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November 5, 2015

WER 11162.02
US Forest Service
Shoshone National Forest
Washakie and Wind River Ranger Districts
Travel Management Proposals

Brandon Houck
Certified Wildlife Biologist
Shoshone National Forest


Dear Mr. Houck:

The staff of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) has reviewed the Shoshone National Forest Travel Management Proposals. We offer the following comments for your consideration.

Terrestrial Concerns:

North Zone

The northern portion (Cody Region) of the Shoshone Forest seems to be primarily suited for foot or horseback travel due to the steep rocky terrain and geographical features; however, the Department is agreeable to routes that do not increase erosion, conflict with important wildlife habitats or impact hunter opportunity.

Road densities can affect elk distribution (Proffitt et al. 2013, Hillis et al. 1991), and new roads can and often times change how elk use the habitat. Low road density forest often serves as security areas for elk and provides refuge from disturbance. Without sufficient refuge on public lands, elk can move onto private lands, or back into wilderness areas to escape disturbance. Because elk in the Shoshone Forest have tested positive for brucellosis, we manage for separation between elk and domestic cattle during high risk periods (Feb-June). New roads could increase disturbance, and potentially brucellosis risk to domestic cattle, in some areas depending on distance to private land, level of disturbance, and timing of use by motorized vehicles.

NZ-01

A portion of this proposal falls within crucial elk winter range (seasonal closure). Although we do not take issue with increased access here in the non-winter period, we would suggest the inclusion of effective closure gates to prevent motorized access during winter if this proposal moves forward. Also, one linkage point off of FSR121 seems sufficient rather than constructing two new routes.

NZ-03, NZ-04, or NZ-05.

We have no comments.

NZ-07

We support this proposal. Although the non-wilderness portion of the Sweetwater Creek drainage provides important access (particularly to non-outfitted, non-resident hunters), the condition of this road has deteriorated significantly to the point where continued motorized travel cannot be easily or safely maintained. We also recommend continuance of the existing seasonal closure regardless of whether or not this proposal is adopted.

NZ-08

Motorized access to the Elks Fork drainage has provided important access to hunters for many years, and we would like to preserve this opportunity. At the same time we realize current motorized access is creating significant resource damage in the sagebrush-grassland meadow complex located at the lower end of the road. We recommend either improving the road through this section, or implementing plans that would only open the road when conditions allow. Another potential option could be to open the road after a date that assures continued damage will not occur. We also recommend continuance of the existing seasonal closure regardless of whether or not this proposal is adopted.

NZ-10

It appears the proposed motorized trail creates a very short loop and one that is only ¼ mile from the existing Carter Mountain Road. It also appears as though the road follows the bottom of the drainage and may therefore adversely impact riparian habitats. How would the construction of this road affect the current seasonal closure on FSR 474.2C?

NZ-12 Gwinn Fk.

We do not support this proposal. The proposed route from the Timber Creek Road to the Dick Creek Road is crucial elk winter range (recommend seasonal closure if built), and traverses through important spring and fall grizzly bear use areas. This area provides important access for elk hunters (favored by non-outfitted, non-resident hunters) seeking to get away from roads, but in non-wilderness. This road would remove hunter opportunity in non wilderness roadless area. In summer 2006, we documented a Canada lynx about ¼ mile north of where this proposed route would connect with the Dick Creek Road.

NZ 13 Aspen Trail

We do not support this proposal or have any alternatives. The proposed route from Brown Creek to West Gooseberry is currently used heavily by horseback and foot hunters during the elk season and also provides important non wilderness roadless area (favored by non-outfitted, non-resident hunters). Portions of this proposed route traverse through crucial elk winter range (recommend seasonal closure if built). This area serves many hunters the opportunity to a semi-“wilderness” area because there is currently no motorized travel in the area. This area also receives high grizzly bear use during the spring and fall period.

NZ-14 Gooseberry

We do not support this proposal. The current existing FS road (213) from Twin Lakes to the bottom of Gooseberry Creek already serves the purpose of the two proposed routes in this area and the proposed routes seem redundant.

