](#), and other partners was covered in our [Autumn 2022 Partnership Peaks Newsletter](#).

Today, millions of obsolete or poorly designed dams, roads, and levees in the U.S. keep fish and other aquatic species from moving freely to feed, migrate, and reproduce. These fish passages not only fragment aquatic habitats, they also increase that region's susceptibility to impacts from climate change – namely aridification, erosion, temperature increases, and more. Removing obsolete and dangerous infrastructure, fish passage projects also eliminate public safety hazards, improve climate resilience, and help restore watershed ecosystems. Find [more information](#) on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Fish Passage Program.



Historically, the Forest Service has approached road stream interaction by installing structures focused on getting vehicles safely across while passing estimated stream flows. In 2017, the San Juan National Forest identified the road crossings at Sig Creek and Relay Creeks as locations where existing structures were substantially disrupting the movement of aquatic species. In an [Environmental Assessment](#) of the [Hermosa Creek Special Management Area](#), the Colorado River Cutthroat Trout (CRCT) was identified as a species of concern and important to the Hermosa Creek Watershed. Creek improvements also aligned with the Clean Water Act pertaining to the life cycle of aquatic species.

Connecting Habitat for Cutthroat Trout

In recent decades, road crossing designs have evolved to better accommodate stream habitat continuity while also protecting infrastructure from the volatile nature of changing weather patterns associated with climate change. These new design methods are referred to as Aquatic Organism Passages, or AOPs.

AOPs aim to replace structures that act as barriers to aquatic species with structures that allow natural passage upstream and downstream within a stream channel. Typical barriers to passage include height (perched culvert above stream) and velocity (steep drainage angle causing excessive stream flow), both of which cause erosion to the stream channel.



Typical AOP designs for road crossing. Photo source: <https://www.greatwesteng.com/aop/>

“For this project, our primary goal is to improve ecological connectivity while also ensuring user safety at stream crossings,” said Cody Jones, Civil Engineer on the San Juan National Forest. “AOPs are designed to mimic stream systems with rocks and natural features. You can design a culvert that fish can pass through some of the year, but here, we’re rebuilding the stream so that under natural flow regimes, fish will move upstream and downstream as if it were an uninterrupted part of their watershed.”

Much of the project’s success, like so many projects here in the San Juan NF, rely on diverse partners uniting over a shared purpose - and this is a unique multi-agency accomplishment for the communities in this region because of its duration. “We’ve been working for 30 plus years to secure stream habitat for the CRCT, and this project is another achievement toward that goal,” said Kampf. “Throughout that time, we’ve partnered with amazing organizations who are passionate about this project, including Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), Trout Unlimited - Five Rivers Chapter, the National Forest Foundation (NFF), and Conservation Legacy, and it’s remarkable to see what long-lasting partnerships can accomplish!”

For more information and updates on the project, follow us on social media and at our website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sanjuan> and check out more surveying photos below!

Connecting Habitat for Cutthroat Trout



Landscape-Scale Programs: Wildfire

Dry Lake Fire: a 2023 wildfire reduced risk & benefitted resources

By Lorena Williams - Shared Stewardship Communications Specialist



ROCKY MOUNTAIN
RESTORATION INITIATIVE

*When we see a wildfire, our first response is to put it out. For decades, the Forest Service has done just that when it came to wildland fires. **But science has changed the way we think about wildland fire and the way we manage it.** We still suppress fires, especially if they threaten people and communities, but we understand that fire has a role in nature – one that can lead to healthy ecosystems. So we look for ways to manage it to play its role, for instance, by igniting prescribed fires. - [Forest Service Science and Technology](#)*

This summer, fire managers on the San Juan NF managed the naturally-ignited Dry Lake wildfire to protect critical infrastructure, reduce hazardous fuels, encourage growth of native plants, increase species diversity in the understory, and reduce the potential for future high-severity wildfires. Firefighters discovered the lightning-sparked Dry Lake Fire on July 30, 12 miles northeast of Bayfield, CO adjacent to the Tri-State powerline. The single tree was burning in a prescribed fire unit that had been first ignited in 2019 and was planned for a second prescribed burn in fall, 2023. The “initial attack” fire crew first on scene recognized the potential to allow this natural ignition to continue burning and reduce vegetation, rather than extinguishing it immediately--what Dan Dallas, Incident Commander for Rocky Mountain Incident Management Team 1 calls “deferring risk by keeping fires as small as possible.” Reducing vegetation at a landscape-scale -- whether through prescribed fire, low and moderate-intensity wildfire, timber harvest, and mechanical

thinning --- is a critical step in protecting our communities, infrastructure, watersheds, wildlife, and forests from catastrophic wildfire.



