



# Resource Protection Study

Newsletter 3, Preliminary Alternatives, Fall 2003

Dear Friends,

This newsletter includes the initial set of alternatives developed for the Curecanti Resource Protection Study in response to a request by Congress. The primary emphasis presented in Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 includes a new idea for the National Park Service, a *Conservation Opportunity Area*. Under these alternatives, the Park Service would work in partnership with neighbors within a designated area to conserve resources. This approach would utilize a variety of tools, from conservation incentive programs to land acquisition. There would be no requirement that landowners participate, but with mutual benefits available in the program, including compensation, opportunities would be available for willing partners.

Under this concept, the Park Service would also work more closely with local counties, neighboring land management agencies, and other organizations to reach common goals of resource conservation and public recreation. Combined with the Conservation Opportunity Area idea, this would help sustain the economic benefits of having a National Recreation Area in our backyard.

This newsletter brings you up-to-date on our progress in the study, addresses tools that provide incentives to work towards conservation, describes initial alternatives for the National Recreation Area boundary, tells you what lies ahead in the project, and provides an opportunity to comment.

So I invite you to let us know what you think about our suggestions for conserving these valuable resources that contribute to making Curecanti such a great place to live, work, and play. Ultimately, we want to send a report to Congress that will be mutually beneficial to all of us in the Curecanti area. With your involvement and support, we can make that a reality.

Best Regards,

*Pete Hart, Interim Superintendent  
Curecanti National Recreation Area*



The Dillon Pinnacles

## The National Park Service Mission

The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.

## In summary, this study is about

- finding ways acceptable to Congress that will allow NPS to work in partnership with landowners and others to conserve the natural, cultural, recreational and scenic resources and character of the land;
- formal establishment of Curecanti for permanence of resource conservation and public recreation, which will be of continued economic benefit to the area.

## In summary, this study is **not** about

- making any recommendations that would use condemnation or infringe upon the rights of landowners;
- making any recommendation pertaining to water rights.

# What is Curecanti National Recreation Area?

## And what is this study all about?

### Origin of Curecanti NRA

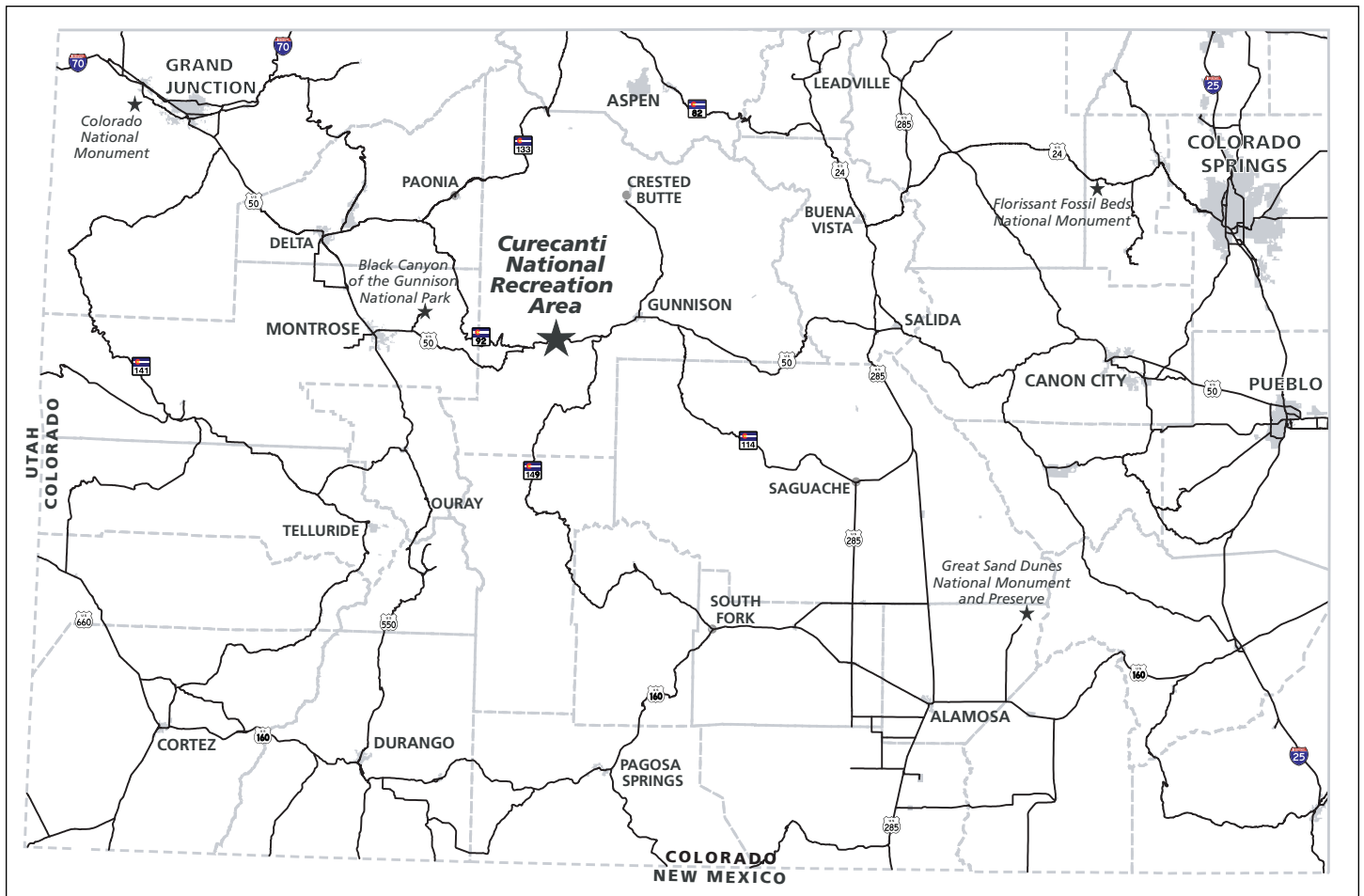
The Wayne N. Aspinall Unit, formerly known as the Curecanti Unit, was authorized by the Colorado River Storage Project Act of 1956, as amended. The Act initiated the comprehensive development of water resources of the Upper Colorado River Basin. The purposes of the Act include regulating the flow of the Colorado River; controlling floods; improving navigation; storing and delivering water for reclamation of land and other beneficial purposes; improving water quality; providing for public recreation; improving conditions for fish and wildlife; and generation and sale of electrical power.

