



## EUREKA COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

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December 7, 2020

Mr. William Dunkelberger  
Humboldt-Toiyabe Forest Supervisor  
Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest  
1200 Franklin Way  
Sparks, NV 89431

RE: Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Forestwide Prescribed Fire Restoration Project

Dear Mr. Dunkelberger:

Eureka County is very interested in participating in the development and implementation of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest (HTNF) Forestwide Prescribed Fire Restoration Project. We support any efforts to streamline NEPA to allow for more active management of rangelands within and adjacent to Eureka County and support the project being categorically excluded (CE) under NEPA. Even if appropriate for a CE, we want to ensure that Project treatments are completed with the proper proposed actions, analyses, and management alternatives that enhance the ecosystem while sustaining and protecting the uses of the land that are the underpinnings of Eureka County's socioeconomic vitality. As such, as a local government entity with recognized and demonstrated special expertise, we request very close coordination and involvement on development and implementation of the Project.

Please also consider the Eureka County Code Title 9 and the Eureka County Master Plan, specifically the Natural Resources & State and Federal Land Use Element of the Plan, as Eureka County's primary scoping input into the Project. These outline the plans, goals, objectives, guidance, and policies for the use of lands and resources of Eureka County. Eureka County will not, and cannot, support any management option inconsistent with these. The County Code and Master Plan also call for USFS to fully comply with the intent of Congress as specified in various federal laws, including NFMA and NEPA, by properly coordinating with Eureka County in incorporating our land use plans and policies into agency documents and activities and resolving inconsistencies between federal proposals and County plans and policies. As you know, coordination with local governments is mandated regardless of cooperating agency status and regardless of formal comment being submitted by a local government during the official public scoping period (see 40 CFR § 1501.6 and § 1508.5).

Eureka County fully supports properly planned and executed restoration and protection efforts using prescribed fire, where appropriate. However, Eureka County is concerned about unintended consequences and poorly planned efforts. Effective scoping, and more importantly, effective planning

and analysis will reduce the likelihood of unintended consequences and provide mechanism for dealing with those that occur. To be successful, the project must allow for streamlined permitting, timely environmental and cultural clearances for treatments, and management flexibility in completing successful projects. It is important that innovative solutions not be dismissed simply because they are not “NEPA-friendly.”

All management is site specific. The Project should include site-specific analysis for high priority treatments. For specific projects that cannot be evaluated this way, the analysis should provide sufficient information for projects to adequately be evaluated on a site-specific basis in a quick and streamlined manner.

### Socioeconomics

Eureka County requests inclusion of analysis of impacts on socioeconomics, particularly on the local basis. Analysis will likely find it difficult to separate social issues from economic issues. We believe that emphasis should be given to analysis of local economics. Most social issues in Eureka County are directly related to local economics. Actions that benefit the local economy will create social benefits for the citizens of Eureka County.

While the Project must balance the impacts on many resources, it must also balance a range of impacts from each use. There is a full continuum between maximum resource use and preservation. Some environmental analyses look at multiple uses as being limited to 2 scenarios, use that is damaging to the resource or protection of the resource by limiting or eliminating use. It is important that the analysis not become stuck on the paradigm of protection, in spite of use. Desired objectives differ between different resources. The Project must balance these differing demands and provide users information sufficient to properly balance demands on a project basis.

We encourage USFS to consider design of projects that provide local economic opportunities and keep project dollars within the County when possible. One thing that could minimize economic impact is careful project planning so that large allotments are not closed to grazing or other access in order to facilitate a project on a small portion of the allotment.

### Restoration vs. Improvement

Although the Project is couched as a “restoration” project, “restoration” has long been used to describe range improvement projects, the treatments proposed will not “restore” rangelands to any historic or prehistoric condition. And it is appropriate that the projects do not do so. All projects should be designed to manage resources to meet desired objectives within the current capability of the site. It is not possible to “restore” many ecological sites but all sites can be managed to have improved resource values given their current ecological potential.

