

**Version: May 24, 2022, Dave Lambeth.**

## **Expansion of the Sarvis Creek Wilderness Area**

### **I. Goals**

- \* To collect and collate information relevant to protection of this pristine area, its watersheds and its fauna and flora.
- \* To educate the local public about this area and to coordinate community support for preservation.
- \* To extend Wilderness protection to this area by rejoining the Green Creek and Harrison Creek watershed with the larger Sarvis Creek Wilderness Area from which it was excluded because of the then-proposed Catamount Ski Area.
- \* To preserve for current and future generations this area for low impact recreation, including hunting, fishing, back-country skiing and hiking.

### **II. Physical Description of the Area (See Appendix I for Maps).**

The area consists of 7,200 acres of pristine sub-alpine forest that ranges from 7,000 feet elevation to over 10,000 feet. The area is bordered on the East and South by the existing Sarvis Creek Wilderness, on the West by the forest boundary and to the North approximately 100 feet beyond Harrison Creek and approaches close to US Hwy 40 at one point. It includes long meadows along Green Creek where the terrain is moderate. The terrain going in from US Hwy 40 on the only trail is steep. Soil in the area is granitic to loamy sand. Harrison Creek on the south side is dense, steep sub-alpine fir and spruce. A ridge separates Green and Harrison Creeks and a high ridge separates both from Sarvis Creek. The west side of the area has a private land development, a reservoir and the Yampa River. The west valley overlooks several historic homestead ranches. The Gay's Green Creek Ranch has the closest proximity to the Sarvis Creek Wilderness area. There is a ditch diversion located in the western side of the area that provides irrigation water to the Green Creek Ranch. A parking area on US Hwy 40 about 10 miles east of Steamboat Springs provides the sole trail access to Green and Harrison Creeks. The area is undisturbed by roads, bike paths, homes of other structures.

The climate is cool summers and cold, snowy winters. The snow pack run-off feeds the Yampa River.

### **III. History**

**A. Early History.** Before pioneer settlements, this area and the valley below were traditional summer grounds for hunter-gatherer groups. Artifacts found in the area include lithic tools and arrow heads as evidence of prehistoric camps. A Clovis Point was recovered by a rancher while digging fence post holes. Native American tribes that used the area were mainly the Ute and Arapahoe. In the 1880's, European settlers began arriving in the Yampa Valley.

**B. Establishment of Sarvis Creek Wilderness Excludes Green/Harrison Creek Watersheds.** Congress approved the Sarvis Creek Wilderness in 1993 which protected this 44,556 acre tract. Originally the Wilderness plans included the Green/Harrison Creeks areas. However developers for the proposed Catamount Ski Area requested

that the drainage be removed from wilderness protection and be added to their project. The rationale was that Colorado's proposal for the 1976 Olympics (voted down by a statewide referendum) had designated a ski area that included the steep terrain of Green/Harrison Creeks; as a result, the National Forest Service designated the Green/Harrison Creek drainages as recreational. In part due to community opposition, the plans for a ski area never materialized and the ski area permit was abandoned by the developers in 1999. However the recreational designation remains.

**C. Routt County Sarvis Creek Area Plan (SCAP).** Beginning in the early 1970's local Routt County citizens and organizations including the Citizens Against Lake Catamount, Club 200, Northwest Rivers Alliance and local chapters of the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society united to oppose the development of the Lake Catamount Ski Area and Dam. These efforts created the local conditions for the support and approval of the Sarvis Creek Wilderness Area in 1993, creation of the Routt County Sarvis Creek Area Plan (SCAP) in 1996, and disapproval by the Forest Service in 1998 of the proposed Lake Catamount Ski area.

In 1996, local stakeholders including representatives from the Routt County Board of County Commissioners, US Forest Service, Colorado Division of Wildlife, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, landowners/ranchers and others, established a sub-area land use plan for the protection, cooperative management and monitoring of the Sarvis Creek Area including areas adjacent to the Sarvis Creek Wilderness Area, the Yampa River and parts of Pleasant Valley. This area had been under threat from two proposed residential and commercial developments: the aforementioned Lake Catamount Ski Area and Stagecoach to the south of Sarvis creek. The SCAP plan, building on the energy of the opposition to the Lake Catamount Ski Area and the approval of the Sarvis Creek Wilderness, documented the need to manage these areas as part of a larger ecosystem. Support of SCAP included these local partners: Routt County, and CO Division of Wildlife, US Department of Agriculture (Forest Service), the US Bureau of Land Management, Upper Yampa Water Conservancy District, Stagecoach Property Owners, interested citizens and adjacent property owners including prominent ranchers. SCAP included a Policy and Action Item on wilderness that demonstrates the historic support for both the established Sarvis Creek Wilderness Area as well as the Green/Harrison Creeks watersheds. SCAP advocates: Policy #1: The management of the Sarvis Creek Plan area should be compatible with the Sarvis Creek Wilderness Area. Action #1: Future land uses within the Sarvis Creek Plan area should be restricted in order to buffer the Sarvis Creek Wilderness Area.

#### **IV. Resources to be protected**

**A. Scenic Beauty.** The Green/Harrison Creeks watersheds, along with the larger Sarvis Creek Wilderness area, are a rare sub-alpine pristine region of unusual scenic beauty. The area contains no alpine tundra, in contrast to most wilderness areas in Colorado. In addition, its location close to population centers make it readily accessible for low impact human use.

**B. Pristine Watershed.** Higher elevation areas to the east being US Forest Service land leaves the watersheds uncontaminated as there is no agricultural runoff. The pristine water flows into the Yampa River and eventually into the Colorado River.

