

# ANDERSON DITCH PROJECT OVERVIEW

## BACKGROUND

The Blanca Wildlife Habitat Area (WHA) is located in the San Luis Valley, about 10 miles northeast of Alamosa, Colorado. Blanca WHA lies south of the Great Sand Dunes National Park and west of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range. Encompassing 9,775 acres of public lands, Blanca's playa lakes (salt flats), ponds, and marshlands provide habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals and provide nesting habitat for hundreds of migratory waterfowl and shorebirds. Blanca WHA also offers recreation opportunities for hiking, fishing, hunting, and wildlife watching.

In 1965, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) San Luis Resource Area began a wildlife habitat project to restore some of the valley's dry playas to their historic wetland characteristics. Restoration and preservation of habitat within the WHA is an ongoing cooperative effort by BLM in partnership with the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Ducks Unlimited, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and other entities. Blanca WHA is designated as an official mitigation site for wetland losses caused by the Bureau of Reclamation's construction and operation of its Closed Basin Project. BLM and its cooperators have invested several million dollars in restoration and improvement of wildlife habitat in the San Luis Valley, including the historic wetlands of the Blanca Wildlife Habitat Area.

Once dry lake beds, the Wildlife Habitat Area now consists of a series of ponds and wetland sites which include fresh water marshes/meadows, alkali marshes/meadows, and playa lakes. The water to maintain Blanca WHA is supplied from artesian wells drilled into the Valley's confined aquifer, with additional water provided by the Bureau of Reclamation's Closed Basin Canal. Colorado water law requires that BLM replace water depletions of surface streams caused by BLM's operation of the Blanca well field. Under an annual agreement, CDOW currently supplies BLM with water for depletion replacement to the Rio Grande River. The arrangement with CDOW is temporary until BLM can acquire a permanent source of augmentation water to the Rio Grande, as required under state water law.

## EXCHANGE PROPOSAL

Sun Peaks Land Company, LLC (Proponent) is proposing an exchange of up to 189.8 acre-feet of water annually for federal lands of equal value. The proposal provides BLM an exceptionally rare opportunity to acquire all the permanent water rights it needs for augmentation and replacement purposes in a single transaction. These water rights have very senior priority on the Rio Grande, and their acquisition would bring BLM into full compliance with Colorado water law.

The water is diverted from the Rio Grande into the Anderson Ditch near the town of Del Norte. The water rights comprise approximately seven percent of the total adjudicated Anderson Ditch water rights. Sun Peaks no longer needs this water because the company plans to convert the

lands irrigated by this water into a residential development. Transferring the water rights to BLM would not affect water rights owned by other parties.

The federal lands proposed for disposal in the exchange consist of ten parcels totaling nearly 2,700 acres. All the federal parcels are in Rio Grande County. BLM would reserve all minerals to the United States. At this time, there are no unpatented mining claims or mineral leases. The lands are not fenced, have no grazing, and offer little to no recreational use.

## FEDERAL LANDS

The proposed exchange would be consistent with planning goals set forth in the 1991 San Luis Resource Management Plan (RMP). In the RMP, the federal lands are shown on the Realty Action Decisions Map as Land Disposal Category I. The RMP states that, although lands in this category meet the criteria for public sale consistent with the provisions of Section 203 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, other methods of disposal will not be precluded. Based on planning goals established in the RMP, BLM has determined that disposal of the federal lands by exchange would provide greater public benefits than disposal by sale.

The proposed exchange would support BLM's wildlife habitat management objectives stated in the San Luis Valley Proposed RMP and Final Environmental Statement. These objectives are to increase habitat quality through intensive wetlands management and restoration of historic wetlands within the Blanca WHA; and to increase production of water birds in support of the CDOW water bird plan for the San Luis Valley. The protection of waterfowl and water bird nesting habitat is emphasized in the RMP's Record of Decision. The designation of the Blanca WHA as an Area of Environmental Concern (ACEC) protected 9,147 acres of wetland habitat.

## NON-FEDERAL PROPERTY

Acquisition of up to 189.8 acre-feet annually of senior-priority water rights is consistent with the San Luis Valley RMP. The water rights have been fully adjudicated in the Colorado water court system. The Colorado Division of Water Resources confirms that these senior priority rights have received decreed amounts of water every year on record, including in years of drought. This proposal offers a rare opportunity for BLM to secure adequate water rights to ensure continued operation of the Blanca Wildlife Habitat Area.

The proposed exchange would be consistent with water resource management decisions in the RMP to acquire legal rights through the state water court system to use water in support of BLM programs. Securing adequate water supplies is crucial for implementing the RMP's special management objectives to maintain and improve wetlands for waterfowl production in the Blanca WHA.