By strict definition, restoration would serve to preclude certain technologies, such as use of non-native plants in fire breaks. However, doing so could provide ecologically positive site properties that benefit the ecosystem on whole. We encourage analysis that focuses on sustainable functioning ecosystems. As long as management tools provide opportunity to regain or retain attributes of rangeland health—soil/site stability, hydrologic function, and biotic integrity—they should be considered, whether they technically restore the site or not. There are numerous examples across the West where soil/site

stability, hydrologic function, and biotic integrity have been achieved on sites that were not suitable for “restoration” to pre-settlement conditions.

#### Data References and Disclosure

When preparing for “restoration” actions, it may seem natural to focus on the things that need restoring. However, focusing only on the negative creates a tone that everything is degraded or destroyed. However, our first-hand experience with much of USFS managed land is that large portions of the ecosystem are functioning. It would be more effective if both the positive and negative aspects of the area were included in the analysis avoiding the rhetoric that creates the impression that all acres are in poor condition. We contend that much of the area we are familiar with is in better condition now than it has been in the past century. The analysis should discuss the areas that are functioning and analyze what has occurred on these areas. The lessons learned from these areas will serve well when restoring those areas that are not functioning.

#### Ecological Site Concepts

Using the State and Transition Model concepts included in NRCS Ecological Site Descriptions (ESD) will improve the underlying understanding and explanation of the rangeland ecosystem being analyzed. We request working with NRCS to use ESDs and associated State and Transition Models for the project area. The linear concept of plant succession has been well documented to inadequately describe plant community processes (Love 1961, Jameson 1970, Smith 1978, Westoby 1980, Smith et al. 1995 and others). Successional theory is an inappropriate model of vegetation change on rangelands (Smith et al., 1995). It will be absolutely necessary to analyze management with the understanding of current and sound rangeland science. For instance, the Desired Plant Community (DPC) concept will only work when incorporated with a grasp of current site potential, thresholds, and transitions as described in ESDs. DPC would be more valuable if described in terms of species life forms or functional groups rather than individual species. There may be multiple DPCs for each ecological site depending on which community currently occupies a site and which thresholds have been crossed.

Focusing on Potential Natural (or Native) Community (PNC) limits managers ability to manage for objectives. State and Transition Models show that there are many dynamically stable communities on any given ecological site. Once a community crosses a threshold between states, returning to the original state will require a substantial input of energy. Crossing that threshold means that managers cannot create a return to a higher community simply by removing the disturbance that created the lower community. In order to “recover” the site, outside energy will need to be introduced to the system.

Some thresholds are considered to be terminal: returning to a previous state is not possible with current knowledge. It may be that a lower level community may be the new potential community. Cheatgrass monocultures demonstrate this concept, the site will not return to a sagebrush-bunchgrass community through grazing management. On many sites, removal of frequent fires may not be enough to push the site back across the threshold that created the annual grassland state.

There may be multiple DPCs for each ecological site depending on which community currently occupies a site and which thresholds have been crossed.

Analysis should evaluate the costs and probability of success for transitions back across thresholds. Restoration should first focus on economically viable actions with the highest probability of success.

Treatments on sagebrush dominated areas with limited herbaceous understory should be analyzed as to site potential using ESD and associated STM. These provide analysis and discussion of dynamic stable states such as sagebrush monocultures. The Project should incorporate this information in analysis of resources.

Current models show that sagebrush dominated communities (up to the point of near monocultures) are a predictable result of long-term lack of fire regardless of other management on the site. While this may be accelerated by improper grazing, the progression to shrub domination will not be reversed by a change in livestock management.