NZ-15 Grass Creek

We do not support this proposal. This proposed route from Forest Road 213-3B over to the Grass Creek Road would not serve the public or hunters any real benefit due to the existing Grass Creek Road already open for vehicle use. This proposed route goes to the divide between Gooseberry and Cottonwood Creek, which is highly used by elk hunters, both on foot and horseback. On several occasions Department personnel observed motorcycle tire tracks on the Wind River Stock Drive Trail (650) as far as Cottonwood Peak. This proposed route could likely increase illegal travel due to the gentle terrain and topography along this divide. The existing trailhead on Road 213 would less favorable to horseback hunters if motorized travel is allowed past this trailhead along the existing horse/foot trail

NZ-16 Cottonwood Creek

We do not support this proposal. Portions of these proposed routes traverse through crucial elk winter range (recommend seasonal closure if built). The proposed motorized route down into Cottonwood Creek could open up more illegal off-road travel issues due to the complexity of timber harvest roads in the area. Again, on several occasions Department personnel have either observed or caught illegal motorized travel in the area. This area serves many hunters the opportunity to a semi-“wilderness” area because there is currently no motorized travel in the area. This area also receives high grizzly bear use during the spring and fall period.

South Zone

Department personnel spent significant time cooperating with the Forest Service to develop the current Shoshone National Forest Land Management Plan (LMP). The development of the LMP involved compromise between various forest user groups and resulted in a balanced and progressive Forest plan from the Department’s perspective. The Department believes it is most important for any proposals brought forth during the travel management process to be consistent with direction in the LMP.

The Department's primary concern is the number and miles of new motorized trails being proposed initially. The Department and hunters recognize, and it is acknowledged in the LMP, hunt quality improves significantly if one can get 0.5 miles beyond motorized roads/trails. The Forest Service recognizes this issue in the LMP when discussing elk security habitat. Although security habitat is above the minimum 30% threshold for the Wiggins Fork Elk herd as designated in the LMP, the Department believes the Forest should analyze the impact of any new proposed roads/trails on elk security cover within the Wiggins Fork Elk Herd Unit. In particular, the analysis should examine the amount of elk security habitat provided outside the grizzly PCA as the LMP states on page 297: 'Identify and maintain sufficient elk security habitat outside of the grizzly bear primary conservation area.'

Outside of wilderness, the Department believes there is currently good motorized access to much of the Wind River and Washakie Ranger Districts with existing designated roads and trails. Adding the miles of proposed trails to the existing road/trail system would be doing a disservice to publics interested in non-motorized experiences on the Forest and likely decrease hunter success in some areas with new motorized trails. According to Table 131 in the LMP, the primary activity of 19.5 percent of forest users was some sort of non-motorized recreation versus 7.9 percent of users who primarily participated in motorized activities. The Department believes it is important to maintain areas for foot/horseback hunters to recreate without having to pack into wilderness areas. Comments received from hunters each year during the Department's harvest survey support this view. In 2014 and 2013, 10% and 20% of hunter comments in the Wind River Ranger District expressed dismay over the amount of motorized traffic in the area.

During the travel management process, the Department believes it is important for the Forest Service to identify as many illegal roads/trails (user created routes) as possible. It is widely acknowledged there is a substantial amount of illegal motorized travel occurring on the District. Much of the illegal motorized activity is taking place on well defined illegal trails or on closed roads. Based on public meeting comments, discussions and comments in the Department's harvest survey, the Department believes there is significant public frustration over the amount of illegal motorized travel in the Dubois area. The Forest Service recognizes the effects of illegal roads in the LMP on page 486:

'Unauthorized routes: Unauthorized routes result in additional land disturbance. Often these routes are created on steep grades and in drainage areas, resulting in resource damage such as soil erosion, sedimentation in channels, rutting, compaction (impacts aquatic habitat and destroys vegetation), and causing disturbance to wildlife and non-motorized users. Effects of this use are costly to remedy. The presence of these routes directly affects personnel, time and funding available to maintain, reconstruct, and manage system roads and to manage resources, such as water and soils, for programs that reduce weeds and improve aquatic organism passage and habitat.'

The Department strongly advocates travel management decisions that progressively address illegal motorized travel. The Department is concerned that of the 36 proposals in the Wind River RD, 27 of them advocate increased motorized travel. Of those 27, 11 of the proposals (41%) advocate opening an illegal trail (user created route). While the Department recognizes the difficulties enforcing road closures and curtailing establishment of the illegal routes, we encourage the Forest Service to work with motorized recreation advocates and other publics to effectively curtail illegal motorized travel.

