



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest  
Service

San Juan National Forest

15 Burnett Court  
Durango, CO 81301  
Voice: 970-247-4874  
TDD: 970-385-1257  
FAX: 970-385-1243  
<http://www.fs.usda.gov/sanjuan>

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File Code: 2500

Date: February 5, 2016

Ms. Linda Bassi  
Colorado Water Conservation Board  
1313 Sherman Street, Room 721  
Denver, Colorado 80203

Subject: Draft Recommendation for Vallecito Creek, San Juan National Forest

Dear Ms. Bassi:

The U.S.D.A. Forest Service ("Forest Service") is writing this letter to formally communicate its recommendation for an instream flow water right on Vallecito Creek pursuant to the rules of the Colorado Instream Flow and Natural Lake Level Program. The stream is located in Colorado Water Division 7.

**Natural Environment to be Preserved:** Wilderness, resident self-sustaining population of rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), brown trout (*Salmo trutta*), brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) and hybridized cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki* spp.), aquatic macroinvertebrates, wetlands, water-dependent wildlife habitat, and riparian vegetation.

**Location and Land Status:** Vallecito Creek originates at the Continental Divide near Hunchback Pass. Vallecito Creek drains into Vallecito Reservoir and is tributary to the Los Pinos River. The recommended reach begins near the Continental Divide at the outflow of Vallecito Lake in the Weminuche Wilderness and extends to the National Forest Boundary upstream of Vallecito Reservoir.

The recommended reach is approximately 17.7 miles in length and is entirely located on lands managed by the San Juan National Forest. Vallecito Creek is largely located in La Plata County with the headwaters portion reaching into San Juan County. Vallecito Creek is found on Storm King Peak, Columbine Pass and Vallecito Reservoir USGS quadrangle maps.

**Biological Summary:** Vallecito Creek is a cold-water, moderate-to-high gradient mountain stream. The upper and middle portions of the reach are less confined and exhibit some braiding, higher sinuosity and larger floodplain and riparian widths. The lower portion of the reach is mostly located in a narrow canyon confined by bedrock, is steeper and has little to no developed floodplain. The stream generally has small to medium-sized substrate ranging from gravel to



boulders, but large sections of bedrock are present as well. In general, stream condition is good to excellent, with little degradation or eroding banks. There are a good mix of step-pools, riffles, pools and runs. Riparian width and diversity is variable throughout the reach, with scattered wetlands and fens.

Fisheries surveys have revealed self-sustaining populations of Rainbow Trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), Brown Trout (*Salmo trutta*), Brook Trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) and hybridized Cutthroat Trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki* spp.) in the lower portions of the reach, and Brook Trout and hybridized Cutthroat Trout further up in the drainage.

The mid to upper sections of Vallecito Creek contain valuable riparian and wetland habitat. Willow complexes in the vicinity of Johnson Creek are suitable Southwest willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) habitat. Riparian wetlands support thriving moose populations at the upper elevations of Vallecito Creek.

**R2Cross Analysis:** R2Cross quantification data has not been collected on this stream. The Forest Service plans to collect field data necessary for a quantified flow recommendation in 2016 in coordination with CPW and CWCW.

**Water Availability:** The USGS has established and maintained a gauging station (09352900) at the Weminuche Wilderness boundary near the Vallecito Campground since 1963 (see Appendix A for location). The Forest Service recommends this gage for water availability analysis.

The vast majority of water rights on Vallecito Creek are located on private lands downstream of the recommended reach, and there are no diversions located within the recommended instream flow reach. There are thirteen (13) alpine lakes located in the Vallecito watershed that currently have decreed water rights pursuant to the rules of the Colorado Instream Flow and Natural Lake Level Program (see Appendix C).

**Relationship to Land and Resource Management Plans:** The San Juan National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan ("San Juan Forest Plan") contains resource specific direction for the management of Vallecito Creek on Forest Service lands.

The San Juan Forest Plan calls for Vallecito Creek to be managed to provide ecological conditions sufficient to support a diversity of native and desired non-native fish species and other aquatic biota in the long-term. It also directs that the management of riparian areas and wetlands maintain or restore the composition, structure, and function of these ecosystems. In addition, aquatic habitat should support well-distributed populations of vertebrate and invertebrate species.

Establishing an instream flow water right on Vallecito Creek pursuant to the Colorado Instream Flow and Natural Lake Level Program would assist in meeting the Forest Plan direction summarized above. Thank you for considering the Forest Service recommendation for Vallecito Creek, a stream with many important resource values including wilderness values, recreation, wildlife and aquatic species habitat. If you have any questions regarding our instream flow recommendation, please contact the Forest Hydrologist, Kelly Palmer at (970) 385-1232.