The Aspinall Unit is approximately 40 miles long, and includes Blue Mesa Dam (completed in 1965), Powerplant, and Reservoir; Morrow Point Dam (completed in 1968), Powerplant, and Reservoir; and Crystal Dam (completed in 1976), Powerplant, and Reservoir; all on the Gunnison River. The United States Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) has overall responsibility for the project, and operates and maintains the dams, powerplants, and related facilities. Since 1977, Western Area Power Administration has operated and maintained the power transmission system and has marketed the power generated at the Wayne N. Aspinall Unit.

In 1965, the National Park Service (NPS) entered into an agreement with BOR to construct and manage recreational facilities and to manage natural and cultural resources and recreation on and adjacent to the reservoirs. The area then became known as Curecanti National Recreation Area or NRA. The NRA is currently identified by an administrative boundary that has not been established by legislation.



Sapinero Basin on Blue Mesa Reservoir



Location of Curecanti National Recreation Area

### Conserving Curecanti Resources

The NRA contains extensive water resources, including three reservoirs that provide a variety of recreational opportunities in a spectacular geological setting; geological, paleontological, and other natural resources, including abundant wildlife and fisheries; and a 10,000 year continuum of human culture. The park mission is to conserve, protect, and interpret the nationally significant and diverse natural and cultural resources of Curecanti, provide outstanding recreational opportunities, and to manage the area as part of a greater riverine ecosystem, in coordination with other land management agencies.

Beginning in the late 1950's, BOR began a process to withdraw public land and acquire private land needed for the project. Lands acquired were generally the minimum lands needed for the reservoirs, without full consid-

eration of what was needed for a recreation area that would be managed by NPS. Since that time, it has become apparent that there are additional resources beyond the current administrative boundary that should be evaluated prior to establishment of a legislated boundary.

Development on private lands surrounding the NRA is on the increase. If such development occurs without concern for the cumulative impacts to natural and cultural resources and to the magnificent natural vistas that contribute so much to the attractiveness of this area, the national significance of the NRA could be diminished.

### Study Purpose

Therefore, in 1999, Congress directed NPS to conduct a study to assess area resources within and surrounding Curecanti and recommend alternatives to protect resource value

and character. In particular, Public Law 106-76, requires NPS to:

- (1) assess the natural, cultural, recreational and scenic resource value and character of the land within and surrounding Curecanti NRA (including open vistas, wildlife habitat, and other public benefits);
- (2) identify practicable alternatives that protect the resource value and character of the land;
- (3) recommend a variety of economically feasible and viable tools to achieve the above; and
- (4) estimate the costs of implementing the approaches recommended by the study.

