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.

October 18, 2010

Laurie Walters-Clark
USDA Forest Service, Bighorn National Forest
2013 Eastside 2nd Street
Sheridan, WY 82801

Dear Ms. Walter-Clark:

Following are the Wyoming Department of Agriculture's (WDA) comments pertaining to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on Livestock Grazing and Vegetation Management on Five Project Areas on the Tongue, Medicine Wheel/Paintrock, and Powder River Ranger Districts of the Bighorn National Forest (BNF).

Our comments are specific to our mission: dedication to the promotion and enhancement of Wyoming's agriculture, natural resources, and quality of life. As this proposed EIS affects our agriculture industry, our natural resources, and the welfare of our citizens, it's important you continue to inform us of proposed actions and decisions and continue to provide the opportunity to express pertinent issues and concerns.

The WDA supports Alternative 3 (the Proposed Action with Adaptive Management) to continue permitting livestock grazing by incorporating adaptive management in the Beaver Creek, Goose Creek, Little Horn, Rock Creek and Tensleep areas to meet Forest Plan direction. This alternative allows BNF personnel the flexibility to change livestock grazing management in a timely manner to maintain and improve rangeland conditions. Furthermore, we support the use and development of range improvement projects to achieve healthy rangelands for the benefit of livestock and wildlife.

The WDA also supports the use of vegetative treatments in Alternative 3 to reduce fuel as well as restore the vegetative and age-class diversity of a fire-adapted ecosystem. Treatments will also open up the canopy to allow herbaceous vegetative growth, allowing livestock grazing to continue and improve on the allotments.

However, the WDA has specific comments to the DEIS. The comments reflect our mission and promote continued sustainable livestock grazing management.

The WDA does not support net losses of Animal Unit Months (AUMs).

The WDA does not support the proposed reduction in permitted AUMs in the Big Goose C&H, Little Goose C&H, Rapid Creek C&H, Walker Prairie C&H, Lake Creek C&H, Little Horn C&H and Red Springs C&H Allotments. Permanent reductions in AUMs cannot be based on a 10-year actual use average. The 10 years being averaged to produce the proposed reductions in AUMs include several years of drought, increased wildlife use and increased recreational use. There have also been recent changes in many of the allotments. As stated in the DEIS, it is too soon to determine the effects of those changes at this time. The WDA strongly recommends these allotments maintain permitted use and implement adaptive management to improve the allotment if only monitoring shows improvement is necessary.

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In addition, the proposed reductions in AUMs indisputably conflict with the BNF Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (2005) objective that "…strives to maintain or exceed the year 2004 permitted stocking level of 113,800 AUMs…"

Proposed Action, continuation of permitted livestock grazing, page 1-5:

The DEIS states that one of the adaptive principles is to vary numbers of livestock authorized. The use of number reductions is clearly explained, however, the possibility of increases in livestock numbers is not. We recommend adding the following language after the sentence describing how authorized use will be adjusted:
"*Conversely, if monitoring and conditions indicate an increase in numbers of livestock can occur, the Forest Service will determine the appropriate use and adjust accordingly.*"
Increasing numbers can occur due to livestock grazing management changes, range improvements (as described in the adaptive management options) and climatic conditions.

Table 2-2, Summary of permitted and current management (alternative 2) on the Big 6 allotments, page 2-4:

The Matthews Ridge C&H allotment is run in rotation with BLM. Do the permitted numbers of 1.7 acres per AUM take this into account?

Alternative 3: Proposed Action, Adaptive Management – Key areas, page 2-15:

This section states that key areas are "generally those areas of a pasture in which livestock have the tendency to congregate and graze first." This definition is incorrect and must be changed. The glossary contains an acceptable definition of key areas based on Skinner et al. (2000[1]), Schalau (2010[2]) and the Society for Range Management (1998[3]).

Design Criteria, page 2-42:

The Robel pole should be used on a site-specific basis to meet particular goals and objectives for individual allotments and negotiated annually with the affected livestock grazing permittee. In addition, other monitoring methods that meet goals and objectives should be considered and used.