**C. Fishing.** Green and Harrison Creeks produce healthy trout populations.

**D. Wildlife.** Green/Harrison Creeks provide a rich habitat for wildlife. It provides winter range and spring calving areas for elk, as well as elk nursery areas. The Colorado Division of Wildlife estimate the number of elk using this habitat at 250 to 300. The Division of Wildlife conducted a multi-year elk tracking study that resulted in a 1988 report and map. Elk movement patterns, tracking collared elk by aircraft and ground observation over several years showed extensive use of this habitat.

Beaver, while less abundant than in the past, still inhabit the area and are making a healthy comeback. Other species include pine martin, pine squirrel, snowshoe hare, mink, black bear, mountain lion, bobcat, red-tailed hawk, northern goshawk (a Forest Service sensitive species), and the area is suitable habitat for lynx (federally threatened) and wolverine (an endangered species.)

**E. Forest.** Most of the region is forested with aspen and lodge pole pine on south facing slopes and spruce and sub-alpine fir on north facing slopes. The area has, so far, been relatively spared from infestation by pine bark beetles which have wreaked havoc on many stand of trees in other areas.

**F. Other Plant life.** **An inventory of plants is planned, pending snow melt. To be inserted as text or if an appendix.**

## **V. Current Management and Uses**

**A. Land Management.** The area encompassing Green and Harrison Creeks is part of the Routt National Forest managed by the US Forest Service. Currently, the area is approved for recreational uses, excluding snowmobiles. It is also part of the larger management plan recommended in 1996 by the Sarvis Creak Area Plan described above. It presently lacks wilderness protection.

**B. Historic use for grazing.** Parts of the area were formerly used for cattle and sheep grazing. It is no longer used for this purpose.

**C. Historic use for timber.** Timber cutting was done in the present Sarvis Creek Wilderness Area around 1910-20. No area timber was taken from Green/Harrison Creeks.

**D. Water use.** An irrigation head-gate on Green Creek lies within the region near its western border and provides seasonal irrigation for the Green Creek Ranch. The gate is accessible only by foot or horseback.

## **VI. Threats**

**A. Population pressure.** The wild beauty of this area, along with its proximity to population centers makes it vulnerable to overuse and environmental degradation.

**B. Access roads, improved paths, and bike trails.** With it's scenic beauty and proximity to population centers, the region has the potential to attract not only low-impact visits, but also other higher impact recreational activities. This causes pressure to increase roads, improve trails and bike trails. In particular organizations representing mountain bikes have been exerting pressure to build more bike trails in the Routt National Forest. Elk herds in Routt County have declined in Routt National Forest by approximately 30% in the past 15 years. Similar areas in Colorado where more such trails have been allowed have experienced a 50% reduction. The Denver-based non-profits Rocky Mountain Wild and the local Keep Routt Wild released a joint study

showing the negative impact of such recreational trail building in the Routt National Forest and how human recreation is leading to elk area habitat decline (also a proxy for other types of wildlife). In the study area, 88% of the region was considered to be disturbed for elk, with undisturbed areas totaling only 14,000 out of 124,000 acres.

**C. Timber cutting.** While there is no timber cutting currently in this area, it is currently classified by the USDA Forest Service as “suitable for timber harvesting.”

**D. Extractive Industries.** Although there are no current mining claims in the area, there are more than a dozen now closed mining claims from the 1980’s, and 1990’s in the Green/Harrison Creeks area. An additional 10, also closed, are in the Sarvis Creek Wilderness itself and many more closed claims exist in the region to the immediate northeast (within-1.5 miles). (<https://thediggings.com/land/wild-534/map>). Thus, there has been historic interest in mining in these areas, and future changes in resource costs and federal policies could make mining economically attractive. To our knowledge, the area has not been explored for oil and gas resources.

## **VII. Economic and societal impact**

**A. Low impact recreational opportunities.** Protection of the Green/Harrison Creek watersheds provides a close-in area for low-impact recreational opportunities for Steamboat Springs, and Oak Creek, without threat of multi-use activities (e.g. bikes, motorized vehicles, access road, etc.) that would degrade the wilderness experience. Such multi-use activities have affected many of the hiking trails in the area.

**B. A pristine watershed.** Protection insures that this watershed, which provides pure water to the upper Yampa River and Lake Catamount is safe guarded thus helping to preserve world class trout fishing areas downstream. In addition, the undisturbed region with its extensive shade allow its snow pack to melt gradually during the spring and early summer, helping to spread out the flow into the Yampa River and to allow moist soils and healthy flora that help to mitigate fire danger.

**C. Global Warming.** Forests provide a natural sink for sequestering atmospheric carbon. Preserving such forest environments is one of our best weapons to fight global warming. The addition of Green/Harrison Creeks to the Sarvis Creek Wilderness adds 7,200 acres of protected forest.

**D. Fire mitigation.** Wildfires, spurred by a historic drought in western states, have caused extensive loss of property and life. Studies of wild land-urban interfaces have shown that undisturbed native forests are more resistant to wildfire than disturbed areas or areas with brush and other types of vegetation. The lightly populated Catamount development bordering on the Green/Harrison Creeks drainage, consists of grassland, a reservoir, and low density housing on large plots of land. Such grassland poses a risk of wildfires, such as the recent fire in Boulder, CO which burned 6,000 acres and destroyed 1,000 homes. While the Catamount development is far less densely populated than Boulder, the community perceives some risk and has advanced plans to mitigate fire risk by clearing approximately 60 acres of combustible materials including along their eastern border that interfaces with the Green Creek area. Wilderness protection of this area will not affect plans by Catamount or private land holders for fire mitigation and will not affect the response of fire fighters to control fires that might break out within the Green/Harrison Creeks area.

**VIII. Local/Regional Support for the plan. (Rich has list so far....awaiting comprehensive list and results of petition)**