Wildfire burning in oak understory on the Dry Lake Fire

Dry Lake started within a network of Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) trails and Forest Service System Roads that were planned containment lines for a prescribed fire but would now be used to contain the wildfire. “It was the perfect opportunity to reduce long-term fire risk in the area,” said Pat Seekins, San Juan NF Fuels Program Manager. “We already had engines, hand

Dry Lake Fire



Reducing fuel loading under and around the Tri-State transmission lines was a central focus during Dry Lake

crews, and aviation resources on the forest if needed, that could help us keep the fire within pre-defined boundaries. We also had favorable conditions that helped achieve our objectives for this piece of ground." Those objectives included lowering the risk of future catastrophic wildfire by reducing the amount of fuel on the ground, particularly oak brush. Low-to-moderate intensity fire also improves forage for wildlife by creating growing room for grasses and other plants. These efforts align with the Forest Service's [10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#), which aims to increase the use of fire on the landscape as well as other treatments to improve forest resiliency.

While communities increasingly espouse wildfire's beneficial role in nature, it's easy to be a "NIMBY" (Not in My Back Yard) when smoke pops over the ridgeline. "It is critical that we support every opportunity to mitigate the risk of fire and the potential it has for the devastation and displacement of our community," says Archuleta County Sherriff Mike Le Roux. "By collaborating with and supporting our federal partners in their efforts to reduce fuel load responsibly, our community ultimately reaps the benefit in the long term. As 2023 has shown us, we are vulnerable to fire in our landscape. We must be proactive in our approach to lessen the potential for critical incidents affecting our community."



Dry Lake Fire

Crews employed a "confine and contain" strategy on the Dry Lake Fire, using the existing roads and trails that surrounded the fire as containment lines. Firefighters first blacklined the containment lines, increasing their depth using drip torches--this process helps ensure the fire is held within the lines. Once the fire perimeters were buffered, the interior of the Dry Lake footprint was ignited using both drip torches and an Unmanned Aerial System (UAS), or drones, for strategic firing operations. The most technical work occurred under and around the 1/2 mile stretch of the Tri-State transmission line, which services the town of Pagosa Springs.



Fire managers listen intently during Dry Lake Fire briefing

Protecting critical infrastructure such as the transmission line and nearby private lands was a central strategic focus for Dry Lake. Tri-State Senior Manager Transmission Maintenance (West) Doug Dean says, "Tri-State appreciates our relationship with the US Forest Service as both entities look to manage the risks associated with wildfires to protect associated with wildfires to protect critical infrastructure. The U.S. Forest Service's

efforts this summer with managing the Dry Lake wildfire in a manner to reduce fuel loading is significant step in protecting Tri-State's power delivery infrastructure in the region."



Unmanned Aerial System pilots prepare to fly

Less than a week after it started, the Dry Lake Fire was winding down. While residents along the nearby Piedra River drainage experienced residual smoke impacts and increased firefighter traffic for almost two weeks, it was a far cry from the level of smoke and traffic that might accompany a more intense wildfire in the same area burning under more severe critical conditions. The raging and often catastrophic wildfires we see on the news are what carefully managed wildfires such as Dry Lake and prescribed fires are indented to prevent.

