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Elk vs. trails: Proposal in Steamboat Springs highlights conflicts over public lands

Mountain bikers want to ride in Routt National Forest, but others are concerned about the impacts on wildlife.



Land managers in Colorado have been unable to keep up with the evolving uses and demands like biking of mountain trails, writes Steve Lipsher. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

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The quality of life provided by Colorado's outdoors — the untrammeled places, the economic benefit, the expanding outdoor recreation industry — is clashing with wildlife conservation on the Western Slope in a case that puts the spotlight on how the state's public lands are used.

The debate in Steamboat Springs is over a proposed network of mountain bike trails that would be funded with revenue from a local lodging tax and built in the Routt National Forest. Outdoor recreation enthusiasts, many of them mountain bikers, have hit a speed bump in efforts to add more trails

— hunters and wildlife advocates who say elk and other animals could be harmed.

With tensions building, the Steamboat Springs City Council hired the Keystone Policy Center to oversee public meetings aimed at reaching agreement on the proposal the U.S. Forest Service will consider. Ahead of a March 4 meeting, tensions and frustrations remain high, people on various sides of the issue say.

“There’s a high degree of suspicion that this is a railroad,” said Larry Desjardin, who lives in Steamboat Springs and is a member of the newly formed group Keep Routt Wild.

News of declining elk numbers in other parts of Colorado and reports from local hunters of fewer elk where earlier trails were built have prompted the group to call for a pause, Desjardin said.

“What we’re really trying to do is understand the impact that outdoor recreation has on wildlife and wildlife habitat and have a really holistic planning process,” Desjardin said. “There’s a sprawl of outdoor recreation, and we’re trying to treat that just like we do housing.”

Housing construction, mining, oil and gas drilling and transportation are bigger threats to wildlife than trails, Kelly Northcutt wrote in [a Jan. 10 letter](#) in the Steamboat Pilot and Today newspaper.

“Really, a wildlife advocate group should be looking at a lot of other issues besides a handful of trail connectors,” Northcutt, executive director of the cycling advocacy group Routt County Riders, said in an interview.

Voters overwhelmingly endorsed new mountain biking and multi-use trails when they approved the tax, now in its sixth year, Northcutt said.

Northcutt’s organization and others are part of an alliance that has proposed trails to finance. The project being considered by the Forest Service is called the Mad Rabbit Trails Project because the trails — motorized and nonmotorized — would run generally from Mad Creek to Rabbit Ears Pass.

The project would incorporate existing trails, including some that were illegally created. Some proposed trails have already been dropped because of the potential impacts on wildlife, Northcutt said.

While participation in mountain biking is increasing, Steamboat Springs has fallen behind in meeting the demand, Northcutt added. The Mad Rabbit trail would include features geared to more experienced riders while connecting to other systems.

"I'm incredibly frustrated right now. It's been over a seven-year process and everybody opposing it now just showed up a few months ago," Northcutt said.

Members of Keep Routt Wild and the Routt County Riders are part of a roundtable that includes ranchers, outfitters and members from local, state and federal agencies who are looking at a proposal the Forest Service put together based on feedback so far. Aaron Voos, spokesman for the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest, said the hope is the collaboration becomes a model for future projects.

The Forest Service hopes to start an environmental review of the project next year, Voos said.

Sonja Macys, a Steamboat Springs City Council member, is representing the city in the discussions. She said those worried about the impacts on wildlife feel as though they're not being listened to.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife has also raised concerns about the cumulative impacts of more trails on wildlife. In a 2018 letter to the Forest Service, JT Romatzke, CPW's northwest regional manager, wrote that "outdoor recreation associated with trails influences a variety of wildlife species in multiple ways."

Two trail options under review at that time — one 79 miles total and the other 68 miles — would affect from 44,500 to 48,100 acres of wildlife habitat, according to CPW. The estimates are based on the miles of trails and the results of studies showing how far elk and mule deer stay away from trails that are in use.

The proposal currently being discussed would encompass about 74 miles of trails.

“Outdoor recreation is one of the greatest drivers of Colorado’s economy and is one of the fastest growing activities in the state,” Romatzke wrote to the Forest Service.

However, the state’s growing human population is placing a growing demand on Colorado’s limited natural resources and CPW is responsible for both connecting people to the outdoors and “conserving wildlife and habitat,” Romatzke added.

Pressures from more people recreating outdoors are among the things state wildlife biologists are looking at to explain declining numbers of elk in parts of Colorado. The Frying Pan River herd, whose territory runs from the Frying Pan’s drainage around Basalt to the Eagle River drainage above Vail, dropped from a peak of a little over 10,000 animals in the 1990s to an estimated 4,600 by the end of 2017.

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Biologists have set a goal for the herd’s size from 5,300 up to 8,300 elk. Wildlife officials have dramatically reduced the hunting licenses offered in the area as the number of young elk making it to one year has dropped, said Brad Petch, CPW’s senior wildlife biologist for the northwest region.

There are pockets of similar declines among elk just north of Steamboat Springs, Petch said. Next fall, CPW plans to start studying what’s behind the decreases.

Desjardin of Keep Routt Wild believes more study and education about the potential effects on wildlife are in order before more trails are built. Studies show that habitat becomes fragmented and animals use up a lot of energy running from disturbances when human activities increase, he said.

"A year ago, I didn't have these opinions. I couldn't imagine why a path would have an impact on elk. Now, I realize it's an issue of high-volume use," Desjardin said.

Macys, the Steamboat council member, said the city, CPW and the Forest Service will meet to review proposed development, including about 1,200 new housing units that could be built in the next two to three years.

"Given what I think we're going to be seeing with development, erring on side of caution is a better step," Macys said. "This is not just a decision we're making for the people of Routt County. It's a decision we're making for the people of the United States. These are our public lands."