

February 12, 2025

Wesley W. Thompson

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Dear Bearlodge District Employees:

Hats off to the Bearlodge District for recognizing the need for management on the North Sand Management Project.

It is paramount to know how this area got into the current condition. Conservation implies proper and scientific use of our natural resources. Preservation implies protection of natural resources. Man is not in the equation, meaning no use.

This all started with the Sierra Club's nomination of the Sand Creek area for wilderness in the 1980's. The Sierra Club's numerous appeals against logging in the North Sand Project has halted management now for 40 years. There has been no timber harvests since Homestake logged the area after World War 2 or about 80 years ago. (at least 2 timber cycles)

My grandfather, N. H. Thompson, logged and milled Ponderosa Pine in the Thompson Gulch area at least 5 years before the creation of the USFS. He logged with horses and was granted a horse grazing permit for them. The steam engine used water to mill the timber. The spring was near the confluence of Thompson Gulch with the present Sand Creek road and has long since dried up.

Around 1914, N. H. traded the Thompson Gulch area to the USFS for land they owned adjacent to the present north end of the North Sand Project. The Thompson family has farmed and grazed this land to the date of this writing. The USFS converted N. H.'s horse permit to cattle, and the Thompsons have grazed the North Sand Project area until 2021 when we sold the permit. The permit and permitted cattle were sold to Freuncksons

for these cattle. We still pasture these same cattle on the same ground before and after the USFS grazing season.

Due to diminishing water flow on the aforementioned private land, we have drilled a stock water well into the Minalosa formation at considerable expense. (No USDA cost share) We are, therefore, counting on the North Sand Project to continue or increase the recharge to this formation. We have logged and thinned our adjacent private land to give us some protection from the wildfire hazard and to increase our forest's productivity.

The Thompsons have a well-maintained 100-plus year old house on this land and several drift and pasture fences that need protection from logging and control burning during the proposed work on the project. Of the numerous springs and seeps on the North Sand, there are at least six developed springs, meaning the springs are fenced to protect catch basins and pipes leading to water tanks for permitted livestock and numerous wildlife species. Permittees place salt and minerals strategically between water tanks to achieve proper grazing and distribution. Wildlife species are also benefitted from these salts and minerals. It should be noted that big game ignore fenced pastures, mandated by the USFS, thus reducing their effectiveness.

Howard Orr, a professional hydrologist employed by the USFS Experiment Station located on the S.D. School of Mines campus in the 1960's and 1970's, conducted forest research on the now ignored experimental forest. This facility was located west of U.S. Highway 385 between Pactola Reservoir and Strawberry Hill, and also near the site of the first timber sale by the USFS. Orr's research was published in several scientific journals at the time, showing significant increases in water yield as forest overstory became less dense, in other words, managed. Orr's publications have since mysteriously disappeared from Forest Service archives. I have a serious suspicion of their fate. Results did not align with Sierra Club's preconceived notions and their influence on Forest Service management.

Earth Day, 1971, came along and exacerbated the problem, allowing numerous young, and some not so young, uneducated and not scientifically astute people to the bargaining table of the environmental movement. The decline in sound management manifested itself in severe damage to the West's forest ecosystems. It should be noted that many of these young emotional, and not scientifically astute people, wormed their way into management positions in the USFS. This resulted in numerous catastrophic wildfires in western states and was exacerbated by the felonious ~~discussion~~^{DEBATE} to protect the so-called spotted owl habitat in the Pacific Northwest. This resulted in loss of human life and towns that zoning laws could have prevented. Overzealous realtors are another factor plus the selfish attitude of the wealthy to build in remote and scenic areas. On top of these factors are the loss of water yield and quality grazing habitat, the timber resources and general aesthetics.

In the Black Hills, due to lack of forest service timber harvests and the declining grazing resource, deer have been forced into towns and private crop land causing crop damage. Elk are moving back to the prairies. There are elk seasons in all of South Dakota West River counties now. The same is happening in Wyoming. Most plants and wildlife species are negatively impacted. Forest fire risks have dramatically increased. Wildfire is very expensive to fight. Timber sales are money makers if done correctly.

I hope and suspect the Sierra Club has lost its credibility. U.S. Senator Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) recently reintroduced the Timber Harvesting Restoration Act. This legislation would require the USFS to improve timber sales numbers in the Black Hills National Forest. In recent years, timber sales have steadily decreased, putting significant strain on the manufacturer's use of timber products. On top of that, the overall health of this forest has declined to critical levels and the list goes on, but I digress.

The treatments outlined in the North Sand Management project are an important step to returning this area back to productivity. I think all livestock fences and water developments should be inventoried and mapped to protect them from proposed treatments. I think most of your management

areas and treatments are accurate. It should be noted that big game winter range should also include adjacent private lands.

I would like to encourage less dense timber strands. A 60-basel area used to be the standard to sustain all the multiple uses.

I am encouraged that the plan is addressing noxious weed control which has not been practiced enough in recent years. I understand the risk and liability of control burning, but more aggressive fire produces better results.

Oak management and Buckhorn suppression is a tough and expensive topic. Timber sales are money makers. Please do not let the Northern Goshawk become the spotted owl of the Black Hills. Diversity is important, to a point.

I have always pointed out that timber harvests are not pretty initially. I recall packing salt on horseback with my grandmother, Edith Thompson, to permitted cattle in the mid 1950's, five years after Homestake had logged the North Sand area. The area was beautiful with native grass and flowers up to a cow's belly. There were open vistas of Sundance Mountain, Warren Peak, Bear Butte, Lookout Mountain, Cement Ridge, Terry Peak, Two Top and the red bluffs on the Redwater Valley to the north.

I spent 5 ½ years at the University of Wyoming in Laramie earning a M.S. degree in range management and 5 years in Rapid City at SDSU's Research and Extension Center studying logging and prescribed burning on Ponderosa Pine plus practicing and evaluating range improvement technologies in western South Dakota, including some extension work. We documented our work in several scientific publications.

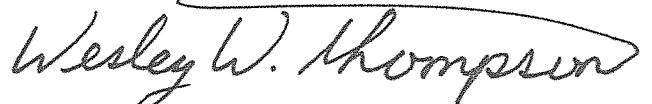
In 1974, I had a chance to return to the family ranch on Redwater and the land adjoining the current North Sand Project, running permitted cattle on the same with few regrets.

The ensuing 50 years, the Sand Creek area had dramatically changed. With no management, the beautiful vistas are gone. Water yield has dramatically decreased. My grandfather, N.H. in 1900, had irrigated the flats to Red Canyon and had harvested the native ~~greases~~ for his logging horses to winter on. Water had flowed until August to Ranch A. Today Sand Creek doesn't flow to its confluence with Grand Canyon until May or early June. The forest is overgrown and unhealthy and is an extreme wildfire hazard.

The North Sand Project is a good start. However, nothing short of a Homestake logging like in the late 1940's will return this area to its beautiful grandeur and productivity.

I thank the Bearlodge District for allowing me to comment on the North Sand Project.

Respectively submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive ink, appearing to read "Wesley W. Thompson". The signature is written over a horizontal line that extends from the "Respectively submitted," line above it.

Wesley W. Thompson