Please consider using pre-treatment soil bioassays to get a handle on the seed bank present before a treatment is pursued. Having an understanding of soil properties and what seeds are present, can increase treatment success by helping managers make decisions regarding treatment methods, reclamation seeding strategies, and likelihood of success. Significant research has been done regarding pre-treatment bioassays and site reclamation in Nevada. Please consider partnering with USDA-ARS as they have uncovered many dynamics that could come into play with this project and could save a tremendous amount of time, effort, and funding in the long-run (see the work by Charlie Clements)

#### Treatment Objectives and Associated Grazing Closures

Any necessary livestock grazing closures must be based on vegetation objectives being met, not strict timeframes (e.g., a minimum of two growing seasons). Recent sophisticated rangeland research has shown grazing only negatively impacts plants if the same plant is excessively grazed over and over within the growing season. This same research shows “livestock grazing during the non-growth season actually helps reach certain objectives such as weed control, fire reduction and wildlife habitat improvement” (West et al., 2007). It has been shown, and is accepted within the rangeland management community, that two or more seasons of rest from grazing is not necessary after a burn or treatment if the grazing that does occur happens after the growing season and during the dormant season, ***even in the same year as the burn or treatment***. Please make it very clear grazing closures may be lifted anytime objectives are met ***or if objectives are not are not likely to be met*** and grazing closures are no longer justified.

Please also include provisions that may allow grazing during the dormant season before the vegetation objectives are met. This is an important item to add to allow for full adaptive management and the ability to come back to the table with the ranches within the first year and before the objectives are met and potentially remove the livestock closure altogether if the objectives are not likely to be met due to establishment of cheatgrass, impossibility of objectives being met due to the attenuated potential of an ecological site, etc. The ranchers need to be able to return use to the area as soon as possible without going through annual bureaucracy and receive flexibility to get livestock back on the burned area as soon as possible where cheatgrass is present.

#### Monitoring and Inventory

The analysis should report the source of data analyzed and reference the protocols used for inventory, analysis, and reporting those data. While this may be necessary to resource-specific criteria, USFS

should fully disclose data sources, explain why different sources were used, and document the differences in those data sources. This is critical for reviewers and stakeholders to be able to intelligently participate in the planning and implementation process. Fully reporting this information may seem burdensome, but will streamline the review and implementation process. It will also increase buy-in from project partners.

Project analysis must clearly specify how and when progress toward long-term objectives or desired plant communities will be monitored. Without regular ecologically-based monitoring information and without flexibility in management, there is no way to know whether the management prescriptions set forth will be successful. Furthermore, there must be a monitoring based feedback mechanism to adapt management as projects are implemented. The USFS should disclose and analyze mechanisms for USFS and project partners to determine if primary resource values (i.e., high elevation riparian areas) remain at risk during or after project implementation. The USFS should also report and analyze timelines and mechanisms to make changes to management schemes if data indicate the project is not creating the desired result.

Robust monitoring will be necessary for USFS and stakeholders to successfully meet the goals and objectives. Monitoring should be quantitative, objective, and include both site-specific and landscape-level data correlated to management objectives and desired outcomes. Objective setting and monitoring will be crucial to setting time tables for opening project areas to multiple use following treatments. Baseline, quantitative monitoring will also be useful in making determinations of why objectives are not being met if that turns out to be the case.

We are concerned about the potential misuses of comparing between burned and unburned or untreated rangeland sites. It needs to be ensured that comparison between sites is based on the same Ecological Site Descriptions (ESD) or Disturbance Response Groups, not simply burned and un-burned or untreated. Further, by its very nature, a burned ESD will (and must) be in a different state than nearby unburned ESDs.

#### Fires and Fuel Management

USFS is to be applauded for taking action to deal with fuel management. Eureka County renews its offer to work as a partner to create effective fuel management programs. We must collectively create active and persistent pre-suppression fuel management on rangelands. The Project must be used to develop and evaluate an actionable plan for prescriptive reduction of fuel loads for the long-term.

We continue to emphasize that fuels management, especially for fine and flashy fuels, should fully utilize the most cost-effective tool in the tool box, managed livestock grazing. Properly managed and targeted livestock grazing is one of the most valuable and cost effective tools to achieve this continued reduction.

#### Pinion-Juniper Woodlands and Other Biomass

Where possible, consider projects that allow responsible use of biomass, especially when addressing encroaching and infilling pinion-juniper woodlands. There are novel and innovative approaches and opportunities to use the biomass created in these encroaching PJ communities to create energy and other economic benefits. The USFS should analyze these approaches and, more importantly, be written in a manner that allows use of new technologies as they become available. We understand

that this complicates development, but also understand that an effective restoration project requires managers to have the flexibility to try new approaches. We encourage USFS to include mechanisms to analyze and adopt innovative solutions without requiring preparation of additional NEPA.