# What has been accomplished to date?

Over the past three years, the study team has been working on the following elements of the project, leading up to the preliminary alternatives that are presented in this newsletter:

- 1 Gathering information on interests and concerns to address in the study from the general public and neighboring agencies during scoping - *spring 2000*
- 2 Gathering and analyzing resource data and information - *summer 2000 to the present*
- 3 Collecting information and opinions from local citizens regarding scenic values, critical resources to protect, and areas important to preserve for recreational use via a photo assessment project - *fall 2000*
- 4 Conducting study team and intra-agency work sessions - *fall 2000 through spring 2001*
- 5 Soliciting information from the public regarding ideas about the types of visitor use, recreation, and learning experiences they would like to see in the Curecanti area, as well as ideas regarding resources that might be protected and/or interpreted to enhance visitor understanding and enjoyment of the Curecanti area - *spring 2001*
- 6 Conducting workshops to address recreational opportunities with focus groups and the general public - *winter 2002*



Recreation Opportunity Workshops in March, 2002

- 7 Initiating the Joint Agency Management Effort (JAME), wherein neighboring land management agencies get together to resolve resource management issues of mutual concern - *spring 2002 to the present*
- 8 Publishing two documents that share information and ideas about how agencies and landowners can work together to maintain the outstanding qualities that are commonly valued in the Curecanti area, and a variety of tools and resources that may be available to provide assistance (refer to the *Toolbox* and *Park Neighbor Booklet* sections discussed later in this document) - *spring 2003*
- 9 Meeting with and/or contacting neighboring landowners to discuss goals and objectives of the study, and to encourage their involvement - *spring 2003 to the present*.

Throughout the study, the team has been consulting with local, state, tribal, and federal agencies and officials, including elected representatives, to keep them informed of the study's progress, and to obtain their input and guidance.

## What have we learned from the analysis of our resource data?

The best available data on natural and cultural resources was gathered primarily via a Geographical Information System (GIS). From the data, a set of maps was produced, providing visual representation of the resources that were considered most important to study. Examples of resources evaluated include:

- Areas of known archeologic/historic sites or districts
- Wildlife habitat, such as:
  - Elk winter concentration areas
  - Mule deer severe winter areas
  - Bighorn sheep overall range
  - Pronghorn overall range
- Areas of paleontological potential
- Raptor habitat, including:
  - Bald eagle
  - Golden eagle
  - Peregrine falcon
- Rare or imperiled species, such as:
  - Threatened and endangered species
  - Gunnison sage grouse
- Viewshed from highways and the center-line of Blue Mesa Reservoir

The resource maps were combined, and a composite map was generated that identified areas where important resources are concentrated within and surrounding the NRA. By combining this information with other information gathered through public involvement, the study team was able to identify areas where resources were already adequately protected, areas where enhanced resource protection was warranted, and areas where expanded recreation opportunities were desirable.



Morrow Point Reservoir east of Pioneer Point

# A conservation approach is a practicable alternative!

The Congress requested that NPS identify practicable alternatives that protect specific resource values and character of the land (including open vistas, wildlife habitat, and other public benefits). One such alternative would use a concept now being promoted by Secretary of Interior Gale Norton—the four C's, or Communication, Consultation and Cooperation, all in the service of Conservation.

A conservation principal was developed by Aldo Leopold over half-a-century ago. *Conservation is a state of harmony between land and man. . . A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.* A Sand County Almanac, 1949

Two types of partnerships that promote the use of conservation to achieve the goals suggested by Congress are being explored and are presented in this newsletter.

## Conservation Opportunity Area (COA)

A Conservation Opportunity Area, or COA, is an area that would be designated by Congress within which the NPS would be authorized to use various landowner incentives (comprising a *toolbox*) to partner with park neighbors to conserve resources. Participation by landowners would be voluntary, and condemnation or other non-partnership actions would be excluded from the *toolbox*. Acquisition (fee simple, access rights-of-way, conservation easements, etc.) from willing sellers would be one component of the toolbox. Other incentive ideas are discussed later in the *Toolbox* section of this newsletter. Although a few components of the toolbox could be implemented today, most will require authorization and funding and/or partnered funding with other agencies. Other components of the toolbox will require additional input and development prior to implementation.

