

2.5.5 Land Use and Capabilities for the PR-11 Expansion Area

The lands within the PR-11 expansion area are rangelands, primarily used for cattle grazing. Limited wildlife habitat is available, mostly located in the drainage bottoms where cover for big game animals is present. The land is owned by the state of Colorado under the management of the Colorado State Land Board (SLB). Trapper has exclusive surface and coal leases from the SLB. There are no public lands or parks within the PR-11 Mine Expansion Area. There are no lands within or adjacent to the PR-11 Mine Expansion Area associated with the National Parks System, the National Wildlife Refuge System, the National System of Trails, the National Wilderness Preservation System, the Wild and Scenic Rivers System, National Recreation Areas and National Forests. There are currently no farmland uses within the area and there has been no farmland use of the area during the last five years.

Two major plant community types were delineated within the PR-11 Mine Expansion Area, consisting of the Big Sagebrush and Grassland vegetation types. The grassland community type comprises the vast majority of the PR-11 expansion area. Historically, the area was a productive sagebrush habitat. In the middle of the 20th century it was converted to cropland; first to dryland wheat and then to alfalfa/grass hay. Over the past two decades the area was converted to a grassland plant community. It was replanted to introduced dryland pasture species. There is no evidence that any portion of this area has ever been irrigated. The grassland and sagebrush plant communities are principally utilized for fall grazing of cattle. At the conclusion of the grazing season, cattle are sorted in corrals situated on the southeast corner of the expansion area, then loaded and trucked to winter feeding locations away from the area.

Nearly all of the PR-11 expansion area is available for cattle grazing. The flat to mildly sloping grassland community is completely available, while the sagebrush community has areas that are steeper but still mostly available to grazing cattle. The small acreages of drainage bottoms and mountain brush plant communities are less accessible to cattle but provide the best habitat for wildlife, particularly for mule deer and various avifauna.

Productivity of the PR-11 expansion area varies significantly from year to year based on the timing and quantity of precipitation and other factors, such as an ongoing infestation of ground squirrels, but is an important, if relatively minor, component of the annual grazing cycle for local cattle ranchers.