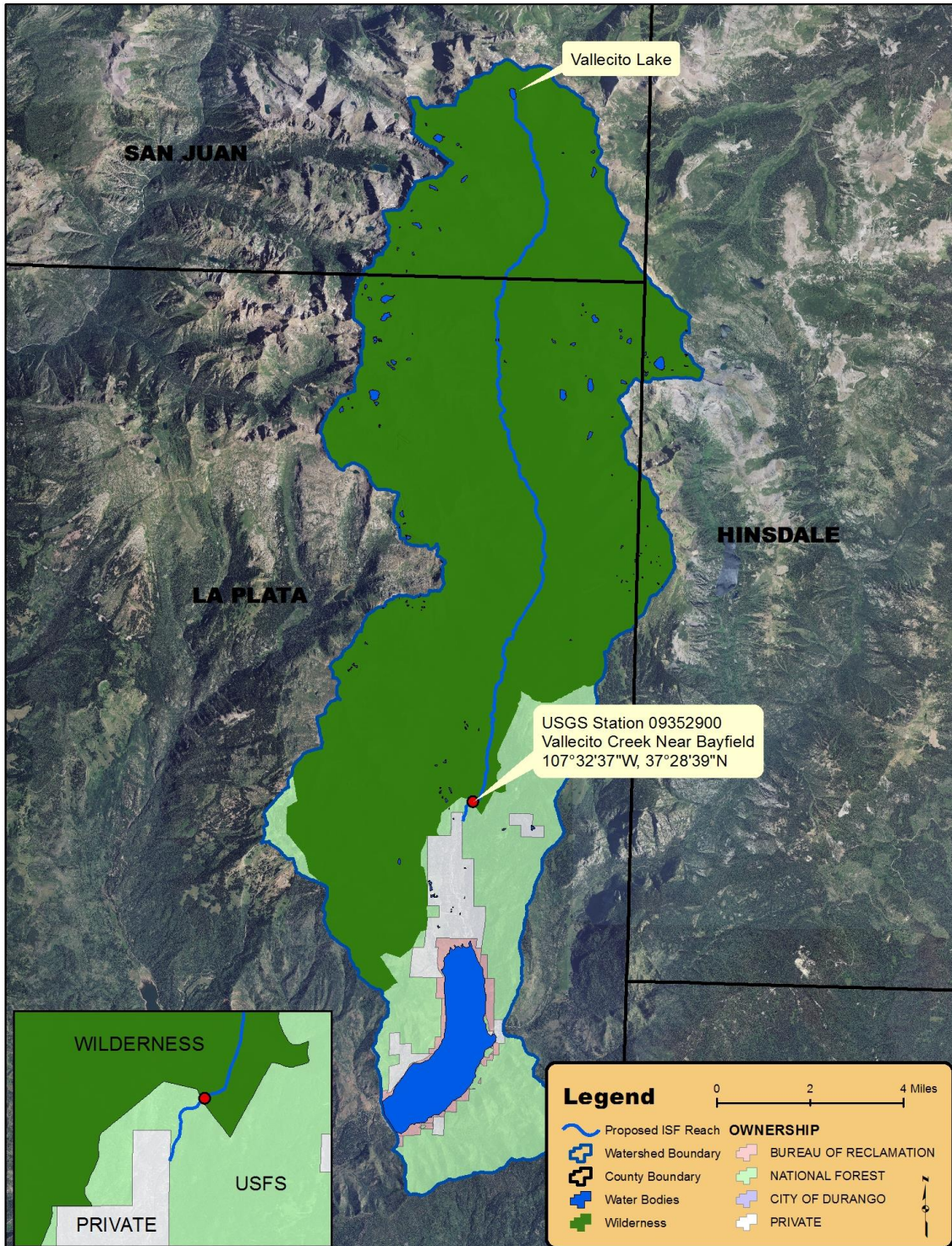
Sincerely,

KARA L CHADWICK  
Forest Supervisor

cc: Maribeth Gustafson  
Deputy Regional Forester  
Rocky Mountain Region  
U.S.D.A. Forest Service

Cherie Hamilton  
Acting Director Renewable Resources  
Rocky Mountain Region  
U.S.D.A. Forest Service

