



# **Justification for Final Permanent Seasonal Recreational Shooting Order Pole Mountain Area Laramie Ranger District Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests**

**September 6, 2023**

## **SUMMARY**

The Forest Supervisor of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests is issuing a final permanent order that will prohibit recreational shooting in the Pole Mountain Area of the Laramie Ranger District of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests from March 31 to September 10. The final permanent recreational shooting order will implement a requirement in the Allotment Management Plan Revisions for the Pole Mountain Grazing Allotments and Limiting Firearm Use Within the Pole Mountain Area Environmental Assessment (EA) and Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact – Limiting Firearm Use Within the Pole Mountain Area (DN). The final permanent seasonal recreational shooting order will exempt persons in possession of a valid State of Wyoming hunting license who are hunting in compliance with Wyoming law. The final permanent seasonal order was subject to advance public notice and opportunity to comment pursuant to the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act of 2019 (Dingell Act) and the Forest Service’s implementing directives.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Pole Mountain Area encompasses approximately 55,584 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands in Albany County, Wyoming, approximately 12 miles southeast of Laramie, Wyoming, and 30 miles west of Cheyenne, Wyoming, along the Interstate 80 corridor.

There are eight livestock grazing allotments in the project area: Ames, Warren, North Pasture, Beacon, Horse Creek, Crow Creek, Green Mountain, and Lodgepole. These allotments are used primarily for cattle grazing, but also may have domestic sheep grazing.

The current elk population is above herd unit objectives, while the mule deer antelope populations are below herd unit objectives in the Pole Mountain Area. Eastern and western boundaries of the area are considered mule deer winter range, and the western and northern boundaries are elk winter range, including crucial winter range. There are also elk calving locations within the Pole Mountain Area. Cliff and rock formations provide excellent habitat for raptors, including prairie falcons.

The Pole Mountain Area is important to a wide variety of recreationists. The proximity of the Pole Mountain Area to Laramie, Cheyenne, and Interstate 80 makes it a convenient and popular destination. Popular recreational activities in the area include off-highway vehicle use, hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, camping, hunting, and fishing. The Pole Mountain Area is also

known as Front Range North, as many visitors make the drive from the Front Range of Colorado to visit the Pole Mountain Area throughout the year.

Developed recreation sites in the Pole Mountain Area include three picnic areas with 85 units, five campgrounds with 73 units, and one group picnic area that can accommodate up to 300 people. There are also numerous dispersed campsites located along or near the end of the many two-track roads that cover almost the entire area. Technical rock climbing is very popular in the Vedauwoo and Blair Areas, which are known regionally as one of the best places to climb. Fishing is a common activity in the many streams and beaver ponds throughout the area. Dispersed recreation includes recreational shooting, hunting, cross-country skiing, over-snow vehicle use, tubing, tobogganing, fat biking, snow shoeing, horseback riding, and wildlife viewing. Summer trail use is also very popular for mountain bikers and hikers.

Commonly viewed wildlife species include deer, elk, antelope, squirrels, and a variety of birds. Hunting is primarily for deer, although a limited number of hunting permits are issued for elk. Other popular activities in the Pole Mountain Area include use of firearms, weddings and other private events, and recreation events involving paintball shooting, bicycle races, Nordic skiing races, and archery tournaments.

## **DINGELL ACT COMPLIANCE**

This final permanent seasonal order was subject to the process in the Dingell Act and the Forest Service's implementing directives in Forest Service Handbook 5309.11, Chapter 30. This section addresses the need for and scope and duration of the final permanent seasonal order.

### **Need for the Final Permanent Order**

The DN states:

Recreational shooting at Pole Mountain will not be allowed between March 31 and September 10 of each year, with one exception. Use of firearms will be allowed during the big game, waterfowl, small game, and upland game bird hunting seasons. Since small game and upland game bird seasons begin September 1, sportsmen possessing a valid hunting license approved by the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission for the Pole Mountain area will be allowed to use firearms while in pursuit of legal game.

DN, p. 3.