### Cheatgrass

Cheatgrass monocultures (more accurately “near monocultures”) provide an important forage resource when managed with strategic and targeted grazing. While no one proposes that conversion of native range to cheatgrass is desirable, once it has occurred, it would be a mistake to ignore the biomass produced. The USFS should discuss how this biomass can be used and provide treatment and management options that allow cheatgrass to be grazed or otherwise utilized. We encourage creative solutions that allow use of cheatgrass, particularly when utilized in such a manner that benefits native rangelands. The USFS should analyze targeted and strategic grazing and its use for control and management of the cheatgrass. Targeted grazing could reduce the need for herbicide treatments. Comparisons should be made comparing grazing with herbicides and other treatments.

### Seeding

Moving forward with seeding without the appropriate seeds and using the appropriate methods (i.e., drilling vs. broadcasting), proven species, and rational seed rates will be a waste of resources and limit likelihood of success thereby increasing the chances objectives will not be met and livestock unjustifiably being kept off the area for many years. For example, take any seed mix proposed to be drilled seeded. Many of the seeds to be drill seeded have an “ideal” depth to be seeded which can greatly vary according to the soil type and the seeding depths of the species listed do not coordinate. Most grasses all have a range of seeding depths ranging from 1/4 inch to 3/4 inch. Yet, some species, especially forbs, must be barely planted below the soil surface and no deeper than 1/4 inch with the ideal depth around 1/8 inch. And, all drills are not created equal. Drills are needed that have multiple seed boxes where seeds with similar depth requirements will feed to discs set at the right depth and drilled at the highest recommended rate. Other seeds requiring shallower depths may need to be dribbled over the drill at a much lower rate and then a drag chain behind.

Based on our experience, many of the species often used may not be conducive for rehabilitation success. There must be allowance of proven, beneficial non-native seeds which have been proven time-and-time again at providing limited chances of success in establishing. We understand the desire to use native species and we agree native seeds should be used when appropriate. However, USFS must not limit use of non-native, long-lived perennial species (such as crested wheatgrass varieties) throughout the entire area. Much research, including specifically on Nevada rangelands (by USDA–ARS) has proven successful rehabilitation of rangelands after fire depends on use of proven, long-lived perennial herbaceous species, regardless whether native or not. In fact, these studies have shown use of non-native long-lived perennial grass species is preferable and essential in ameliorating the threat of cheatgrass invasion and dominance. Rehabilitation and restoration are not synonymous. USFS must first rehabilitate areas to provide stability and proper function and then make progress towards restoration to native rangeland and desired conditions through subsequent efforts. Function has little to do with whether the perennial vegetation species are native or not.

### Wild Horses

Unless horses are managed within AML, all other vegetative management actions within HTs are at high risk of failure. Wild horse management needs to be prioritized to reflect this. The USFS should provide flexibility for managers to gather more frequently if necessary to maintain herds within AML.

### Conclusion

We understand the purpose of scoping and appreciate the opportunity to be included in planning efforts. We fully support improving the natural resources of Eureka County and hope that this effort will be highly successful.

Given Eureka County's tremendous reliance on the activities conducted on federally administered land, it will be important to develop local support for the project. This will be difficult when analyses often points fingers at land users and suggests that everything done on all of the project area has been harmful. A large majority of the current permitted users of these lands are working to manage these lands in a sustainable manner. The USFS needs to draw on the experience of these managers to develop analysis and suggest solutions.

It is important to Eureka County that information and analysis included be sufficient to make decisions necessary to mitigate negative impacts of projects and minimize the impacts of unintended consequences. We are willing to play our part as a partner. The County appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the scoping.

We look working with you and fully participating in this important process.

Sincerely,



J.J. Goicoechea, DVM, Chairman  
Eureka County Board of Commissioners