Many of the roads and trails on the Washakie Ranger District are in varying states of disrepair, often leading to unauthorized use to bypass eroded or muddy areas. The current level of mechanized access via roads or trails is more than adequate to provide recreation opportunities throughout the year, and creation of new or re-opening of closed roads seems unnecessary for a variety of reasons including: 1) Disturbance to wildlife is already extensive in many areas, and new motorized use areas would be detrimental to habitats and security for wildlife; 2) Difficulty for many users (especially during hunting seasons) to “get away” from mechanized traffic in front-country areas, especially from Sinks Canyon south along the Louis Lake and Limestone Mountain roads and adjacent roads/trails; and 3) Difficulty of enforcement/prevention of unauthorized, user created trails. The Department does not have specific recommendations for permanent closures of roads or trails. However, we would support seasonal closures of some roads, trails, and areas for the protection of crucial winter ranges particularly for elk and moose, and parturition (birthing) habitats. Specifically, a seasonal closure basically from Fossil Hill to the Limestone Mountain Road near Pass Creek would reduce impacts to wintering wildlife and provide security during spring in parturition habitats. The Department has already engaged in conversations with SNF personnel regarding potential closure points and timing, and local personnel are available to “fine-tune” any proposal for seasonal closures.

The Department offers the following, specific comments for proposals on the Wind River Ranger District:

1. Some of the initial proposals are at odds with direction in the LMP. Most notably, the proposed motorized trails WR-02 and WR-09 are in 3.3B management areas. These areas do not allow for summer motorized use per the LMP. It should be noted, these areas are popular among hunters to pursue elk on foot and horseback without motorized disturbance. The Department believes no trails should be developed in these areas to preserve non-motorized hunting opportunities and to remain consistent with the LMP.
2. WR-03, WR-11: These trails allow legal, motorized access into the Salt Barrels ATV trail. The Department believes the hunting public is well served by providing legal, motorized access into Salt Barrels Park to hunt elk and deer in the fall. More than one access point does not seem necessary.

3. WR-10, WR-34, WR34A, WR34B: These trails appear to be designed to provide motorized loops into the Fish Lake Mountain Road. Recall, MT12 and MT13 were created several years ago at the request of motorized recreation advocates to provide loop trails in the Fish Lake and Union Pass areas. At that time, no legal trail was designated along Cow Creek and the snow machine trail above Leeds Creek was not opened because 2 new loops were deemed enough. The end of the existing road at Cow Creek and the continental divide above the Bridger Teton National Forest continue to be popular spots for hunters to park and hunt for short periods of time without motorized disturbance. Adding trails in the area would detract from non-motorized hunting opportunities. That said, these are areas where illegal motorized travel continues to be a problem and the Forest Service should focus on decreasing illegal use.
4. WR-33: This proposed trail cuts through an excellent area to hunt elk later in October for non-motorized hunters. The trail bisects a narrow stretch of Forest and increased motorized travel along here would simply encourage elk to move onto private lands and become unavailable for public harvest. Department personnel believe opening this route to motorized traffic would significantly degrade elk hunt quality.

The Department offers the following, specific comments for proposals on the Washakie Ranger District:

1. WK-01 (Cony Basin) and WK-01A (alternate Cony Basin) – The Department does not support this proposal. This proposed trail (or the alternate) would dissect one of the few remaining front-country roadless areas in the Washakie Ranger District. This area provides security habitat for wildlife and remote hunting opportunities for foot or horseback hunters, especially important to non-residents desiring remote, non-mechanized hunting experiences but unable or willing to hunt in designated wilderness areas. The Department encourages the Shoshone National Forest to retain roadless areas in as many locations as possible to maintain the undisturbed settings of the forest (off wilderness) for the protection of wildlife and enjoyment of roadless recreation opportunities, including hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, etc.
2. WK-02, State Trails Proposal #2 (Elderberry Creek) – The Department is very concerned about this proposal. This proposed trail would re-open a trail closed many years ago. The route would be almost entirely in a narrow riparian corridor along Elderberry Creek, and would result in degradation of riparian vegetation along the creek and disturbance to aquatic resources, along with a high likelihood of increased erosion and sediment loading in Elderberry Creek. Impacts to wildlife would include: 1) vehicle disturbance in spring and early summer to elk and mule deer during calving/fawning and parturition. Calf and fawn births and survival are vital to recruitment of these species (the area is within designated parturition (PAR) habitat for elk); 2) disturbance during hunting seasons by creating a continuous loop that would likely experience high volumes of vehicles in an

area which currently provides security cover for wildlife; and 3) The proposed road/trail is in crucial winter-yearlong (CRUWYL) range for moose. The Department does not support this proposal.

