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Comments: Attached are the EPA Region 8 recommendations. Please let us know if you have any questions.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 8 has reviewed the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service's October 2019 Thunder Basin National Grassland (TBNG) 2020 Plan Amendment and Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) (CEQ No. 20190250) pursuant to Section 309 of the Clean Air Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Thunder Basin National Grassland is located in the Powder River Basin of northeastern Wyoming, in portions of Campbell, Converse, Crook, Niobrara, and Weston Counties. Within the Thunder Basin boundary are approximately 553,000 acres of National Forest Service land and more than 1 million acres of private and State lands.

According to the Draft EIS, the Forest Service has determined there is a need to address ecological, social, and economic issues related to current management of prairie dogs and grassland vegetation on the Thunder Basin National Grassland. It proposes to amend the Thunder Basin National Grassland Plan to replace Management Area 3.63 - Black-Footed Ferret Reintroduction Habitat with Management Area 3.67 - Rangelands with Short-Stature Vegetation Emphasis and decrease its boundaries. The Forest Service also proposes expanded use of lethal control options (e.g. rodenticides, fumigants, anticoagulants and recreational shooting) to minimize encroachment onto non-federal lands and reduce conflicts with livestock grazing. The enclosed detailed comments include recommendations for strengthening the effects analysis, improving the document's internal consistency, and a recommendation to include a monitoring and reporting plan in the selected alternative.

We appreciate the opportunity to participate in the review of this Draft EIS. If further explanation of our comments would be helpful, please contact me at (303) 312-6704, or your staff may wish to contact Shannon Snyder at (303) 312-6335 or snyder.shannon@epa.gov

ENCLOSURE

Detailed Comments on the Thunder Basin National Grassland 2020 Plan Amendment and Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Strengthening the connection between the available science and the proposed changes

The Draft EIS includes background on the 2002 TBNG Plan, the 2009 amendment, and the 2015 Prairie Dog Conservation Assessment and Management Strategy. This background describes the actions taken to manage a viable prairie dog population on TBNG and to address continued landowner concerns about encroachment onto non-federal lands during prairie dog population booms. It states the expansion of the prairie dog colony acreage in 2017 triggered the need to review the 2015 Strategy, and that the social context surrounding prairie dog management became increasingly contentious. Then in 2017-18, a sylvatic plague epizootic reduced prairie dog acreages by 99% on federal lands to approximately 625 acres. Previous TBNG plans, the 2015 Strategy, and supporting documents anticipated cyclical population booms such as the one that occurred in 2017, as well as sylvatic plague epizootics, and provided for management tools to address the need to maintain healthy prairie dog populations and manage encroachment onto non-federal land. These documents identified a wide range of management tools to maintain viable populations of prairie dogs and associated species of conservation concern while providing various methods for boundary control and management options. Available tools under those plans included: prescribed burning, recreational shooting, chemical control (i.e. rodenticide and insecticide), translocation, visual barriers (e.g. buffer fence), and vegetative barriers. Given the dramatically reduced prairie dog populations on the TBNG (Table 2), we recommend the Final EIS consider whether there remains a need to

change the management direction of Management Area 3.63 and expand the use of lethal control.

The 2009 Plan and the 2015 Strategy also required periodic monitoring and reporting on the effects and effectiveness of the Plan and Strategy. The Draft EIS and the supporting documents found on the USFS project website do not include the monitoring reports completed to support the 2015 Strategy, and the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests' website does not include monitoring reports for the 2009 Plan after the year 2011. Prairie dog population expansions, sylvatic plague epizootic, encroachment onto private lands, and resource conflicts previously existed and led to the development of the 2009 Plan and 2015 Strategy, which already decreased the size of Management Area 3.63 and expanded the use of lethal control. We recommend the Final EIS more specifically identify the scientific basis for the changed conditions cited in the proposed amendment. It would be useful to include the monitoring reports and data showing the consistent implementation of the 2009 Plan and 2015 Strategy management tools and their relative effectiveness to determine the scientific basis of the proposed plan.

Effects Analysis

To support TBNG plan amendment, the USFS prepared a report titled Potential Species of Conservation Concern Species Evaluations (September 2019) (the USFS Report). The USFS Report is an assessment of the "best available science" and current status of species considered as potential species of conservation concern on the TBNG. It includes individual species evaluations and indicates which species on the TBNG could be adversely affected by changes the proposed plan amendment. The USFS Report concludes that 27 animal species and six plant species "could be subject to substantial adverse impacts or substantially lessened protections as a result of the plan amendment." Among these species are the Bald Eagle, Burrowing Owl and the Greater Sage-Grouse. For instance, the Report indicates key risk factors for the Bald Eagle and the Burrowing Owl include rodenticide application and recreational shooting that could lead to secondary rodenticide poisoning, lead poisoning, and accidental shooting. To mitigate these impacts, it suggests management actions to support the key ecological conditions. The actions recommended in the USFS Report include restricting and/or limiting these methods of control while the proposed plan amendment proposes to expand the use of lethal control methods. We recommend the Final EIS identify which mitigation measures recommended in the USFS Report are carried forward into the proposed plan amendment. For those mitigation measures specified by the Report that are not carried forward, we recommend more clearly explaining the scientific basis for those decisions, describing the expected impacts to species of conservation concern, and whether those impacts are consistent with TBNG desired conditions, goals and objectives.

Using the Report, the USFS prepared another document titled Biological Evaluation of Animal Species and Potential Animal Species of Conservation Concern (October 2019) (the BE). The BE serves as the effects analysis for the proposed alternatives in the Draft EIS. Our review noted instances where the Report identifies species that could experience "substantial adverse impacts or substantially lessened protections as a result of the plan amendment," while the BE arrives at the opposite conclusion. For instance, the Bald Eagle evaluation concluded "no substantial adverse impacts or substantially lessened protections as a result of the plan amendment" and the Burrowing Owl evaluation concluded "may adversely impact individuals but not likely to result in a loss of viability in the planning area, nor cause a trend toward Federal listing; no substantial adverse impacts or substantially lessened protections as a result of the plan amendment." Where there are apparent inconsistencies between the conclusions of the Report and the BE, we recommend the Final EIS include additional scientific support for the BE's conclusions. If supporting science is not available, consider including the mitigation measures identified in the Report in the selected alternative to avoid substantial adverse impacts for species of conservation concern.

Monitoring and Reporting

The 2015 Strategy cooperatively manages Black-Tailed Prairie Dog populations and their habitats through a

variety of tools that pose the least possible risk to people, property, and the long-term productivity and sustainability of grassland and prairie ecosystems. Monitoring and reporting components were included in the 2015 Strategy to evaluate the effects of implementation of the tools on meeting the purpose and need and these components were in addition to the general monitoring in the overarching TBNG Plan. The Proposed Action would eliminate the 2015 Strategy and the monitoring and reporting components were not carried forward to the proposed plan amendment. Recent prairie dog population declines along with the reduced protection measures in the Proposed Action compared to 2015 management direction appear to strengthen the case for monitoring the results of this Plan. We recommend the Final EIS include more specific monitoring and reporting components to assess the sustainability and productivity of grassland and prairie ecosystem components including, prairie dog populations, associated sensitive species and vegetation.