## Appendix A Map





**Appendix B**  
**Photographs of Vallecito Creek**



**Typical channel conditions of middle portions of the recommended reach.**

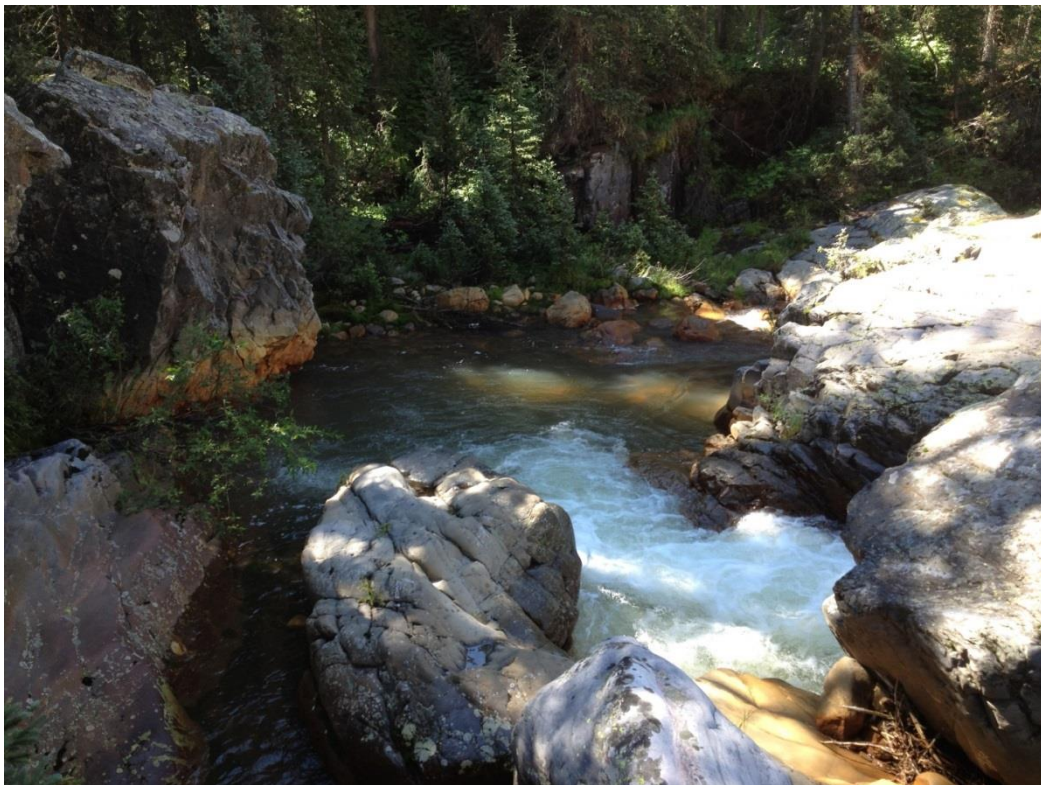


**Waterfall in upper portion of Vallecito Creek.**





**Wetland complex adjacent to Vallecito Creek.**



**Large fish-bearing pool.**





**Whitewater rafting and kayaking are popular on Vallecito Creek as are other types of recreation such as fishing, swimming, and hiking the Vallecito Creek trail through the wilderness.**



**Step-pool habitat in the lower section of Vallecito Creek where the channel is largely bedrock-controlled.**

**Appendix C**  
**CWCB Water Rights for Natural Lake Levels**  
**Vallecito Watershed**

<b>Water Right Name</b>	<b>Decreed Amount (AF)</b>	<b>Adjudication Date</b>	<b>Appropriation Date</b>	<b>Court Case</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Donut Lake	7.0	12/31/1977	3/9/1977	W1777	MIN LAKE LEVEL
Hazel Lake	225.0	12/31/1976	5/12/1976	W1538	MIN LAKE LEVEL TO PROTECT NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
Irving Lake	87.0	12/31/1976	5/12/1976	W1537	MIN LAKE LEVEL
Leviathan Lake	225.0	12/31/1977	3/9/1977	W1781	MIN LAKE LEVEL TO PROTECT NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
Lower Leviathan Lake	4.0	12/31/1977	3/9/1977	W1780	MIN LAKE LEVEL
Lower Sunlight Lake	536.0	12/31/1976	5/12/1976	W1504	MIN LAKE LEVEL TO PROTECT NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
Mystery Lake	215.0	12/31/1977	3/9/1977	W1784	MIN LAKE LEVEL
North Leviathan Lake	108.0	12/31/1977	3/9/1977	W1782	MIN LAKE LEVEL
Sunlight Pothole #1 Lake	29.0	12/31/1976	5/12/1976	W1507	MIN LAKE LEVEL TO PROTECT NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
Sunlight Pothole #2 Lake	28.0	12/31/1976	5/12/1976	W1508	MIN LAKE LEVEL TO PROTECT NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
Trinity Lake	1040.0	12/31/1977	3/9/1977	W1786	MIN LAKE LEVEL TO PROTECT NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
Upper Sunlight Lake	503.0	12/31/1976	5/13/1976	W1505	MIN LAKE LEVEL TO PROTECT NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
Vallecito Lake	595.0	12/31/1976	5/12/1976	W1515	MIN LAKE LEVEL TO PROTECT NATURAL ENVIRONMENT