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April 17th, 2025

Shawn Cochran and Anita Swanson
Hell Canyon Ranger District,
Black Hills National Forest
1019 North 5th Street
Custer, South Dakota
(605) 673-9200, 605-673-9360
<https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=67387>
anita.swanson@usda.gov,

RE- Comments on Frass Forest Health Project - Draft EA

Dear Mr Cochran and Ms Swanson,

Thanks for opportunity to comment. Seven days is too short a comment period.

Fire Risk

We are not sure how trees with needles eaten by moths are such a fire risk, as we believe it is the fine fuels of needles and small twigs where most fire risk lies. It seems the estimates of fire risk were taken before the moths ate the needles. The fire risk survey mentioned is dated at 2022 (USDA Forest Service's 2022 Wildfire Crisis Implementation Plan). The high-risk Pringle Fireshed, was identified by the USDA Forest Service's 2022 Wildfire Crisis Implementation Plan.

The moth started eating pine needles in 2022 and continued in 2023. You discuss defoliation impacts to trees as of August 2024. That seems that fire conditions could have substantially changed due to moths in the 3 years since the Fire Survey. There are also 3 timber sales done pursuant to the MPBRP that are ongoing – have they changed the fire risk in the 3 years since 2022?

One of the purposes and needs is:

"The Black Hills National Forest is proposing to conduct primarily salvage harvest treatments on National Forest System (NFS) land within the Frass Forest Health Project (Frass Project) area in the Hell Canyon Ranger District of the Black Hills National Forest." However you don't use salvage logging as the excuse for avoiding an objection period or limiting the range of alternatives.

You are using the risks outlined in the Forest Service's January 2022 Wildfire Crisis Strategy (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/wildfire-crisis>), to claim that an emergency exists on 250 high-risk firesheds in the western United States. This project falls within these designated firesheds and thus you claim your project does not have to offer an objection process and can limit the range of alternatives. We challenge this claim, as the moths & perhaps logging done, pursuant to MPBRP will have changed the fire risk and this change since 2022 must be disclosed.

Inadequate Range of Alternatives

There is just the action and no action alternatives, this is an inadequate range of alternatives and violates NEPA.

Which CEQ Rules apply?

Given that Trump has illegally rescinded the Phase 2 CEQ rules, please explain what rules interpreting NEPA apply to this NEPA review. We object to any new Forest Service NEPA rules that may be applying, used to replace the Phase 2 CEQ rules adopted during the Biden Administration.

We are not sure how the instructions under Section 40807 of the 2022 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) interact with President Trump killing the CEQ regulations by Executive Order in 2025. But it is possible that there is a regulatory dessert existing and we object to Trump's Executive Order killing the CEQ rules.

Hiding & Thermal Cover

Please discuss the cumulative impacts of all the logging going on in and planned for the area on the thermal and hiding cover for ungulates. As the area is set aside for big game emphasis these objectives should be very important. We searched for words hiding and thermal cover and the only reference to hiding/thermal cover was at hiding cover for northern leopard frog/Black Hills red-bellied snake ("The denser canopy would allow for more moisture on the ground in the site as well as provide some hiding cover for big game." See page 70). There is a reference to "screening cover" on page 73. There is reference to "hiding pockets" at page 76.

There needs to be better discussion of hiding cover for big game species, as well as snakes, frogs and for a "variety of wildlife species".

At page 46 for White-tailed deer it says:.

"Likely to persist. Adequate habitat would remain under both alternatives.

Big Game Screening. Hiding, or screening, cover is defined in the Forest Plan as being able to hide 90% of an adult deer or elk from human view at a distance of 200 feet or less of the road. Currently, all roads in the project area meet this requirement; most are well above the 20%

cover, mainly because of topography. However, once proposed activities are completed there may not be sufficient screening cover. Design features for the project are designed to keep select regeneration to provide adequate screening when possible. "

At 76 you mention road closure if hiding cover is reduced. Please explain those plans in greater detail.

How many areas will have hiding cover reduced to such a degree that roads must be closed?

Definition in glossary –

Thermal Cover (Wildlife)

"Cover used by animals to ameliorate the effects of weather. Optimally, thermal cover is provided by a stand of coniferous trees, 30 to 60 acres in size, at least 40 feet tall, with a canopy cover of at least 70 percent. South of Highway 16, thermal cover may be provided by shorter trees due to poorer site indices."

Birds

Black-backed wood pecker impacts are not adequately discussed, as the woodpeckers would use the dead trees as habitat and you are removing them.

We also have special concern for impacts to goshawks.

Large diameter Trees

Please retain large diameter pine trees, with a moratorium on cutting the large ones.

Unsustainable cutting

We are concerned for the unsustainable rate of cutting of ponderosa pine trees on the Black Hills National Forest. We object to the cutting of live trees in this project as addition to that unsustainable rate.

Beaver Dam Analogs

Please add a section on allowing beaver dam analogs in the project, so you can have NEPA done should you decide to do an BDA building.

Thanks,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nancy Hilding", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Nancy Hilding
President