3. WK-03, WK-04, State Trails Proposal #1 (Stock Trail) – The Department is very concerned about this proposal. The proposed trails would cross at least 2 significant boggy wet meadows and associated riparian creek crossings. The areas involved would be potentially degraded by off trail users avoiding these muddy areas throughout the year. This use would degrade riparian vegetation along the creek and create disturbance to aquatic resources. It is highly likely increased erosion and sediment loading in adjacent streams and disturbance to wildlife would be inevitable. Impacts would include: 1) vehicle disturbance in spring and early summer to elk and mule deer during calving/fawning and parturition. Calf and fawn births and survival are vital to recruitment of these species; and 2) disturbance during hunting seasons by creating continuous loops that would likely experience high volumes of vehicles in an area which currently provides relative security cover for wildlife. The Department does not support this proposal.
4. WK-05 (Allred Proposal) – The Department is very concerned about this proposal. The proposed road/trail would result in additional vehicular traffic in an already high use area, which would likely lead to reduced use by wildlife (particularly elk, mule deer, and moose) throughout the year. The proposed road/trail is in crucial winter-yearlong (CRUWYL) range for moose and is adjacent to CRUWYL range for elk. The area is also within designated parturition (PAR) habitat for elk. Additional vehicle disturbances in these habitats would have negative consequences for animals during those time periods as well as during hunting seasons, and is likely to lead to habitat degradation in these important habitats due to erosion, unauthorized off road use, and damage to riparian resources along Cherry Creek and Snow Creek. One of the proposed routes also crosses private land owned by The Nature Conservancy. The Department does not support this proposed road/trail.

Aquatic Concerns:

The Department has reviewed the preliminary proposals regarding summer travel management on the Shoshone National Forest. The following comments are broken into three primary sections 1) General comments that should be considered as stand Best Management and Design Practices for all proposals, 2) Proposal specific comments, and 3) Additional road maintenance concerns that WGFD would like the USFS to consider.

General comments:

1. Any new road construction or reconstruction completed as a part of these proposals should be designed and completed in a manner that minimizes soil erosion, prevents silt

loading of streams, and does not constrict the floodplain of the stream. Methods to minimize soil erosion include the use of silt fencing, water bars, and properly placed culverts.

2. Road crossings should be designed to allow for fish passage at all flows and life stages of fish. Culverts should be set at the existing grade (slope) and be large enough so that water velocities are navigable by fish. Fish have burst speed, prolonged speed, and sustained speed limitations. Small diameter pipes and smooth pipes accelerate water beyond these speeds. Culverts should be long enough to avoid bank erosion but as short as possible because fish will become exhausted and not be able to navigate long culverts. Using bottomless culverts or having natural stream substrate inside the culvert or culvert baffles aid fish passage.
3. Any road that is going to be closed and decommissioned should be reclaimed and permanently blocked to prevent illegal use of the road.
4. Any closed and decommissioned road should have all stream crossing reclaimed and streams be returned to a stable condition. Reclamation goals should include providing for fish passage, sediment transport, and floodplain connectivity. Reclamation techniques should be provided to and reviewed by WGFD.

Proposal Specific Comments:

NZ-01

This proposal would create new segments to connect FSR 123 to 121.

- 1) This proposal would create a new road crossing on Bennett Creek. Bennett Creek provides important spawning habitat for trout in the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River. It is crucial that the road crossing on Bennett Creek be designed to allow for fish passage at all flows, prevent siltation of the stream, and not constrict the floodplain. We recommend that a bottomless arch culvert or bridge be considered at this crossing.
- 2) FS 123 was washed out in sections in 2013. This road needs to be repaired and maintained to prevent future sedimentation in Line Creek. We recommend that these improvements be conducted regardless of the continued consideration of the NZ-01
- 3) The development of two access routes off of FS 121, seems unnecessary. They provide access to the same area and would result in additional ground disturbance. We recommend that the least environmentally damaging route be chosen and the other route eliminated from further consideration.