## Joint Agency Management Effort (JAME)

Another concept that arose out of Resource Protection Study discussions that merited a more detailed analysis was initially referred to as a Joint Agency Management Area or JAMA. The idea was to evaluate resources on the basis of issues that extend beyond administrative boundaries, while recognizing the responsibilities of each agency. The agencies the National Park Service entered into discussions with included Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Western Area Power Administration, and the local counties. The agencies decided that tackling topics on a thematic basis would make greater sense and would be easier to accomplish than to jointly administer geographic areas. Thus, the Joint Agency Management Effort (JAME) was created. This is similar to previous cooperative efforts among agencies that have been established to address resource management issues of mutual concern. The agencies agreed to deal with invasive species (i.e. weeds) as the first JAME challenge.



Field studies to help define boundary alternatives

# Management and boundary considerations

## Who should manage the NRA?

Different scenarios for NRA management have been considered. These potential management scenarios would not affect the boundary alternatives. This includes management of various sections defined by the three reservoirs, by various agencies, including BLM, BOR, NPS, USFS, and Colorado State Parks. BLM and USFS have stated that they are not interested in directly managing the NRA. BOR operates the reservoir to meet Colorado River Storage Project purposes and prefers to contract management of the NRA to another agency. NPS, operating under an agreement with BOR, already manages the natural, cultural, and recreational resources of the NRA. Colorado State Parks is currently assessing the feasibility of managing the Blue Mesa portion of the NRA. The NPS is interested in continuing to manage the entire NRA.

## Where should the boundary be?

Four preliminary boundary alternatives were developed after data collection and analysis of the data and resource maps; meetings with agencies, officials, landowners and the public; and consideration of NPS management policies pertaining to boundary adjustments. All acreages referenced are approximate. Please refer to the maps inserted into this newsletter for a graphic representation of each alternative.

Alternative 1 is the No Action alternative. Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 are similar in that they each add the same agreed upon federal and state lands to the NRA, and they each exclude some lands to be transferred to BLM and USFS. They also include a Conservation Opportunity Area (COA). However, under Alternative 2, the COA would be outside the legislated boundary. Under Alternative 3, the most important lands to protect within the COA would be included in the boundary and the remainder of the COA would lie outside of the boundary. Finally, under Alternative 4, the legislated boundary would include the entire COA.

# Preliminary Boundary Alternatives

## Alternative 1

Alternative 1, known as the *No Action* alternative, represents the continuation of existing conditions. The existing administrative arrangement between BOR and NPS would continue under the 1965 Memorandum of Agreement. The area administered would include 41,900 acres. The boundary could remain an administrative boundary (minor adjustments among agencies might occur in the future with appropriate agreements) or it could become a legislated boundary.

## Alternative 2

This alternative would include 52,175 acres inside a legislated boundary and 15,300 acres outside the boundary in a COA.

The legislated boundary would consist of the existing NRA administrative boundary with the addition of certain mutually agreed upon federal and state agency lands that would include 7,000 acres of BLM land, 3,400 acres of USFS land, and 125 acres of CDOW land. Certain lands would be excluded from the NRA, including 230 acres of land to be administered by BLM (the Gateview parcel where rafting and other upstream uses suggest management efficiency in transferring this unit to BLM) and 20 acres of land to be administered by USFS. Additionally, 125 acres of federal land would be identified for use in exchange for the CDOW land to be acquired.

If, at some time in the future, NPS were to acquire an interest in lands within the COA, NPS would be authorized to amend the boundary to include those properties that are acquired. Emphasis would first be placed on partnering or seeking conservation solutions with landowners of those COA lands specified as the most important lands for protection. These lands, that comprise approximately 7,550 acres, are outlined on pages 7-9. A Land Protection Plan would be developed to identify additional priorities in the COA.

## Alternative 3

This alternative would include 59,725 acres inside a legislated boundary. A COA would be designated that would include 7,550 acres within the legislated boundary and 7,750 acres outside the NRA boundary (total COA of 15,300 acres).

The legislated boundary would consist of the existing NRA administrative boundary, with the addition of the same mutually agreed upon federal and state agency lands identified in Alternative 2. It would also include the 7,550 acres of the COA that are considered the most important to protect. (As noted in Alternative 2, these lands are identified on pages 7-9.) NPS would be authorized to amend the boundary to include properties within the COA that are outside of the initial legislated boundary, that might be acquired from willing landowners in the future.

The 7,550 acres within the COA identified as the most important lands for protection are generally the lands where NPS would place priority on seeking conservation solutions with landowners. A Land Protection Plan would be developed to identify specific priorities and approaches.