Table 2-10, Comparison of Big 6 allotment statistics for alternatives 2 and 3, page 2-56:

There are changes to the suitable acres throughout this table. Please explain why changes in suitable acres have changed in each allotment.

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[1] Skinner, Q., K. K. Crane, J. G. Hiller and J. D. Rodgers. 2000. Wyoming watersheds and riparian zones. University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service. Laramie, WY.
[2] Schalau, J. 2010. Rangeland monitoring: Selecting key areas. University of Arizona Cooperative Extension. Tucson, AZ.
[3] Glossary Update Task Force. (1998) Glossary of terms used in range management, fourth edition. Society for Range Management. Denver, CO.

Hydrology Resources, Existing Condition, Water quality, page 3-38:

It would be helpful to have more background information on the water quality data presented. For example, when were samples taken and how does this correlate with livestock grazing, if at all?

Biological Resources, Existing Condition, page 3-91:

This section discusses vegetation treatments to remove encroaching conifers in aspen stands without clearfelling aspens. What is the result of this management change?

Environmental Consequences, Alternative 3, Direct and indirect effects, page 3-93:

Remove targeted willow utilization from this section. The purpose is to discuss aspen regeneration. The WDA recommends removing the targeted use level of 10% on terminal aspen buds. There is no science or monitoring in the document to show that 10% use is a good target. And there is no science or monitoring in this document to prove that 10% use will work in each area being evaluated. We recommend setting an aspen regeneration goal and using adaptive management to reach that goal as opposed to using an arbitrary number to determine if goals are being met.

Invasive and Noxious Weeds, Environmental Consequences, Alternative 1, page 3-134:

This section and the cumulative effects section must show that spread of weeds will still occur even if livestock grazing is removed. Wildlife (Endress and Bartuszevige 2008[4]), recreation and other activities on the BNF will not stop and the spread of invasive and noxious weeds will continue.

Invasive and Noxious Weeds, Environmental Consequences, Alternative 1, page 30-136:

The summary discusses the effect removing livestock will have on invasive and noxious weeds and states that changes have already occurred on vacant allotments. Is there monitoring data to support these statements?

Fisheries Resources, Environmental Consequences, Alternative 1, page 3-149:

The direct and indirect effects portion discusses wildfire effects on fisheries and watersheds. There should be a discussion on the intensity of wildfires without livestock grazing and proposed vegetative treatments. It is likely that without removal of fine fuels by livestock and without completion of the proposed vegetative treatments, wildfires will be more intense and it will take longer for watersheds to recover.

Grouse Creek C&H (formerly S&G) Allotment, page B-13:

Please clearly explain why Grouse Creek Allotment is being converted to a cattle and horse allotment.

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[4] Endress, B and A. Bartuszevige. 2008. Do ungulates facilitate native and exotic plant spread? Seed dispersal by cattle, elk and deer in northeastern Oregon. Journal of Arid Environments. 72: 904-913.

Whaley Creek S&G Allotment, Summary of Allotment Status, page B-41:

Please explain "preferred applicant" under current permitted livestock grazing.

Goose Creek Table B-13, page B-89:

Under the adaptive management strategy to reduce spike moss, the action to consider states that treated sites will have one full season of rest before authorizing livestock grazing. The WDA recommends changing the language to "*Consider the need for one full season of rest…"* to allow grazing to occur sooner if possible.

Lake Creek C&H Allotment, page B-116:

The Pastures and Possible Timing table states that the East Burnt and Parks pastures will only be allowed an overnight period of time for trailing. This is not sufficient time for cattle to be moved through this area.

Little Horn Table B-16, page B-150:

The adaptive strategy states "…long term monitoring shows that the entire allotment is not meeting or moving towards desired conditions over the long term." However, Little Horn Table B-16 shows that 6 locations are meeting or moving towards desired condition, 6 locations are baseline data only and 4 locations are not meeting or moving toward desired condition. The statement made in the DEIS must be accurate.

Little Horn Table B-21, page B-158:

The adaptive strategy states "…long term monitoring shows that the entire allotment is not meeting or moving towards desired conditions over the long term." However, Little Horn Table B-19 shows that 10 locations are meeting or moving towards desired condition and 6 locations are not meeting or moving toward desired condition. The statement made in the DEIS must be accurate.