This final permanent seasonal order is necessary to implement this direction in the DN and will provide an exception for persons in possession of a valid State of Wyoming hunting license who are hunting in compliance with Wyoming law. Implementation of the direction in the DN will address public safety and natural resource concerns in the Pole Mountain Area. The Forest Supervisor issued an emergency order to prohibit recreational shooting from March 31 to September 10 in the Pole Mountain Area for the 2022 season to address the adverse effects from

recreational shooting and to implement the DN pending completion of the Dingell Act process for a permanent seasonal recreational shooting order.

Due to its proximity to population centers in Wyoming and Colorado, the Pole Mountain Area attracts people who enjoy numerous outdoor recreational opportunities, including recreational shooting. Over the last four decades, the number and variety of recreational activities, special uses, and management projects in the Pole Mountain Area have greatly increased. It has become an area of concentrated public use, particularly between March 31 and September 10.

Recreational shooting in the Pole Mountain Area often occurs in unsafe locations (e.g., in and near developed recreation sites) or involves unsafe practices (e.g., lack of backstops and rounds fired across canyons, along roads, and across roads). Widespread recreational shooting results in litter, damages public property and resources, and affects habitat for big game during non-hunting seasons. Widespread recreational shooting can also result in conflicts among uses.

Prior to issuance of the first seasonal recreational shooting order in the Pole Mountain Area in 2000, the Forest Service, grazing permittees, and the Albany County Sherriff's Department recorded 101 incident reports, violations, and warning notices between 1985 and 1998. Incident reports documented \$2,660 in damage to natural resources and \$2,880 in property damage; however, the actual costs of repair, replacement, and clean-up were much higher. In addition, 11 cattle were reported killed, and four were reported wounded due to recreational shooting. Most of the incidents occurred between from March 31 to September 10. Further, over the years, many people have reported close calls from careless recreational shooters. Recorded violations, unsafe recreational shooting practices, resource damage, and near misses associated with recreational shooting have generated both public and Forest Service concern. Since the first order prohibiting seasonal recreational shooting in the Pole Mountain Area was issued in 2000, recreational use has increased in the Pole Mountain Area, especially in the last decade, and the number of warning notices, incident reports, and violations related to recreational shooting per decade has not declined. From 2001 to 2011, 149 warning notices, incident reports, and violations were issued, and 102 were issued between 2012 and 2021.

### **Duration and Geographic Scope of the Final Permanent Orders**

The final permanent seasonal order is necessary to permanently implement management direction that has been effective at controlling risks to public safety and natural resources over the last 20 years as recreational use has increased in the Pole Mountain Area. The final permanent seasonal order is necessary to address the ongoing seasonal effects of recreational shooting in the Pole Mountain Area without having to issue a new order each year or every five years. The Forest Supervisor of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests has determined that the area covered by the final permanent seasonal order is the smallest area of NFS lands necessary to meet the purpose of the final permanent seasonal order. The final permanent seasonal order will remain in effect until rescinded.

### **NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (NEPA) COMPLIANCE**

The Forest Service has analyzed the effects of the final permanent seasonal recreational shooting order in the Pole Mountain Area as part of the EA, which is incorporated by reference into the

record for this final permanent seasonal recreational shooting order. These effects, which are the same as the effects of the current order, include decreased disturbance to livestock and improved livestock distribution from potential reduction in damage to livestock improvements (e.g., shooting of gates and stock tanks). There will also be an increase in yearlong elk use, elk distribution, elk habitat security, and overall elk numbers in the Pole Mountain Area. In addition, there will also be reduced use conflicts, resource damage, and public safety concerns. The Forest Service has therefore concluded that additional NEPA analysis is not required for issuance of the final permanent seasonal recreational shooting order.

## **REFERENCES**

USDA Forest Service. 2008. Environmental Assessment. Allotment Management Plan Revisions for the Pole Mountain Grazing Allotments and Limiting Firearm Use Within the Pole Mountain Area. Laramie, WY, USA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland.

USDA Forest Service. 2010. Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact – Limiting Firearm Use Within the Pole Mountain Area. Laramie, WY, USA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland.

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