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UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION IX
75 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105

AUG 11 2011

Mr. Vernon Keller
Range NEPA Coordinator
Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest
1200 Franklin Way
Sparks, Nevada 89431

Subject: Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Ely Westside Rangeland Project, Lincoln, Nye, and White Pine Counties, Nevada (CEQ# 20110205)

Dear Mr. Keller:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has reviewed the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Ely Westside Rangeland Project pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act, Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508), and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act.

The EPA commends the Forest Service for both the design and the managing philosophy underpinning the preferred alternative. We support pursuing an alternative that commits the Service to assessing the ecological conditions of the habitat groups within an allotment, and actively managing grazing operations on those allotments to achieve and maintain healthy ecosystems.

Based on our review of the DEIS, we have rated the preferred alternative—Alternative 1—and the document as LO-1, Lack of Objections – Adequate (see enclosed EPA Rating Definitions). The EPA supports the adaptive management strategy proposed; however, we question whether the monitoring and enforcement resources requisite to its success will be available. We also recommend that the Final EIS discuss how climate change may affect the planning area, and identify measures for minimizing and mitigating greenhouse gas emissions. Our detailed comments are enclosed.

We appreciate the opportunity to review this DEIS, and are available to discuss our comments. When the FEIS is released for public review, please send one hard copy and one CD-ROM to the address above (Mail Code: CED-2). If you have any questions, please contact me at 415-972-3521, or contact Jason Gerdes, the lead reviewer for this project. Jason can be reached at 415-947-4221 or gerdes.jason@epa.gov.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Martyn Goforth

Kathleen Martyn Goforth, Manager
Environmental Review Office

Enclosure: Summary of the EPA Rating System

U.S. EPA DETAILED COMMENTS ON THE ELY WESTSIDE RANGELAND PROJECT DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT, LINCOLN, NYE, AND WHITE PINE COUNTIES, NEVADA, AUGUST 11, 2011

Monitoring and Enforcement of Grazing Allotments

The EPA strongly supports the Forest Service's management approach for this project. The objectives articulated in the DEIS for the preferred alternative—to assess the ecological condition of rangelands within the Ely Westside allotments, and to implement (and when ecological conditions warrant, amend) grazing practices and strategies to restore and maintain these lands—should, if sufficiently monitored and enforced, result in long-term protection of sensitive resources in the planning area. We question, however, whether the Service has the resources in place to administer and enforce a stewardship program whose success will be contingent on time-intensive monitoring. There are two features, in particular, of the monitoring plan that give us pause: one is that "permittees would be responsible for monitoring proper use criteria and complying with the annual operating instructions" (with permit administrators responsible for reviewing monitoring information provided by the permittee to ensure compliance); and two, "permittees would be encouraged, but not required, to participate in allotment monitoring and to collect data on their allotment(s) every year." By relying too heavily on permittee monitoring, and end-of-season compliance visits, the Service risks overgrazing, and having to impose more stringent grazing practices for the next grazing season to achieve desired ecological conditions.

***Recommendation*:**

- EPA requests that the Forest Service provide additional information describing the resources it will commit to implementing and enforcing the grazing practices and strategies of the preferred alternative.

  Additionally, we recommend that the Service staff commit to in-season monitoring, as well as in-season enforcement, when needed, to stem overgrazing and ensure functioning ecological conditions.

Climate Change

The Forest Service devotes little attention to climate change in the DEIS, covering the topic in the section of the document that identifies matters excluded from analysis. The EPA believes that the long duration of this project (most likely two or three decades) warrants consideration and at least a qualitative description of the potentially significant changes that could transpire because of a changing climate, including drought, species migration (both of key plant species for forage, and the introduction of invasives), and the potential of the land to sequester carbon.

In addition, there may be substantial differences in the volumes of greenhouse gas emissions that would result from the alternatives under consideration. We recognize that calculating GHG emissions for land management projects, including grazing plans, is more challenging than estimating emissions for a distinct point source such as a power

plant; however, models are available (including one developed by the EPA's Non-CO_2 Gases and Sequestration Branch that evaluates baseline and future methane emissions from cattle populations--see: http://www.epa.gov/methane/rlep/resources.html) that should enable the Service to quantitatively compare the GHG emissions of the proposed action and the alternatives.

Recommendation:
We recommend that the Forest Service describe the potential effects of climate change on the planning area, and the implications of those effects for the proposed project.

The Forest Service should consider whether a quantitative comparison of projected GHG emissions for the proposed action and the alternatives would be useful to decision-makers and the public, and, if so, include this information in the Final EIS. The FEIS should also identify options for minimizing and mitigating greenhouse gas emissions.