Wyoming
DEPARTMENT OF Agriculture

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The Wyoming Department of Agriculture is dedicated to the promotion and enhancement of Wyoming's agriculture, natural resources and quality of life.

September 11, 2017

Paula Guenther
Central Zone NEPA Coordinator
Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District
PO Box 249
Saratoga, WY 82331

Dear Ms. Guenther,

Following are the Wyoming Department of Agriculture (WDA) comments regarding the North Savery Project (Project), Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on the Brush Creek/Hayden Ranger District of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest (MBNF).

Our comments are specific to our mission: dedication to the promotion and enhancement of Wyoming's agriculture, natural resources and quality of life. As the proposed project could affect our industry, citizens, and natural resources it is important that you continue to inform us of proposed actions and decisions and continue to provide the opportunity to communicate pertinent issues and concerns.

The WDA supports the MBNF in their efforts to treat vegetation, including logging, thinning, and hazard tree removal, as well as decommissioning of unauthorized roads in order to enhance the landscapes and watersheds of the project area. We offer the following comments to include in the Final EIS and Draft Record of Decision.

Page vi: Table 3: Table 3 compares the effects between the No-action Alternative and the Modified Proposed Alternative for different resources. While this table is only a summary of the effects, the FS should ensure the short- and long-term impacts of the proposed project are realistic and equitable within the analysis. Additionally, certain species, such as sage-grouse, do not currently use portions of the project area.

Page 20: The project area indicates only 165 acres combined includes shrubs, sagebrush, and Gambel oak. WDA encourages MBNF provide more detailed information regarding how the 165 acres overlaps with priority and general sage-grouse habitat. The DEIS analysis has a heavy emphasis on sage-grouse, but lacks the specifics of current habitat conditions.

Pages 49 – 51: The DEIS states, *"A known lek is located 3 miles west of the project area."* However, the majority of the acreage for sage-grouse is on the northeast corner of the project area. Again, to ensure complete transparency, MBNF needs more information regarding acreages and current conditions.

Page 83: *"Local concern plant species will be subject to a 30 foot buffer, in which timber harvest activities and ground disturbance will be prohibited, unless specified by the botanist and approved district ranger."* WDA is very concerned the MBNF has now created a separate list beyond the Threatened and Endangered Plants list or the Rocky Mountain

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Region 2 sensitive plants list. The additional buffer and prohibition of timber harvest based on an additional list is unreasonable. WDA is unaware of what plants and how many plants are on this local concern list, as well as the process to list a plant. See also page 128.

Page 89: Table 20: WDA recommends including a Socioeconomics comparison between the No Action and the Modified Proposed Action. As part of this, we would include the cost or reduction in cost as a response to wildfire versus the proactive approach to reduce fuel loads.

Page 90: Table 20-Riparian Areas and Wetlands: *"Increased water temperatures and more available large woody debris..."* WDA does not understand why an increase in water is an effect from the No Action Alternative. Additionally, the Modified Proposed does not include water temperature to compare equally.

Page 90: Table 20-Canada Lynx Habitat: WDA would urge the USFS to include the number of acres of current habitat acres meeting desired conditions under the No Action Alternative and compare to post treatment under the Modified Proposed Action.

Page 91: Table 20: Pygmy shrew, etc.: *"Decommissioning existing system roads would restore additional minor amounts of habitat. Some Disturbances to pygmy shrews, greater sage-grouse..."* The Table must include the number of acres and identify what is considered "minor." Also, harvesting timber should not occur in sage-grouse habitat, thus cause disturbance. We recommend revising the Table to reflect more accurate information, especially in sage-grouse habitat.

Page 90: Table 20-Boreal Toad, etc.: *"Overall, the modified proposed action may adversely impact individuals, but not likely to result in a loss of viability in the Planning Area, nor cause a trend toward federal listing."* The analysis of "viability" at the Planning Area level is incorrect. Viability is determined across the forest level.

Page 93: Table 20-Livestock Management: WDA recommends inclusion of human safety to grazing permittees and their employees. Also, *"livestock disturbance"* could be mistaken for "surface disturbing activity." We recommend MBNF clarify disturbance from decommissioning activities or replace with "displacement."

Page 108: No Action: *"Indirect effects to riparian ecosystems could occur as a result of increased mortality to riparian trees killed by mountain pine beetle. This is expected to increase water temperatures and increase the amount of available woody debris which could provide terrestrial habitat in riparian areas of aquatic habitat in streams."* WDA is concerned the analysis does not accurately reflect current conditions. Conifers typically are not considered a riparian tree species. If beetle mortality has ceased due to its natural cycle as stated earlier, then an increase in tree mortality is unlikely.

Page 113: Canada Lynx: *"Dead lodgepole stands would be unsuitable habitat."* The analysis needs to state what current conditions are under the No Action Alternative. The EIS should provide the number of suitable acres of lynx habitat and the number of acres of unsuitable. As the conditions of the forest change with beetle killed trees, the analysis should estimate a timeline for the conditions to change and possibly improve for prey and lynx habitat.

Page 114, 117: Sage-grouse: *"There are 3.5 miles of unauthorized motorized routes in sage-grouse habitat." "Decommissioning 1.6 miles of unauthorized route in core and general habitat..."* WDA questions if the MBNF is planning to leave 1.9 miles of unauthorized routes for inclusion in the travel management. We ask for clarity on these additional routes.

Page 130: No Action—Livestock Grazing: WDA recommends providing the number of acres in each allotment and the acres of overlap with the project area.

Page 139: Sage-grouse: *"The cumulative effects of decommissioning roads under the modified proposed action and weed treatments and livestock grazing in the project area would be an improvement in sage-grouse habitat."* WDA questions how livestock grazing management is modified to improve sage-grouse habitat. The EIS should analyze decommissioning of roads as part of travel management and timber treatments, not livestock grazing.

Page 143: Rangeland: *"The project would not add appreciably to other factors that would negatively impact livestock management and rangeland health…"* WDA urges MBNF provide clarity to what "other factors" are.

"Vegetation treatment projects that may be implemented as part of the Landscape Vegetation Analysis project will have the same types of effects on livestock management and rangeland…" This is the first time LaVa Project has been included in the Cumulative Effects analysis. We ask MBNF to analyze LaVa Project consistently throughout the EIS.

"Negative effects include a likely increase in noxious weed populations and other invasive plants species, elimination of natural barriers between allotments, and direct disturbance to livestock during project implementation. For some shrubland, or bother treatments, there may be a need for protection of the treatment sites from livestock grazing for several years, which may require temporary adjustment in livestock numbers or season of use or construction and maintenance of temporary fences." WDA does not support removing or reducing livestock for this project. Removing livestock for "several years" is not only ambiguous, but unacceptable. WDA recommends development of vegetative objective and work closely with livestock grazing permittees to meet these objectives.

We look forward to working with your staff on this project and suggest implementation of any treatments or changes in management be closely coordinated with permittees. If you have questions, please contact Justin Williams, Senior Policy Analyst at 307-777-7067.

Sincerely,

Chris J Wedemann

for

Doug Miyamoto
Director

DM/jw/cw

CC: Governor's Policy Office
Wyoming Board of Agriculture
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Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation
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