## Alternative 4

This Alternative would include 67,475 acres inside a legislated boundary, including the entire COA of 15,300 acres.

The legislated boundary would consist of the existing NRA administrative boundary and the mutually agreed upon federal and state agency lands described in Alternatives 2 and 3, as well as the addition of the entire COA. The 7,550 acres within the 15,300-acre COA identified as the most important lands for protection are the lands where NPS would place priority on seeking conservation solutions with landowners. These lands are described on the pages 7-9. A Land Protection Plan would be developed to identify specific priorities and approaches.

# Most important areas to protect within the Conservation Opportunity Area

Within the Conservation Opportunity Area, approximately 7,550 acres have been identified where NPS would first direct efforts in partnering with landowners to conserve resources. Photographs of these units and brief descriptions of important resource attributes follow.

## Vicinity Of Soap Creek Arm (5,400 Acres)

At the northwestern edge of Blue Mesa Reservoir, this land unit is the essential scenic backdrop for the rugged Dillon Pinnacles, the western end of Blue Mesa Reservoir, the Soap Creek Arm, the land bordering Morrow Point Reservoir, and a segment of the West Elk Loop Scenic and Historic Byway on US Hwy 50 and CO Hwy 92. It provides important wildlife habitat, and unique opportunities for future upland recreation, including a potential trail to scenic overlooks.



Looking across Soap Creek Arm from Soap Creek Road



Soap Creek Mesa from Soap Creek Road



Looking northeast to Blue Mesa and Soap Creek Arm from Hunters Point



Butte north of Blue Mesa Dam along Soap Creek Road



Looking north across Blue Mesa Reservoir towards Soap Creek Arm



Curecanti Needle from potential overlook



Curecanti Needle and potential overlook

### Curecanti Needle Overlook (500 Acres)

This area offers unique scenic and recreational opportunities, with overlooks into Blue Creek Canyon, Morrow Point Reservoir, the Curecanti Needle (which is also the historic railroad logo for the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad), and Chipeta Falls. Trail access to these overlooks would provide year-round opportunities for hiking and cross-country skiing.



Intersection of Blue Creek and Morrow Point Canyons

### Across From Neversink (400 Acres)

This area of traditional ranchland contains ribbons of the meandering Gunnison River and supports lush willow and cottonwood riparian communities. An important heron rookery is a key resource that would be protected. The area also contains the historic railroad bed for the Denver and Rio Grande Line, that has potential for a future interpretive trail.



Looking south east towards Cooper Ranch, Gunnison River and the area south of Neversink



### **Sapinero Mesa (1,150 Acres)**

This land unit is in the heart of one of the most scenic areas of the NRA, extending on the south side of Sapinero Basin from the middle bridge to Sapinero. Therefore, protecting the scenic values of this area is very important. Opportunities exist here to protect important winter wildlife habitat and habitat of the Gunnison sage grouse. Vistas from the mesa offer potential opportunities for a hiking trail with scenic overlooks.



Looking south east to Sapinero Mesa from Soap Creek Road



Southeast Iola Basin at low pool

### **Southeast Iola Basin (100 Acres)**

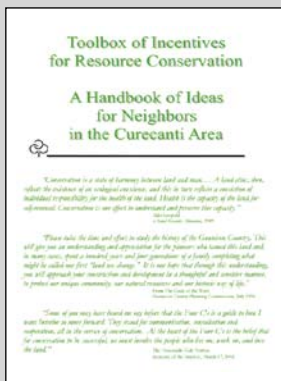
This unit on Willow Creek contains an area on Blue Mesa Reservoir where the high water line is actually outside the current NRA boundary. A boundary adjustment here would ensure that at high water level, the entire reservoir would be within the boundary. In addition, the riparian area along Willow Creek provides habitat for a variety of wildlife.

# Tools for encouraging conservation measures

## Toolbox of Incentives

NPS has developed a prototype package called the *Toolbox of Incentives for Resource Conservation: A Handbook of Ideas for Neighbors in the Curecanti Area*. This toolbox identifies present and potential methods that can be employed to encourage Curecanti area neighbors—private landowners, local communities, and city, county, state, and federal agencies—to work in partnership to manage their lands for more effective resource conservation. It has been developed to help conserve the natural, cultural, recreational, and scenic resources within and surrounding Curecanti. Examples of topics include:

