

## Non-motorized trail development and wildlife

October 29, 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Matt Holloran. I was raised in Steamboat Springs and value the land-stewardship ethic my upbringing instilled. This ethic resulted largely from the hunting opportunities afforded me in the Yampa Valley. Since leaving Steamboat I received my doctorate studying the response of wildlife to anthropogenic activity and have spent my career studying and developing proactive solutions to wildlife-human conflicts in Western communities.

Although there is not much activity-specific research on the effects of non-motorized trails to wildlife, the overwhelming preponderance of scientific evidence suggests that most wildlife populations are negatively impacted by habitat fragmentation and increased human presence in an area. This is especially true of secretive species like elk and mule deer, and in situations where those impacts occur in seasonally-sensitive habitats like winter range, parturition areas, or migratory routes. I recognize that the nominal level of surface disturbance associated with a network of trails imparts the conclusion of minimal impact. However, the indirect effects of these sorts of developments can be substantial and result in the functional loss of significant amounts of habitat and stress-induced increases in mortality (see <https://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/01491/wdfw01491.pdf> as an overview of elk population-level responses to roads). The science is unequivocal that the network of trails proposed for Rabbit Ears Pass and north of Strawberry Park ([https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/fseprd568674.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd568674.pdf)) may have significant impacts to populations of wildlife in these areas.

I am not anti-trail, and I support efforts to expand outdoor recreation opportunities. However, we (as in a society) now know enough to recognize that our activities are not benign. The potential impacts to wildlife populations need to be taken into account when planning and developing an expansion of the trail network in the Steamboat Springs area. Care needs to be taken to avoid and minimize impacts to sensitive seasonal habitats for big game and other species. There are currently more than enough areas to expand outdoor recreation opportunities without introducing potentially irreversible impacts to wildlife.

As one final thought from someone who has been engaged in these sorts of discussions for over 20 years: please do not fail to consider the potential impacts to wildlife because of a lack of site-specific, directly-relevant data. Although in my opinion there is more than enough scientific information to establish that the trail system as proposed could have substantial impacts to wildlife, if those making the decisions on this project are uncomfortable with there not being data specific to non-motorized trails in Routt County, then research to address these questions should be conducted prior to moving forward and not as a component of moving forward. I have seen too many times where the latter approach has resulted in research projects that have essentially documented the significant decline of a population of wildlife in the name of learning how a given species responds to one activity that differs slightly from another, or in one location as compared to another.

I thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact with any questions.

Matt Holloran

Principal; Operational Conservation LLC

Chief Scientist; Wildlife Management Research Support

(307) 399-6885