December 2, 2014

US Forest Service
Rio Grande National Forest
Attn: Kenna Pacheco
1803 West Highway 160
Monte Vista, CO 81144

Via: comments-rocky-mountain-rio-grande@fs.fed.us

Re: Rio Grande Reservoir Land Exchange

The San Luis Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited and the Colorado Water Project of Trout Unlimited are pleased to offer this letter of support for the proposed land exchange at Rio Grande Reservoir. We believe that the proposed land exchange will result in multiple substantial benefits to the general public and to the Rio Grande River. The Rio Grande is home to Gold Medal fisheries and a thriving self-sustaining population of wild brown trout. This fishery not only provides recreation for local residents, it also brings in anglers from around the state, country, and world. Therefore, the river and its fishery support businesses and jobs that are vital to our rural economy. Protecting this resource is critical to the health of our communities in the San Luis Valley.

The new outlet structure will allow the San Luis Valley irrigation district to manage reservoir releases more efficiently and effectively. The new structure will provide additional dam safety measures that have an obvious benefit to citizens, public lands downstream, and the State of Colorado. Without the land exchange, the new outlet structure would be located on USFS land, which would create an unnecessary burden for the USFS and complicate daily reservoir and maintenance operations.

The land exchange proposal is reasonable and fair, and in our opinion actually has substantial benefit to the public in terms of land values and access. The associated donation of approximately 34 acres of lands within the Weminuche wilderness boundary and the perpetual trail easement comprise significant public gains above and beyond the benefits associated with the new outlet works and the land exchange.

By improving the efficiency and precision of Rio Grande reservoir operations, there is a significant increase in the reservoir’s ability to enhance recreation, mimic natural hydrology, and provide environmental services. This ability has an obvious benefit to anglers as well as to populations of trout and the ecosystem as a whole. For instance, the reservoir currently does one gate change per day. This accounts for passing inflows and delivering irrigation water etc. There are often huge changes from one day to the next (500 cfs or more) especially when irrigation deliveries are cut off, but also when big storms change inflows. Since there is only one gate change, the result is an unnatural block shaped hydrograph below the reservoir. This operation scenario impacts fish and recreation in several ways. If the habitat availability (half the water is gone overnight) is altered, the fish have to find a new place to hide, feed, escape etc. Likewise, if you launch a raft at 9 am with a flow of 500 cfs and one hour later the river drops to 100 cfs, not only is fishing difficult, but there is a chance that you will be stranded on the river - potentially on private property. This is particularly challenging for commercial fishing and rafting.
companies. However, if the changes to releases could occur continuously and more precisely, there will be an opportunity to provide a more natural hydrograph and staging of releases and shutoffs that will benefit anglers, boaters, fish, the river, and the ecosystem as a whole, and still deliver the water for its decreed use. This is a major public benefit that extends far beyond the land exchange.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed land exchange at Rio Grande Reservoir. Trout Unlimited feels strongly that the exchange is in the best interest of the public and the communities of the San Luis Valley. Please let us know if there is anything else we can do to help!

Marty Jones, President
San Luis Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited

Kevin Terry, Rio Grande Basin Project Manager
Colorado Water Project of Trout Unlimited