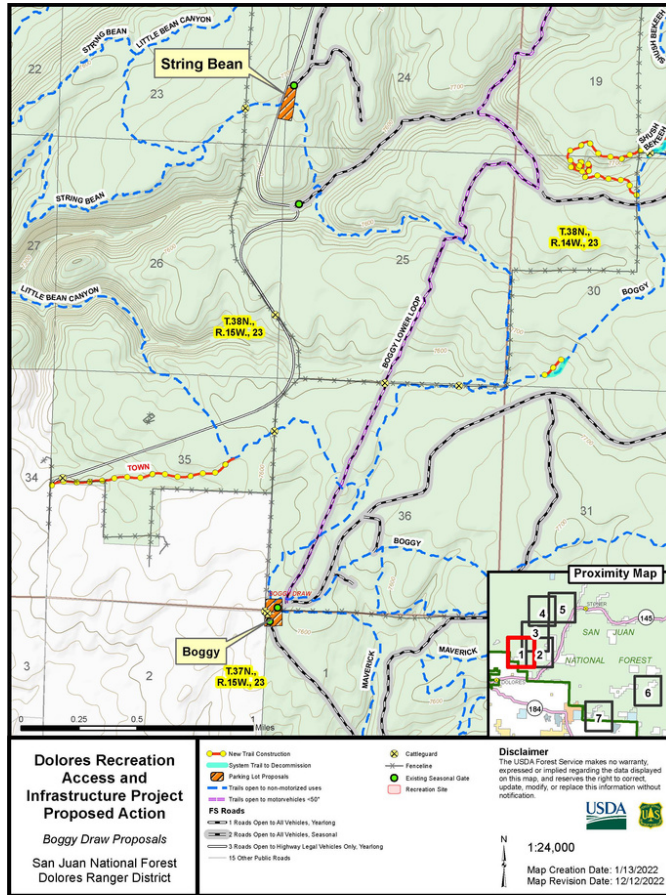


Handcrew preparing for fire line activities

Boggy Draw Gets Busy

Trails, Facilities, and Prescribed Fire

By Abe Proffitt - Partnership Coordinator



Map of Proposed Action

It's been a busy year for Boggy Draw!

In June, the San Juan National Forest proposed an improvement project on the Dolores Ranger District for Boggy Draw – a popular and well-loved recreation area just north of the town of Dolores.

The purpose of the project was to improve recreation access for motorized and non-motorized users, improve bathroom access, update parking infrastructure, and collaborate with the Town of Dolores and interested groups for trail improvements.

Like other recreation-focused areas in the U.S., Boggy Draw has seen a substantial increase in motorized and non-motorized use in recent years. According to the [2023 Outdoor Participation Trends Report](#), hiking and mountain biking participation in the U.S. increased by nearly 23% from

2022 to 2023. Over the past summer, an estimated 3,500 mountain bikers logged a ride at the Boggy Draw area on the [TrailForks](#) app, but the total visitation is likely much higher.

Trail improvements included rerouting approximately 4.6 miles of single-track routes of the Shush Bekeeh Trail #224 and creating the new Black Goat trail – a fully single-track connection to the town of Dolores along County Road 526 to Little Bean Canyon trail. Between June and August, [Southwest Colorado Cycling Association \(SWCCA\)](#), a long-time partner of the San Juan NF, put in hundreds of volunteer hours to complete both projects. Work included cutting back vegetation, cleaning drainages, and installing roll-over gates and signage. For the Shush trail reroute, erosion control played a big part in the design.

Now the trail weaves dynamically between enormous boulders and around switchbacks that better mitigate erosion compared to the previous configuration.

Boggy Draw Gets Busy



Black Goat Trail off CR 526

For motorized activity, the District is planning to redesignate some of the off-highway vehicle (OHV) trails by expanding the width restrictors from 50 inches to 62 inches. Redesignation is scheduled to begin in 2025 with the Boggy Upper & Lower Loop trails. Several new cattleguards were also installed along the main Boggy Draw Road FSR 527.

In addition to trail improvements, two parking areas are planned for the area. In early November, construction began on the existing Boggy Draw trailhead parking area. The design will accommodate 20 additional cars, 2 ADA compliant spots with bathroom access, and 3 back-in trailer spaces, as well as a vault toilet. An additional parking area is planned along the Dolores-Norwood Road near the String Bean and Tava trailhead.



Parking configuration at Boggy Draw

More detailed information can be found in the Dolores Recreation Access and Infrastructure Improvement Project: <https://usfs-public.app.box.com/v/PinyonPublic/file/1235316431396>

Boggy Draw Gets Busy

In conjunction with trail and parking improvements, approximately 2,470 acres were burned successfully in the spring and fall around Boggy Draw. Reintroduction of prescribed fire is necessary to improve and restore vegetative conditions. This effort reduced hazardous ground fuels, lessened the risk of unplanned large-scale wildfire, helped restore ponderosa pine ecosystems, and improved wildlife habitat. For more information on the San Juan NF prescribed fire program, visit our [Prescribed Fire Program](#) page on InciWeb.



Summer and fall prescribed fire operations

Project Updates

RESTORE Grant: Partnering on Big Game Habitat



SCC Crew members thinning oak brush

By Abe Proffitt - Partnership Coordinator

Last winter's Partnership Peaks highlighted a collaborative project to improve big game habitat on the Dolores Ranger District. In 2022, Southwest Conservation Corps (SCC) crew members cleared oak brush around ponderosa pine, aspen stands service berry, and choke cherry near Glade Lake – all species that big game animals rely on for winter food and shelter. This year, they cleared 10.5 acres of oak brush and small diameter ponderosa pine to improve winter habitat in the Lone Pine area.

