



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

March 15, 2011

Bureau of Land Management
Shane DeForest, Field Office Manager
P.O. Box 768
Pinedale, WY 82941

Dear Mr. DeForest:

Following are the comments from the Wyoming Department of Agriculture (WDA) on the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) request for comments on habitat projects addressing population change of the wintering mule deer herd on the Mesa located on the Pinedale Anticline.

Our comments are specific to our mission within state government: dedication to the promotion and enhancement of Wyoming's agriculture, natural resources, and quality of life. As this proposal has major impacts upon our agriculture industry, our natural resources and the welfare of our citizens, we believe it is important you continue to inform us of proposed actions and decisions and provide us the opportunity to express pertinent issues and concerns.

The WDA appreciates the Pinedale Field Office's (PFO) efforts to address the possible decline of the Mesa herd's population in their crucial winter range on the Mesa, as well as keeping the public informed of the agency's efforts. We recognize the PFO strives to manage the Mesa and other PFO lands with a multiple-use approach, which is challenging in an area with diverse natural resources and uses. The WDA genuinely supports maintaining and improving all of Wyoming's natural resources including healthy wildlife populations, such as the Mesa mule deer herd.

The WDA is aware of the project developed by West EcoSystems Technology, Inc. to monitor direct habitat loss, mule deer winter habitat selection, and population counts of the mule deer herd since the year 2000. Although current data are valuable as a start to understand more about the Mesa mule deer, we believe proposed studies and projects must consider the following before additional funding is appropriated; scientifically based understanding of the change in population, including if there is an actual decline or if deer utilized alternative habitat and migration patterns, understanding of forage quality across the herd's seasonal ranges, and if habitat manipulation is appropriate according to the findings of previous research.

The WDA believes agencies and scientists fail to fully understand the reasons for the change in population of the Mesa herd. Sawyer and Nielson (2010)¹ report three potential reasons: 1) mild winters in 2007 – 2009 resulted in the Mesa herd not returning to their crucial winter range; 2) restriction of motorized vehicles in the Ryegrass/Soapholes area may have attracted the Mesa herd to this less disturbed area; and 3) following the 2008 Record of Decision Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the Pinedale Anticline Oil and Gas Exploration and Development Project (ROD), "the level of winter drilling activity increased on the Mesa" (p. 17), which might have "affected fawn survival or adult reproduction" (p. 17). The WDA believes the PFO and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) should consider Sawyer and Neilson's (2010) potential reasons for the change in the population of the Mesa herd.

¹ Sawyer, Hall, Nielson, Ryan. Mule Deer Monitoring in the Pinedale Anticline Project Area: 2010 Annual Report 2010: 17.

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Additionally, Bissonette, White, and Krausman (2010)² provided recommendations to the BLM and the WGFD to improve the mule deer monitoring protocol for the project area. These recommendations include developing more effective methods to estimate mule deer populations as well as how to best determine avoidance distances by mule deer. The WDA understands the BLM and the WGFD (2010) adopted the following recommendations from Bissonette, White, and Krausman (2010): 1) increase the number of quadrats from 50 to 62 in order to detect a 15% population decline between years, or cumulatively among years, as outlined by the ROD; and 2) the agencies dropped the avoidance distance threshold, and instead they will continue to monitor the Mesa mule deer distribution “*from a sample of GPS collared adult females (n=20) and modeled annually using Resource Selection Function (RSF) analyses*” (Bureau of Land Management, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, 2010)³. Additionally, the BLM and WGFD (2010) will use fine scale analysis to “*monitor mule deer distribution ... annually to assess deer response to ongoing mitigation efforts ...*”. However, the BLM and WGFD (2010) did not adopt Bissonette, White, and Krausman’s recommendation to develop a more intensive methodology to monitor adult female deer survival, including a larger sample of adult females and a more precise estimate of “*over-winter fawn survival and fawn production ...*” The WDA strongly urges agencies include the additional recommendation. We recommend existing WGFD data is assessed and used to inform management decisions regarding the Mesa mule deer herd.

The WDA also believes there is a lack of knowledge regarding the current quality of forage across the herd’s seasonal range. The WGFD developed a 2011 project proposal to the Pinedale Anticline Project Office (PAPO) to conduct a habitat assessment across the Mesa herd’s seasonal ranges. We strongly support this project and believe it is important to assess the current habitat conditions for each of the ranges, before concluding there is a need for habitat treatments on the Mesa for the herd’s declining population. The WGFD may actually determine the summer forage is lacking necessary nutrients for the deer to develop adequate fat reserves for winter.

The WDA supports the BLM and WGFD to implement appropriate habitat treatments in areas of need by gaining an understanding of the seasonal forage quality and by tracking the Mesa mule deer’s annual life cycle. Additionally, we strongly support the use of Ecological Site Descriptions (ESDs) developed and regularly utilized on private lands by the Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS). Agency staff can use ESDs to make scientific decisions regarding vegetation treatments and to have realistic expectations of what a site is capable of given soil type, precipitation, and growing season.

The WDA understands the BLM, WGFD, and PAPO have identified several types of habitat manipulation projects to consider on the Mesa. One specific project, the “Mesa Fertilization Project,” was presented at the February 23, 2011 public meeting in Pinedale, Wyoming and is listed on the PAPO website as a possible 2011 mitigation project (<http://www.wy.blm.gov/jio-papo/papo/index.htm>). The WDA is not in support of this project as proposed. As stated on the PAPO’s website, this project proposes to fertilize up to 31,000 acres of rangeland over a 10 year period. We do not support this project as it fails to collect and analyze data from the initial rangeland fertilization research trial implemented in October 2010 by the PAPO. It is inappropriate to spend thousands of dollars on another fertilization project without utilizing previous data or peer reviewed research on the possible impacts to the rangeland health or to mule deer.

² Bissonette, J.A., White, G.C., Krausman, P.R. Review: Mule deer monitoring, Pinedale Anticline. Mule deer monitoring plan review committee, 2010.

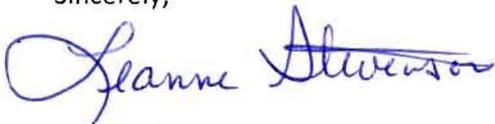
³ Bureau of Land Management, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Agency Response to University of Wyoming COOP Unit coordinated third-party review of monitoring protocol for mule deer in the PAPO development area, 2010.

While the WDA is not opposed to projects involving fertilization treatments, we insist on using the financial resources wisely with the scientific community backing the project. Additionally, a number of local agricultural producers have the following thoughts and concerns regarding fertilization projects in general, and the proposed "Mesa Fertilization Project:"

- The ability to address quality control over multiple years;
- The ability to identify and quantify the results from the fertilization treatment;
- The potential to transition a diverse, native plant community to a more homogeneous plant community (e.g., grasses out compete forbs);
- Provide sufficient, multiple-year, quality data from a thorough study including baseline data, and established control plots;

Again, the WDA thanks the PFO for accepting our comments and concerns regarding the Mesa mule deer winter range projects. We urge the BLM to first understand the change in Mesa mule deer population, analyze the existing quality of habitat across the herd's seasonal ranges, and research results pertaining to previous studies on rangeland habitat manipulation, specifically fertilization.

Sincerely,



Leanne Stevenson

Natural Resources and Policy Division Manager

Cc: Governor's Planning Office
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