Town of Crested Butte

P.O. Box 39 Crested Butte, Colorado 81224

-National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2008 Dozen Distinctive Destinations Award Recipient-

-A National Historic District-

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Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests
Attn: Plan Revision Team
2250 South Main Street
Delta, CO 81416

Submitted via email to: gmugforestplan@fs.fed.us

October 16, 2017

Dear Scott Armentrout and the GMUG Forest Planning Staff,

Thank you for initiating the Forest Plan Revision. With our current Forest Plan over thirty years old, we are excited to see this important guiding document updated to better reflect the current conditions of our forest and the best available science. We appreciate your dedication to outreach to GMUG stakeholders and thank you for the opportunity to comment so early in the process.

The Town of Crested Butte is surrounded by National Forest Service lands. We understand that the health and wellbeing of our Town is dependent on the context of the greater landscape, with the wellbeing of the forest inextricably linked with our social and economic wellbeing as a town.

The Town has several direct interests in the surrounding National Forest lands. Our drinking water is exclusively supplied by Coal Creek. This is unique, given the small size of the watershed (15,600 acres), and its nearly complete location on Forest Service lands. The actions of the Forest Service in this area have a more direct and undiluted effect on our water than seen in many municipal water sources. This sensitive area is protected under Section 14 of the Town's municipal code and we have partnered for many years with the Forest Service on its protection.

We are also adjacent landowners and managers to the Forest Service, with many of the open space lands that we own or hold conservation easements on abutting public lands managed by the Forest Service. Many of the most difficult problems we are encountering on our open space lands, including the control of noxious weeds, the protection of sensitive species, and the management of increasing recreational use require cross-boundary management and coordination between agencies and open space managers.

Finally, the Town of Crested Butte's economy is highly tourism dependent. In 2017, sales tax is projected to account for 74% of our general fund revenues, with revenues peaking in the high-tourism months[1]. Many visitors choose to come to Crested Butte for our historic, small-town feel, and the amenities provided by our proximity to Forest Service lands, including scenic views, access to outdoor recreation, and healthy wildlife and waters. The economy of Crested Butte depends on these natural resources for its future vitality, making the protection of our surrounding landscape a top priority for the Town.

With our water, open space, and economy reliant on our surrounding landscape, the Town of Crested Butte asks that the GMUG Forest address several prominent issues on our surrounding forest in the upcoming revision.

1. Recreation infrastructure and management

Over the past several years, a major concern of the Town of Crested Butte has been the impacts of increased recreation in the northern end of the Gunnison Valley on our public lands. A recent study estimated that 40,000 people visit the Slate River Valley each summer[2]. With economic conditions continuing to improve around the country and a national trend towards increased interest in backcountry recreation, the Town expects that we will continue to see growing visitation numbers in coming years.

While outdoor recreation is a primary economic driver for our community, the Town is also concerned with overuse of some of our most iconic places and the long-term protection of our backcountry resources. Two community groups, the Crested Butte Conservation Corps and Mountain Manners, have formed in the past year to help address some of the growing stewardship needs on public lands in the Upper Gunnison Valley. The Town provided $25,500 in 2017 in funding to public lands stewardship needs, including funding for port-o-potties, Mountain Manners and the Crested Butte Conservation Corps.

The Town encourages the Forest Service to consider the increase in recreation and pursue strategies to help mitigate issues stemming from this growing pressure in the upcoming revision. In particular, the Town sees a need for increased enforcement and visitor engagement, as well as new infrastructure in highly used places, including bathroom facilities and trailheads. The Town would also be interested in helping the Forest Service investigate the possibility of additional campground facilities, with the goal of alleviating some of the impacts from dispersed and long-term camping on Forest Service lands.

Impacts from increased recreational pressures occur along trail corridors, many of which traverse a patchwork of Forest Service, BLM, and private open space lands. We would encourage the Forest Service to continue to work in partnership with other agencies and land managers on recreation issues and to search for ways to enhance collaboration among partners. The Town of Crested Butte would

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[1] Town of Crested Butte Finance Department.

[2] Lieberman, Brian. (2016) Monitoring for Baseline Visitation Figures and Patterns in the Slate River Valley: A Study Supported by Infrared Counters, Onsite Surveys and Observational Data. Western State Colorado University Master in Environmental Management Dissertation.

support greater regional collaboration on recreation management issues, recognizing that we benefit through sales tax dollars from this increased recreation.

