

INTRODUCTION

The planning area contains a majority of the 232-mile long San Juan Skyway, which was designated by the USFS as a National Scenic Byway in 1988. In 1989, it was also designated by the State of Colorado Scenic Byway Commission as a State Scenic and Historic Byway. Both of these were the first such designations for the State of Colorado. The byway was given further distinction when it was recognized as an All-American Road. In order to receive the distinction of an All-American Road designation, the San Juan Skyway had to be considered a “destination unto itself” – a primary destination for a trip that provides an exceptional travel experience for visitors.

The San Juan Skyway also passes through the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests, as well as through Mesa Verde National Park. The San Juan Skyway links the historic towns of Durango, Silverton, Ouray, Telluride, and Cortez. This byway traverses some of the most spectacular, rugged, and primitive landscapes in America. The area is rich in cultural resources from ancient Native American inhabitation (with Native Americans using and accessing the San Juan area for possibly up to 10,000 years), to the colorful mining era of the San Juan Mountains in the 1800s (including the development of the narrow-gauge railways through the area). In keeping with the primary goals of the National Scenic Byway program, the physical development of the highway, its associated facilities, and the management of surrounding landscapes is vital to the conservation of its unique and valued attributes.

The 65-mile Alpine Loop National Backcountry Byway also passes through the southern San Juan Mountains (often along routes that follow ancient paths Native Americans used as they returned to their traditional summer hunting camps). The route connects the towns of Lake City, Silverton, and Ouray. Unlike scenic byways, which are located on paved roads, backcountry byways focus on out-of-the-way routes that are typically graveled. Spectacular higher-elevation scenery and numerous historical markers explain the mining history of the area as the route travels through the towering San Juan Mountains.

The Trail of the Ancients Scenic Byway highlights the long and intriguing inhabitation of the Four Corners region by Native American peoples. It escorts visitors to remote archaeologically, culturally, and historically significant sites in Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. The section of the byway within the planning area travels mainly within the Canyon of the Ancients National Monument (BLM), Hovenweep National Monument (NPS), Ute Mountain Ute tribal Lands, and communities (including Cortez and Dolores). A total of 114 miles of this scenic byway are located within Colorado.

LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE FRAMEWORK

Congress established the National Scenic Byways program under the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991 and strengthened it further with the passage of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) in 1998 and subsequently with the recent passage of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act - A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), in 2005.

The National Scenic Byways Program (NSBP) is under the administration of the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Based on one or more archaeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational, and/or intrinsic scenic qualities, the U.S. Secretary of Transportation recognizes certain roads as America’s Byways, All-American Roads, or National Scenic Byways.

The Colorado Scenic and Historic Byways program is a Statewide partnership intended to provide recreational, educational, and economic benefits to Coloradoans and to State visitors. This system of outstanding touring routes in Colorado affords the traveler interpretation and identification of key points of interest while, at the same time, providing for the protection of significant resources.

Scenic and Historic Byways are designated by the Colorado Scenic and Historic Byways Commission based on their exceptional scenic, historic, cultural, recreational, and natural features.

Backcountry Byways are vehicle routes that traverse scenic corridors utilizing secondary or backcountry road systems.

DESIGN CRITERIA

Management guidelines and design criteria describe the environmental protection measures that would be applied to all of the alternatives at the project level in order to protect, enhance, and, where appropriate, improve resources related to scenic byways. Guidelines and design criteria are presented in Part 3 of Volume 2 of the DLMP/DEIS.

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Existing Conditions and Trends

Currently, driving for pleasure is one of the most popular forms of recreation occurring within the planning area – with scenic byways and backcountry byways serving as some of the most popular routes through the San Juan Mountains (experiencing moderate to high use on a regular basis).

Along these byways, many interpretive opportunities remain untapped and out of reach to the public. Valued scenic and cultural landscapes remain exposed to development and, consequently, degradation due to a variety of impacts. Basic safety information and sanitary facilities are still lacking in key areas.

As the population increases, and as Baby-Boomers grow older and become less able to engage in more physically active forms of recreation, larger numbers of visitors are anticipated to take up driving for pleasure. Heritage tourism, which is the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry, is often combined with a scenic drive. Cultural heritage sites along byways (including early historic mining and Native American sites), offer increasing opportunities for interpretation and education.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACTS

Under all of the alternatives, the condition of the viewshed on SJPLC-administered lands would be conserved for valued scenic and cultural elements to the extent that partnerships, resources, and funding allow. Generally, all of the alternatives are similar with respect to desired future conditions, thematic direction, and design guidelines for land management of the routes (and adjacent lands) within the viewsheds. Differences exist between the alternatives regarding oil and gas stipulations. Alternative A would provide far less scenic protection with standard stipulations than would Alternatives B, C, or D (which would all propose more protective oil and gas stipulations). If no new oil and gas leases were made available, the impacts to Scenic Byways would be similar to the impacts under all alternatives because most of the development will occur on existing leases.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

The main cumulative impact for the future of these scenic routes is related to the development of non-public lands visible from, or adjacent to, these routes. These impacts are outside the scope of this DLMP/DEIS. Over the next decade, many private parcels will be developed for residential and commercial use. Some of this development may cumulatively impact these byways. Changes in the character of the visible viewshed from these routes may likely to occur, especially as lands become more industrial and urbanized. Under a no leasing scenario none of the Scenic Byways would have any potential for oil and gas exploration.