“SCC was super productive this year - they really understood the ecology of this restoration. I'm excited to see how these components will fit into the larger scale of timber and fire management!” - Dave Casey (Supervisory Forester on the Dolores RD)

Once mechanical thinning is complete, the next project is pile burning. Reducing canopy coverage and releasing nutrients via fire creates better conditions for grass and forb production, which will provide big game with forage. Treatments such as these help the Dolores District better meet desired conditions--a mixed species forest with heterogeneous clumps of trees and diverse ground cover.

Forest Potluck Celebration!

On November 16th, we hosted our 1st Forest-wide party since 2020 and it's safe to say it was a hit! More than 60 people attended from across the Forest including current and retired employees. Along with reuniting with familiar friends and eating tasty treats, we also honored our dedicated workforce with Time-in-Service achievements, a Meet-n-Greet Bingo game with prizes, and the Employee Awards--a new tradition that was definitely a crowd pleaser! Folks could vote for an individual employee or department. Enjoy the photos from the event!



Most Welcoming
Christy Garrou



Rookie of the Year
Deanna O'Donnell



Got Your Back
Dennis Woods



Most Miles Covered
Heather Perry



Field Work is Life
Hydro Crew



Only You
Jordan Burningham



Give a Hoot
Wilderness Crew



Partnership Opportunities



This year, the San Juan Mountains Association (SJMA) celebrated its 10th year of Christmas Trees for Conservation tree lot. With the help of dedicated volunteers (and a partnership with the San Juan NF), SJMA harvested over 400 white fir trees from the Beaver Meadows area north of Bayfield and are sold at the Durango-Silverton railroad parking lot. Thinning white firs helps reduce the chance of large-scale wildfires and increases available resources for other forest species. Hundreds of visitors have flocked to the tree lot since Thanksgiving to pick out their favorite tree and make lasting memories, including Smokey Bear!



An important element we want to highlight in this newsletter is our commitment to our partners. The San Juan National Forest works to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of this region's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations - and we're able to achieve that through partner connections. Our partners include land management agencies across all levels of government, nonprofit and for-profit entities, tribes, and community groups. By working with partners with diverse backgrounds and knowledge, we are increasing the resiliency of our natural resources and strengthening the community that enjoys and works in these lands. For information about partnering with the USFS, follow this link: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/working-with-us/partnerships>

To become a partner with the San Juan NF or for questions, contact Abe Proffitt (SJNF Partnership Coordinator) by email at abraham.proffitt@usda.gov or by phone at (970) 501-0261.

For general questions about the San Juan NF, call (970) 247-4874, visit the forest website, or follow us on social media:



Greetings New Employees!

Nick Mustoe

District Ranger on the Dolores Ranger District



Nick was the Deputy District Ranger on the Flagstaff Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest where he worked to build relationships with city, county, and tribal communities. Nick has previously detailed as District Ranger on the Hebgen Lake District of the Custer Gallatin National Forest in West Yellowstone. Nick began his Forest Service career as a Forester on the Fishlake National Forest in central Utah working on landscape scale aspen restoration. Prior to that, he worked with private landowners as a forester for the State of Utah, Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands; served as a Research Assistant for the University of Arkansas School of Forestry and Natural Resources; a forest inventory technician for the University of Alaska-Fairbanks; a Firewise community coordinator in Arizona; and a forestry technician in prescribed fire and habitat management on the Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge. Nick brings a passion for engaging with partners, telling our story, and connecting people with their national forests. In his free time, Nick can often be found on a bike ride, roasting coffee, or lost in a natural history book.



Kyle O'Neill
Silviculture Forester
Columbine RD



Kenar Houghton
NEPA Coordinator
Columbine RD



Andrew Hilliker
OCIO - Client Experience
Supervisor's Office



Douglas Wiersma
SJMA Visitor Information Services
Pagosa RD

Congratulations!

From everyone on the San Juan, we want to give an enormous thank you to Cylia Boyd and Cam Hooley as they count down to retirement! They are always going above and beyond to lend a helping hand and share their wisdom with the rest of the team. Our offices won't feel the same without you--congratulations on your retirement and don't be a stranger!



Cylia Boyd
Resource Assistant



Cam Hooley
NEPA Coordinator

Patti Brady Receives a USFS Chief's Award

CONGRATULATIONS , Patti Brady, on your Chief's Award, signed in ink by Chief of the Forest Service Randy Moore.

This Certificate of Achievement Award is in recognition of volunteer contributions of more than 20,000 hours to conserve and manage natural and cultural resources.

Thank you Patti for all you do for our public lands!