NZ-03

We support the addition of proposed gate to prevent damage to alpine habitats.

NZ-04

We have no resource concerns with the proposal.

NZ-05

We support the closure of FSR 165 and 178.1B. As stated before, we recommend permanent blockage and closure of this road. Where feasible, based on soil types, we recommend reclamation occur on these closed roads.

NZ-07 & NZ-08

The North Fork Shoshone River and tributaries are both crucial and enhancement habitat areas. Stream system supports a highly productive, internationally known sport fishery. Focal species include Yellowstone cutthroat trout, mountain whitefish, and rainbow trout.

NZ-07

Sweetwater Creek is an important spawning tributary for trout in the North Fork Shoshone River drainage, including Yellowstone cutthroat trout. FS 423 is currently severely degraded and contributing significant amounts of sediment to Sweetwater Creek.

If this road is closed, we recommend that the access road be reclaimed. At a minimum, we recommend that

- all stream crossing be reclaimed and streams be returned to a stable condition using natural channel design methodologies. Reclamation goals should include providing for fish passage, sediment transport, and floodplain connectivity. Reclamation techniques should be provided to and reviewed by WGFD.
- the road bed should be reclaimed and revegetated, particularly in areas where the road is close to the stream channel and there is the potential for the stream erode into the road bed

If this road is left open, significant road maintenance and realignment needs to occur to prevent continued sedimentation of Sweetwater Creek. We recommend:

- The road be relocated outside of the floodplain and that relocated sections of the road be fully reclaimed
- The road relocation be designed to reduce the number of stream crossings
- Existing stream crossing should be inventoried and corrective action be taken to prevent continued siltation of Sweetwater Creek

We also recommend continuance of the existing seasonal closure regardless of whether or not this proposal is adopted.

NZ-08

Elk Forks is an important spawning tributary for trout in the North Fork Shoshone River drainage, including Yellowstone cutthroat trout. If the road is closed, we recommend permanently blocking and reclaiming the road. If the road is left open, we recommend that the road be inventoried and improved to prevent continued degradation of riparian areas and siltation of Elk Fork.

NZ-10

Marquette Creek is a part of both crucial and enhancement Yellowstone cutthroat trout habitat within the WGFD Strategic Habitat Plan. We do not support the development of this road because it may adversely impact channel function and the riparian habitat of Marquette Creek and the proposed road does not significantly improve access.

If this proposal is carried forward:

- the road should be designed to prevent encroachment on the flood plain, prevent damage to riparian habitats, and prevent siltation of the stream
- the road should be designed to limit the number of stream crossings
- stream crossings should be designed to allow for fish passage at all flows, prevent siltation of the stream, and not constrict the floodplain. We recommend that a bottomless arch culvert at these crossings
- long term monitoring should be implemented to ensure that degradation does not occur from motorized traffic use
- If NZ-10 is developed, we recommend that the proposal be amended to include the decommissioning, closing, and reclamation of FS 474.2C.

NZ-12

If this proposal is carried forward, we recommend that the condition of the road be inventoried for erosion, sedimentation, flood plain constriction and fish passage. We recommend that the proposal be amended to include any necessary improvements to prevent floodplain constriction, sedimentation, fish passage barriers, and riparian vegetation impacts.

NZ 13

Brown Creek is a spawning tributary for Yellowstone cutthroat trout. If this proposal is carried forward, we recommend that all stream crossings be designed to prevent floodplain constriction, sedimentation, fish passage barriers, and riparian vegetation impacts. Additionally, any road construction should be designed and completed in a manner that minimizes soil erosion and prevents silt loading of streams. Methods to minimize soil erosion include the use of silt fencing, water bars, and properly placed culverts.

NZ-14

We do not support this proposal. The current existing FS road (213) from Twin Lakes to the bottom of Gooseberry Creek already provides access to this area. An additional road would create land disturbance that it not needed to provide motorized access.

If this proposal is carried forward, we recommend that all stream crossings be designed to prevent floodplain constriction, sedimentation, fish passage barriers, and riparian vegetation impacts. Additionally, any road construction should be designed and completed in a manner that

minimizes soil erosion and prevents silt loading of streams. Methods to minimize soil erosion include the use of silt fencing, water bars, and properly placed culverts.