Tensleep Table B-21, page B-212:

Please explain what "Eliminate portions of McLain Lake Allotment that are not being utilized by sheep" means. If "elimination" includes the reduction of AUMs, the WDA is not in support of this action.

Vacant Allotments:

The WDA does not support the continuance of vacant allotments. Many of these allotments have been used as a part of a rotation strategy with adjacent allotments. We support the authorization of livestock grazing through either a term permit or an annual permit in every vacant allotment.

Bighorn Sheep:

The WDA does not support changes in livestock grazing management or numbers due to conflicts with Bighorn sheep. We support the guidance provided by the Wyoming State-wide Bighorn/Domestic Sheep Interaction Working Group (2004).

Forage Reserve Allotments:

We are not opposed to forage reserve allotments to enhance management flexibility for authorized livestock use. However, there is concern that these allotments will not be used to their full potential. We strongly suggest the definition of a forage reserve allotment includes language that plainly states the intent of these allotments is to benefit livestock grazing, permittees, and other natural resources and the intent *is not* for these allotments to remain vacant the majority of the time.

Monitoring:

The DEIS does not state how much data the BNF has collected to make important decisions. Long-term monitoring (effectiveness monitoring) is more likely to show responses to management changes. Although the document expresses the ideal frequency of monitoring, it is unclear how much monitoring has actually occurred. We request the document provide this information. If adequate data is not available, decisions should be postponed until adequate monitoring data is available.

Glossary:

The glossary must define permitted, authorized, and actual use. The definition for permitted use (page A-8) needs to be corrected as permitted use is not a synonym for authorized use.

Cumulative Effects Analysis:

The DEIS fails to identify the possible effects of fencing private lands if Alternative 1 (No Action) is chosen. It is important to fully analyze the effects of additional fencing (even if minimal) on livestock production, rangeland health, wildlife habitat and movement, recreation and open space.

Analysis:

The WDA appreciates the use of references in the DEIS. Peer-reviewed science and on-the-ground observations make the document stronger and justifies the BNF decision to continue livestock grazing with adaptive management in place on each of the allotments. However, the analysis contains very little information regarding positive changes and positive effects of livestock grazing.

For several decades, BNF officials and grazing permittees have been working to improve rangeland health through the management of livestock grazing. The EIS must adequately reflect these efforts. Range improvements, annual operating instruction, allotment management plans, monitoring, and other livestock grazing tools have moved rangelands on these lands in a positive direction. This direction has allowed livestock grazing management to be utilized and rangeland health to be improved. The EIS chapters on affected environment and environmental consequences must acknowledge these efforts and improvements.

In the DEIS, the effects of livestock grazing upon other uses is focused on and the impacts of proposed actions and alternatives upon livestock grazing is overlooked. The repercussions of alternatives upon livestock grazing, forage

availability, and grazing permittees must be analyzed in more depth than simply stating actions and reductions in AUMs.

The discussion on the impacts of recreation on livestock grazing (Social Resources, Existing Conditions, page 3-62) does not fully disclose the effects of recreation on livestock grazing management and grazing permittees. The impacts of recreational horse use on permitted livestock use, open gates, dust from OHVs and other vehicles, damage to forage, etc. should be analyzed in more detail. In addition, solutions to these problems should be outlined in the adaptive strategies, triggers, and actions tables.

In conclusion, the WDA supports the continuance of commercial livestock grazing in each of the five areas (6 geographic areas). We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the proposed actions. We encourage continued attention to our concerns and look forward to hearing about and being involved in future proposed actions and decisions.

Sincerely,

Jason Fearneyhough
Director

JF/jc

CC: Governor's Planning Office
Guardians of the Range
Rocky Mountain Farmer's Union
Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts
Wyoming Board of Agriculture
Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation
Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Wyoming State Grazing Board
Wyoming Stock Growers Association
Wyoming Wool Growers Association
Bill Greer
Keith Grant, Big Horn County Commissioner
Larry Bentley