- Principles for Forging Long-Term, Sustainable Partnerships
- Technical Assistance
- General Agreements
- Purchase and Retained Use and Occupancy
- Fee Simple Acquisition from Willing Seller
- Conservation Easements
- Working with Land Trusts
- Transfer of Development Rights (TDR)
- Endangered Species Incentives
- Landowner Incentive Program
- Private Stewardship Grants Program
- Colorado Species Conservation Partnership
- Grazing and Open Space Incentives
- Sources of Resource Conservation Assistance and Funding

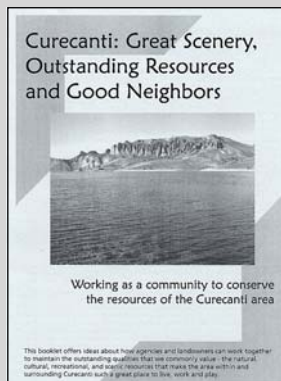


To view the *Toolbox*, visit the Curecanti website. Log onto [www.nps.gov/cure](http://www.nps.gov/cure), click on *Resource Protection Study* under *News and Events*, then click on *Toolbox of Incentives for Resource Conservation*.

## Park Neighbor Booklet

In April, 2003, NPS in cooperation with Gunnison and Montrose Counties produced an 8-page booklet entitled *Curecanti: Great Scenery, Outstanding Resources and Good Neighbors*. This booklet offers ideas about how agencies and landowners can work together to maintain the outstanding qualities that we commonly value in the Curecanti area—the natural, cultural, recreational, and scenic resources that make the area within and surrounding Curecanti such a great place to live, work and play. Topics covered include:

- Siting and Design Considerations
- Building Materials of Low Visual Impact
- Exterior Lighting
- Preserving and Improving Natural Habitat
- Protecting Water Quality
- Protecting Yourself and Property from Wildfire
- Assistance Available to Landowners
- Useful Websites for Additional Information



To view the *Booklet*, visit the Curecanti website. Log onto [www.nps.gov/cure](http://www.nps.gov/cure), click on *Resource Protection Study* under *News and Events*, then click on *Curecanti: Great Scenery, Outstanding Resources and Good Neighbors*.

# What lies ahead for the study?

The next step is to assess public response to the alternatives presented here, refine the alternatives based on comments received, and prepare a Draft Resource Protection Study/ Environmental Impact Statement (RPS/EIS). In the Draft RPS/EIS, the alternatives will be described in more detail, including any refinements that result from the public comment period, and a preferred alternative (Proposed Action) will be identified. The impacts of each alternative on the natural, cultural and socio-economic environment will also be assessed. The Draft RPS/EIS will be distributed next spring followed by public meetings and the solicitation of written comments. After considering all comments on the draft document, a Final RPS/EIS will be written and released to the public, and a report on the study's findings and recommendations will be sent to Congress in the fall of 2004.



Fitzpatrick Mesa and Round Corral Creek Valley

# We would like to hear from you!

We invite you to send us your written comments regarding our preliminary recommendations in this newsletter. For example, what is your opinion regarding the concept of a Conservation Opportunity Area (COA)? Are there additional lands that should be included within the COA? Or are there lands that should be excluded from the COA? What are your thoughts about the boundary alternatives? Do you find one more desirable than all the others? Is there a different alternative that you would like to see? And do you have any ideas you would like to share with us regarding working together in partnership in the service of resource conservation and towards the enhancement of recreational opportunities in the Curecanti area?

We would like your comments in writing, so please mail the enclosed Response Form or contact us in one of the ways shown opposite.

## Via Fax

(970) 240-5368  
Attn: Dave Roberts

## Via E-mail

dave\_roberts@nps.gov

## Via Postal Mail

Dave Roberts, Management Assistant  
National Park Service  
2465 S. Townsend Avenue  
Montrose, CO 81401

## Via Internet

Logon at [www.nps.gov/cure](http://www.nps.gov/cure)  
and click on *Resource Protection Study*

**Please send your comments to us  
by November 21<sup>st</sup>.**

## You may direct general questions about this project to:

Dave Roberts, Management Assistant, Montrose—970-240-5432

BJ Johnson, Education Specialist, Elk Creek (near Gunnison)—970-641-2337 ext. 204

Jeff Heywood, Planner and Project Leader, Lakewood—303-969-2835



Highway 92 west of Meyers Gulch



National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Curecanti Resource Protection Study  
c/o Dave Roberts  
National Park Service  
Montrose Public Lands Center  
2465 South Townsend Avenue  
Montrose, CO 81401

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**Dave Roberts, Management Assistant  
National Park Service  
2465 S. Townsend Avenue  
Montrose, CO 81401**

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