

Public Opinion Poll on Western Colorado Forest Management Issues

KEY FINDINGS

Public Opinion Strategies conducted this survey of 500 registered voters in the eight counties in or surrounding the Grand Mesa, Uncompaghre and Gunnison National Forest (referred to as GMUG in this report). Those counties are Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose, Ouray, San Miguel, Delta and Mesa. Interviews were collected March 21-23, 2006. The margin of error associated with a sample of this type is $\pm 4.38\%$.

Nearly three-quarter of the region's voters reject Forest Service changes that could limit public access.

- Fully 73% of local voters say the Forest Service should not change the current regulations to reduce public access on the Grand Mesa, Uncompaghre and Gunnison National Forest. A majority of 58% say they strongly feel this way.

More than six-in-ten voters in every single county oppose efforts to reduce public access, with opposition most pronounced in Delta County (78% should not change regulations), Mesa (74%), and Montrose (72%). Opposition is across the political spectrum, as 65% of Democrats, 76% of Independents and 74% of Republicans oppose these proposed changes. Sportsmen are particularly opposed, as 81% of hunters and 76% of anglers say the Forest Service should not change regulations to reduce access.

- Opposition to reducing access is HIGHER among the 45% of the electorate who say they had heard about these proposed changes already. Fully 78% oppose the Forest Service reducing access among those who have seen "a lot" or "some", as compares to 69% opposition among those who have seen little or nothing about the issue.
- Even when voters are provided with greater detail about the potential changes, a majority of resident stand firm in their opposition. Voters were told that...
One proposal being considered by the Forest Service would more than double the area that would be closed to residents who choose to use a motorized vehicle to access the back country. Residents would still be able to hike, bike or horseback ride on trails.

Having heard this additional information, six-in-ten (59%) continues to believe the Forest Service should not change the current regulations to reduce public access, with 49% strongly feeling this way. Perhaps most stunning is the fact that a majority (52%) of self-described environmentalists oppose these proposed changes.

Voters in the GMUG area are much more inclined to support a plan that features a variety of uses and recreation opportunities than the priorities stated in the Mountains to Mesa (M2M) proposal. [see: <http://www.hccaonline.org/page.cfm?pageid=2059>]

- Two-thirds of respondents chose a plan that emphasizes balanced uses, while rejecting an exact description of the priorities detailed in the executive summary of the M2M plan.

When asked what the most important priority for the National Forest Service should be, by greater than a two-to-one margin voters select...

65% Ensure a balanced approach that allows many uses of the land by maintaining access residents have now to the trails, natural areas and streams, and allowing diverse recreation and human uses of the forest

27% Protect and restore the native biological diversity of this area, through stopping the fragmentation of the forest, allowing natural processes like wildfires, and recognizing that recreational and other uses are less important than the primary goal of sustainable ecological management

A plurality of voters in every single county supports the multiple uses approach. Moreover, a majority of self-described environmentalists side with maintaining access (50%) versus the goals from the M2M plan (40%).

In addition to access, voters also place personal importance on energy independence and economic vitality.

- The personal importance of maintaining access on National Forest land is 24 points higher than increasing the amount of National Forest land set aside as Wilderness. As seen below, the percentage of the electorate which places strong personal importance on energy and economic issues far exceeds other concerns:

Reducing our nation's reliance on foreign energy imports
75% very important issue to me personally

Increasing the number of good-paying year-round jobs in our communities
74% very important issue to me personally

Maintaining access to trails, streams, and natural areas on National Forest land owned by the federal government
65% very important issue to me personally

Helping small businesses grow and expand, so they can provide more people with good-paying jobs with benefits
62% very important issue to me personally

Increasing the amount of National Forest land which is set aside as pristine Wilderness with limited access
41% very important issue to me personally

Even when faced with a purely economic rationale for preserving access to public lands, local residents are more likely to side with tourism, energy and economic uses.

- There is very strong agreement with a number of economic reasons for maintaining access, including...

80% agree, 53% strongly agree
The ability to drive into the back country to hunt and fish is important to the rural

economy. Hunters and anglers spend millions of dollars every year in Colorado. We should not risk making changes that could negatively affect many small towns who rely on hunting, fishing and tourism for their local economy.

62% agree, 35% strongly agree

The ability to drive on existing roads is necessary for energy companies to explore and produce energy in this area. Imposing these so-called Clinton roadless rules could mean the loss of many good-paying jobs, and a multi-million dollar hit to the area's economy. We should not risk making changes that could negatively affect our regional economy.

This is not to say that local voters are anti-conservation - significant numbers take part in outdoor activities. However, the data demonstrates that they believe that access to public lands is an important element in preserving a conservation ethic.

- The vast majority of respondents take part in outdoor activities, with one-third having engaged in motorized recreation recently.

79% Visited a natural area, forest or park to take part in non-motorized recreation such as hiking, rafting, horseback riding, fishing or mountain biking in the last year

70% Visited a natural area, forest or park to view wildlife or for bird watching in the last year

50% Purchased a hunting or fishing license in the last three years

33% Visited a natural area, forest or park to take part in motorized recreation, such as riding off road vehicles or snowmobiles

- Thus, it is not surprising that regional voters support encouraging access to the outdoors - not limiting access.

87% agree, 44% strongly agree

Whether it is from the backseat of a jeep or hiking with their family, the more children get out in the outdoors, the greater their appreciation for nature will be. We should be encouraging people to visit the forest, not limiting access to it.

72% agree, 44% strongly agree

The best way to instill a love for our area's natural beauty, wildlife and special places is to encourage people to visit it. Limiting access to over one million acres will backfire in the long run, as people who do not experience the outdoors do not value and want to protect it.

In summary, voters strongly resist the proposed changes in the GMUG which could limit public access to National Forest land. Voters in this area are accessing the outdoors for a number of reasons. Voters go so far as to agree that the National Forest Service should be encouraging access instead of contemplating limits on access. In addition, the electorate in this region is more likely to place emphasis on protecting access for industry and energy production, and views those interests as personally important to them.