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Organization: US Environmental Protection Agency, Region 8

Title: Director, NEPA

Comments: Dear Supervisor Whittekiend:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 8 has reviewed the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS) Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS) for the High Uintas Wilderness Domestic Sheep Analysis project (CEQ No. 20190110) in the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache and Ashley National Forests (Forests). In accordance with our responsibilities under Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and pursuant to Section 309 of the Clean Air Act (CAA), the EPA provides the following comments on the Draft EIS.

The Draft EIS was prepared to evaluate the effects of domestic sheep grazing on ten allotments on the north and south slopes of the Uinta Mountains. The existing allotments have been utilized for grazing since the early 20th century and comprise 160,141 acres within the Forests. The Forest Service preferred alternative is to continue allowing domestic sheep grazing within these existing allotments.

To predict future impacts of continued allotment use in the project area, the Draft EIS primarily uses data collected to assess past and existing conditions for water quality, stream bank erosion, grazing, trampling, bedding and herding camps. The Draft EIS indicates that an acceptable percentage of performance conditions are currently meeting Forest Plan objectives in most areas away from driveways, grazing trails and stream crossings. The Draft EIS predicts that continuing the current management practices will maintain this trend. The Draft EIS identifies performance measures and references management activities from the Forest Plan to evaluate and manage conditions in the future. We recommend that the Final EIS include the specific performance measures by resource and how they will continue to be monitored. We also recommend specifying what steps will be taken to achieve Forest Plan objectives if performance measures are not met in areas with existing impacts and those without. Further, the Draft EIS references best management practices (BMP) from the Forest Plan but does not clearly identify them throughout the Draft EIS. We recommend that BMPs and other mitigation measures be clearly identified in the Final EIS. Identifying specific performance measures, BMPs and mitigation in the Final EIS will more clearly identify what measures from the Forest Plan are applicable to this project and how they will be applied to protect Forest resources.

The Draft EIS identifies wetlands, and specifically fen wetlands (which at the time of publication have not been completely delineated in the project area) as being critically important resources. We recommend the Final EIS provide documentation that fen wetland functions are not impacted by sheep grazing or propose BMPs to promote avoidance of herding around sensitive wetland or fen wetland areas. This would reduce disturbance and degradation of the areas in or immediately surrounding wetlands (including fens) which could lead to functional conversion of these sensitive resources over the period of this plan.

A third alternative was considered (in addition to the No Action and preferred alternative) but eliminated from full analysis in the EIS. This alternative would have attempted to prevent overlap of domestic sheep grazing with identified bighorn sheep distribution areas on Forest lands to reduce pathogen transmission from domestic and wild bighorn populations. This alternative was eliminated due to the Forests' determination of the high likelihood of pathogen transmission and population overlap of bighorn herds with domestic sheep herds outside the Forests' boundaries on BLM and private lands. The USFS determined that due to the lack of controls outside of the Forests' boundaries, countermeasures implemented by this third alternative would not prevent pathogen transmission within Forests' boundaries. We appreciate that the USFS considered an additional alternative that might minimize disease transmission from domestic to bighorn sheep. We recommend the USFS consider whether the practices developed for another mixed-ownership area (though not a grazing project), the Bridger-

Teton Invasive Plant Management Project EIS, might be applicable for this project. The Bridger-Teton project implemented collaborative efforts with federal and private landowners to work towards minimization of infestation from outside sources. We recommend continued collaboration with BLM, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and Wyoming Game and Fish Department to identify potential avoidance measures, best practices or mitigation measures with adjacent landowners to reduce disease transmission.

It is unusual outside of Healthy Forest Restoration Act projects, to see an EIS assess only one action alternative. In this case, we found it difficult to evaluate or recommend any potential practices that might yield improved water resource conditions or speed the recovery of impacts to water resources. We recommend USFS consider public comment on this EIS to determine whether there may be one or more action alternatives that could be developed for the Final EIS within the current range of alternatives. Broadening the range of sheep grazing alternatives could help resource agencies, the public and decision makers to identify any practicable modifications to current practice that would benefit the environmental and recreational resources in the High Uintas Wilderness while sustaining sheep grazing.

The Draft EIS references several technical reports that are in the project record. We were unable to locate the specific technical resource reports that were referenced in the document. These reports may provide additional information to answer some of our questions and address our recommendations above. We recommend that before the issuance of the Final EIS, the online project page be updated to include the technical reports, or that links be provided in the document to access these reports.

Effective October 22, 2018, the EPA no longer includes ratings in our comment letters. Information about this change and the EPA's continued roles and responsibilities in the review of federal actions can be found on our website at: <https://www.epa.gov/nepa/environmental-impact-statement-rating-system-criteria>.

We appreciate the opportunity to participate in the review of this project and are committed to working with you as you prepare the Final EIS. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at (303) 312-6704, or Matt Hubner of my staff at (303) 312-6500 or hubner.matt@epa.gov.