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Good or bad?

State congressional delegation backs appeal of FEMA disaster aid denial



PHOTO BY TODD WINSLOW PIERCE/Special to the Sentinel

A proposed Bureau of Land Management acquisition of some 4,000 acres within the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area would include miles of land along the Gunnison River and Escalante Creek.

BLM looks to add 4,000 acres to Dominguez-Escalante

By DENNIS WEBB
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The Bureau of Land Management is close to acquiring more than 4,000 acres of private ranchland lying in numerous parcels within the boundary of the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area.

The agency decided to go ahead with pursuing the purchase of the property from Escalante Ranch in 2024 and is in the final stages of trying to buy it from The Conservation Fund, a third-party BLM partner that bought the land with the intention of selling it to the BLM.

Local BLM spokesperson Heather Marsh said the agency hopes to close on the acquisition early this year.

"BLM Colorado is still completing required steps and coordinating details for the closing process," she said.

The BLM plans to buy the land with funding

from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, which receives revenues primarily from offshore oil and gas development.

Asked about the cost of the purchase, Marsh said the financial details won't be available to the public until the BLM closes on the deal.

Brian Mason, a real estate agent in Delta, was involved with the ranch's sale, to a private party, of a couple of thousand acres adjoining national forest but wasn't involved with the sale of the land eyed by the BLM. He says he believes the ranch sold that property to The Conservation Fund for about \$10 million or \$10.5 million.

"I know there were some struggles early on with the BLM having the funding available to do some of that," he said.

Christine Quinlan, Colorado associate state director for The Conservation Fund, said it doesn't



PHOTO BY TODD WINSLOW PIERCE/Special to the Sentinel

Fall colors adorn acreage the Bureau of Land Management hopes to add within the boundaries of the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area.

disclose what it pays for properties out of respect for the sellers. She said the funding is available to complete the transfer to the BLM and she is confident that will occur.

"It's a pretty substantial, I think, win for conservation in Colorado," she said.

The BLM describes the acreage as consisting of an inholding of nonfederal parcels of private land and interests lying within

the designated boundaries of the national conservation area along Escalante Creek and the Gunnison River. About 2,180 acres of the ranch are in Delta County and another 1,880 acres are within Mesa County.

A 2023 BLM scoping document seeking public comments on the proposals describes the land as "a conglomeration of

See ADD, page 4A ➤

By DENNIS WEBB
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Colorado's entire congressional delegation has thrown its weight behind an appeal by Gov. Jared Polis asking President Donald Trump to reconsider his denial of Federal Emergency Management Administration aid for fires and floods last year in western Colorado.

U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet led the delegation in writing to Trump to ask him to reconsider his denial of disaster declarations for last year's Lee and Elk fires in Rio Blanco County and for heavy flooding in southwest Colorado in October. Bennet was joined in signing the letter by fellow Democratic Sen. John Hickenlooper, and the state's eight House members, including Rep. Jeff Hurd, R-Grand Junction.

"Each event independently meets the statutory and practical criteria for a Major Disaster Declaration, and the consequences of continued denial will be severe, long-lasting, and far more costly if left unaddressed. Disaster funds are critical for the safety and well-being of some of Colorado's most rural residents," the delegation's letter says. "... A Presidential Major Disaster Declaration for each of these events would unlock Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation programs that are indispensable to recovery, mitigation, and long-term resilience."

The lightning-caused Lee and Elk fires burned more than 150,000 acres, an area larger than the city of Chicago. FEMA has validated more than \$27 million in damage from that fire, most of it to White River Electric Association infrastructure. Damages also include post-fire flooding.

The flooding in Archuleta, La Plata and Mineral counties caused extensive damage to homes, businesses, roads, and wastewater and drinking water infrastructure. According to the delegation letter,

INSIDE

Most of Colorado delegation pens letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to unfreeze funds. Page 2A

"FEMA has already validated more than \$13.8 million in eligible damages, with additional losses still being identified."

After Trump denied the initial disaster declaration requests, Polis and Bennet called those decisions political, while state Attorney General Phil Weiser said he considers the denials to be part of a retribution campaign for Colorado's imprisoning of Tina Peters. The former Mesa County clerk is serving a state prison sentence for election-related fraud and misconduct despite Trump trying to free her by issuing her a pardon.

A Trump spokesperson has told media there is no politicization of Trump's decisions on disaster aid, and told Colorado Public Radio he responds to each request "with great care and consideration, ensuring American tax dollars are used appropriately and efficiently by the states to supplement — not substitute, their obligation to respond to and recover from disasters."

Among other Colorado-related actions, the Trump administration also has said it will break up the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, and Trump vetoed a bipartisan Arkansas River water project bill benefiting southern Colorado.

"It befuddles me sometimes," Mike Samson, part of Garfield County's all-Republican county commission, said with a heavy sigh this week before the commission approved a letter supporting the appeal of the FEMA decision involving Rio Blanco County. "I've said it many times, I support President Trump in many

See FEMA, page 5A ➤

Museum officials discuss options with Fruita

By DAN WEST
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The Museums of Western Colorado continued its discussions about potentially combining its museums into one campus with a work session Tuesday night with the Fruita City Council.

Museums of Western Colorado Executive Director Shenna Hayden said the organization is operating out of aging structures at three different sites — Museum of the West, Dinosaur Journey and Cross Orchards. Combining into one campus would be more financially sustainable, she said.

"What we're looking at is not a consolidation," Hayden said. "Consolidation has a negative connotation to it, which we don't dig into a whole lot because what we're doing is not something that's negative. We're creating a revitalized museum. We're putting our story together in a way that has a bigger community impact and is more meaning-

ful, not taking anything away."

Hayden had presented to the Grand Junction City Council about the possibility of combining its museums together at the Museum of the West location near downtown Grand Junction. On Tuesday, Hayden and Fruita council members discussed the possibility of using Fruita's Dinosaur Journey site as the future combined campus.

Hayden described a vision for the Fruita site, which would include a major addition and new features like a dinosaur climbing structure that she compared to one at the Indianapolis Children's Museum.

"The addition would be a two-story addition to that building and we're looking at doing something really exciting and fantastic with it of having a big dinosaur bursting out of the building that the kids walk under to get



LARRY ROBINSON/The Daily Sentinel

Dinosaur displays seen inside the Dinosaur Journey Museum in Fruita on Dec. 18, 2025. The Museums of Western Colorado continued its discussions about potentially combining its museums into one campus with a work session Tuesday night with the Fruita City Council. Museums of Western Colorado Executive Director Shenna Hayden described a vision for the Fruita site, which would include a major addition and new features like a dinosaur climbing structure that she compared to one at the Indianapolis Children's Museum.

into the building," Hayden said. "Our dream is that it actually doubles as a climbing structure so kids can actually get inside

the dinosaur and climb throughout it, which would create one of those things that kids want to come back and do all the

time."

Members of the Fruita City Council asked about

See OPTIONS, page 5A ➤

RETURN OF THE ROAR

Animatronic dinosaurs are back at Dinosaur Journey Museum in Fruita, rejoining the museum's real fossils and exhibit.

A public celebration for the newly installed animatronic exhibits will be from 5-6:30 p.m. on Friday, at Dinosaur Journey, 550 Jurassic Court, in Fruita.

Admission to this event is free.

Dinosaur Journey is one of the Museums of Western Colorado's three sites and the installation and celebration are the culmination of the community campaign Return of the Roar.

The campaign was funded entirely by donations, "from grassroots gifts to leadership-level support, demonstrating broad enthusiasm for the museum's future," a news release said.

Info: mowc.co.