NZ-15

We do not support this proposal. This proposed route from Forest Road 213-3B over to the Grass Creek Road would not serve the public or hunters any real benefit due to the existing Grass Creek Road already open for vehicle use.

If this proposal is carried forward, we recommend that an analysis be conducted which assesses the environmental impacts from the construction of the new routes. This analysis should also consider closing, reclaiming, and blocking access to existing portions of 213-3B which would provide redundant access in the area. The least environmentally impacting of the alternatives should be carried forward.

Additionally, if this proposal is carried forward, we recommend that all stream crossings be designed to prevent floodplain constriction, sedimentation, fish passage barriers, and riparian vegetation impacts. Any road construction should be designed and completed in a manner that minimizes soil erosion and prevents silt loading of streams. Methods to minimize soil erosion include the use of silt fencing, water bars, and properly placed culverts.

NZ-16

Cottonwood and Gooseberry Creek at support trout fisheries classified as Green Ribbon Trout stream of local importance and contains less than 50 pounds of trout per mile. They support species of greatest conservation need including Yellowstone cutthroat and other non-game species. These streams are also listed by the WGFD under the Enhancement Strategic Habitat Plan because they are degraded low elevation riparian.

We recommend that the condition of the roads within the proposal be inventoried for erosion, sedimentation, flood plain constriction and fish passage. We recommend that the proposal be amended to include any necessary improvements to prevent floodplain constriction, sedimentation, fish passage barriers, and riparian vegetation impacts.

Additionally, if this proposal is carried forward, we recommend that all stream crossings be designed to prevent floodplain constriction, sedimentation, fish passage barriers, and riparian vegetation impacts. Any road construction should be designed and completed in a manner that minimizes soil erosion and prevents silt loading of streams. Methods to minimize soil erosion include the use of silt fencing, water bars, and properly placed culverts.

Opportunities to reclaim and permanently close old timber sale routes should also be considered as mitigation opportunities. Permanent reclamation and closure of these roads would benefit aquatic and terrestrial habitats.

Additional road maintenance concerns

- 1) We recommend that closed roads on the Forest be permanently blocked to prevent illegal use. Decommissioned roads should also be reclaimed to prevent future erosion and eliminate the possibility for stream channels to relocate onto decommissioned roads.

As an example, Sunlight Creek has relocated its main channel onto a USFS decommissioned road, ID D101.1D, resulting in significant erosion, sedimentation, and habitat loss. WGFD recommends that this resource damage be repaired and that Sunlight Creek be returned to its historic main channel in this area. WGFD documented the resource damage in 2015 and is currently working with the USFS to try and identify opportunities to resolve this resource damage.



Figure 1. Erosion of FS D101.1D by Sunlight Creek. The main channel of Sunlight Creek now flows down this decommissioned, but unreclaimed access road. Photo taken August 18, 2015 at 44.662266 -109.685702.

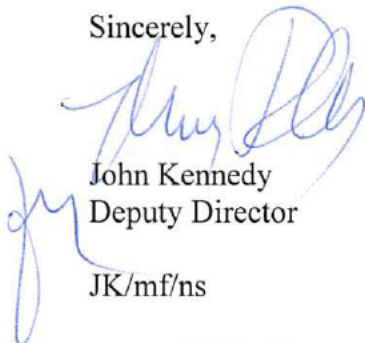
- 2) FS 127, Trail Creek Road, is located on an active alluvial fan of Trail Creek. Trail Creek has flowed down FS 127 and the WGFD access road resulting in significant erosion and sedimentation concerns. WGFD would like to work with the USFS to develop a permanent solution which would eliminate Trail Creek from flowing down the road.

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Initial alternatives would include 1) relocating the road to a higher elevation outside of the alluvial fan or 2) stabilizing the alluvial fan and directing Trail Creek in a functional path away from the access road.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Rick Huber, Staff Aquatic Biologist, at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,



John Kennedy
Deputy Director

JK/mf/ns

cc: USFWS
Chris Wichmann, Wyoming Department of Agriculture, Cheyenne
Tim Woolley, WGFD, Cody Region
Bart Kroger, WGFD, Cody Region
Doug McWhirter, WGFD, Cody Region
Sam Hochhalter, WGFD, Cody Region
Daryl Lutz, WGFD, Lander Region
Stan Harter, WGFD, Lander Region
Greg Anderson, WGFD, Lander Region
Craig Amadio, WGFD, Lander Region

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