2. Continued protection of the Coal Creek and Slate River Watersheds

As the two nearest watersheds to the Town of Crested Butte, the ongoing protection of Coal Creek and the Slate River are a high priority for the Town. The Town encourages the Forest Service to limit any development in these sensitive watersheds, which together, provide our drinking water and greatest riparian habitat. These two watersheds are essential community resources for our Town.

In the upcoming revision, the Town encourages the Forest Service to continue to support necessary mine clean up in these watersheds and to recognize that mining on Mt. Emmons is not compatible with the long-term health and viability of the Town of Crested Butte.

3. Protection of Historic Resources

The Town of Crested Butte is a National Historic District, with our historic character central to our identity as a Town. Historic resources on nearby Forest Service lands help contextualize our historic downtown and reinforce our sense of place as a historic area. The Town would encourage the Forest Service to continue to protect any remaining historic resources on the Forest in the upcoming revision.

4. Climate change

According to the 2011 Gunnison Basin Climate Vulnerability report, the Gunnison Basin is predicted to have an average increase in annual temperature of approximately 3°C (5.4°F) from the late 20th century to the middle 21st century, leading to a 10-25% decrease in average annual runoff, more precipitation falling as rain rather than snow, and greater variability in annual precipitation[3]. The report also states that these climatic changes threaten the ecosystems surrounding the Town of Crested Butte, ranking the ecosystems in our near proximity as *moderately* to *highly* vulnerable to climate change.

As a tourism-based economy, with visitation highly dependent on our scenic beauty and recreational amenities, climate change threatens the economic livelihood of Crested Butte. Lower snowpack means a shorter ski season and less visitors for our town[4]. Less water means that our subalpine and alpine ecosystems will migrate upward in elevation, leaving visitors with less low-elevation, easy access to high

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[3] Southwest Climate Change Initiative. 2011. Gunnison Basin Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment. Available online: http://wwa.colorado.edu/publications/reports/TNC-CNHP-WWA-UAF_GunnisonClimChangeVulnAssess_Report_2012.pdf

[4] Wobus, Cameron, et al. 2017. Projected Climate Change Impacts on Skiing and Snowmobiling: A case study of the United States. Global Environmental Change. Available online: https://ac.els-cdn.com/S0959378016305556/1-s2.0-S0959378016305556-main.pdf?_tid=88a21b34-afab-11e7-913f-00000aab0f01&acdnat=1507853872_852315947af834fee9fd62a13a2b9522

alpine meadows that characterize Crested Butte[5]. As the Wildflower Capital of Colorado, we are concerned that the range shift or complete loss of these native species could reduce the number of visitors drawn to our Town during the summer months. Wildflowers and snow are just two examples, but the Town is concerned about the myriad impacts across species, ecosystems, and economic drivers that climate change could cause.

In addition to threatening our economy, climate change also could jeopardize our sense of place and community character. Many of our residents choose to make Crested Butte their home because of incredible natural landscape and recreational amenities.

In the upcoming Forest Plan revision, the Town of Crested Butte encourages the GMUG Forest Planning team to consider how climate change could affect local economies and social wellbeing. We hope that the GMUG will pursue strategies to both protect sensitive species and ecosystems that could be affected by climate change and look to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from forest lands.

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Because the surrounding forest is critical to our own social and economic wellbeing as a town, the Town of Crested Butte would request to be a cooperating agency during the Forest Plan Revision process. We are committed to help developing the best plan possible and would appreciate being included in the larger conversation about the future of the GMUG forest.

The Town of Crested Butte recognizes that many of the issues facing the Forest Service require regional collaboration. The Town hopes to partner with the Forest Service in addressing these issues. Whether you are working on noxious weeds, mining, or recreation issues, we would like to support you in your work to best manage a healthy, viable forest.

The Town of Crested Butte appreciates your efforts on behalf of our landscape and thanks you for beginning the revision process.

Sincerely,

Roland Mason
Mayor Pro-Tem, Town of Crested Butte

[5] Gilman, Sarah. 2007. Climate change may spur loss of alpine meadows, forest shifts. Aspen Daily News. Available online: http://www.digitalrmbl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/warming_meadow_Harte_AspenDaily2007.pdf