Data Submitted (UTC 11): 1/24/2020 10:00:00 AM
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Comments: Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the United States Forest Service (Forest Service) Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Thunder Basin National Grassland (TBNG) Plan Amendment. The DEIS was received in our office on October 14, 2019, followed by a summary and discussion on the Alternatives analyzed during a Cooperator Agency Meeting held on December 16, 2019. We understand that the Forest Service is considering four possible Alternatives within its Plan Amendment as described in the DEIS. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) provides the following comments on the DEIS in accordance with our statutory authorities under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq., ESA), the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 U.S.C. 703; MBTA), and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (16 U.S.C. 668; Eagle Act).

The Service has actively participated in the TBNG Working Group collaborative process over the past three years, and we appreciate the Forest Service's conservation efforts for many wildlife species on these unique lands. The TBNG is one of the few large grassland properties in federal ownership with extensive black-tailed prairie dog populations. Prairie dog concentrations as they exist at TBNG are exceedingly rare and are a haven for golden and bald eagles, other raptors, as well as mountain plovers, burrowing owls, swift fox, and other species of conservation concern. Of particular interest, TBNG is a site that has high potential to contribute to the recovery of the endangered black-footed ferret (ferret). While there are currently no immediate plans to reintroduce the ferret at TBNG, it may well be the one of best remaining undeveloped sites across the species' range in 12 western states, Mexico, and Canada that could significantly contribute to its recovery at the present time.

We understand that your consideration of various stakeholder interests at TBNG, as well as current vegetation and drought conditions, has largely prompted the need to revise the current TBNG Grassland Plan to address reduction of prairie dog populations while still potentially contributing to migratory bird conservation and endangered species recovery. We recognize that ecosystem health is of primary importance, and that all management objectives within the TBNG stem from this foundational priority including objectives for long-term population viability of native grasses, forbs and wildlife populations, as well as providing opportunities for domestic livestock production by grazing permittees.

All of the Alternatives in the DEIS provide mechanisms through which boundary control management facilitates maintenance of buffers to ensure that prairie dogs on Forest Service lands do not expand to, or encroach upon, adjacent private lands managed for livestock grazing. As stated in our February 8, 2019, letter regarding management areas and buffers within the TBNG, we encourage the Forest Service to incorporate multiple tools for use including buffers, boundary control, boundary adjustments, the use of geographic features and land exchanges into the development of a plan amendment to avoid and minimize expansion of prairie dog towns onto adjacent private lands where prairie dogs are not wanted.

While all Alternatives allow for the use of rodenticides as a means of controlling expansion of prairie dogs, Alternative 3 (Grassland-Wide) alone allows for the use of anticoagulant poisons (e.g., brand names Rozo![reg] and Kaput[reg]) in addition to other means of controlling prairie dogs. We understand that, under Alternative 3, anticoagulants (and fumigants) would be allowed in the boundary management zone only after three applications of zinc phosphide prove ineffective. The Service recognizes the need for, and supports, prairie dog control on the TBNG, and recognizes the challenges and importance of prairie dog control in the boundary management zone in particular. However, as stated in our letter of February 8, 2019, and three previous letters of 2017, 2014, and 2013 (enclosed, including references), the Service has substantial concerns regarding the use of anticoagulant rodenticides for prairie dog control including, but not limited to, brand names Rozol and Kaput, and their potential

impacts to migratory birds and ferrets.

While we will not provide another in-depth analysis here, we invite the Forest Service to review previous letters cited above, and references included therein, for details outlining our concerns regarding the use of anticoagulants and potential impacts to species falling under protection of Service authorities. To briefly summarize, of particular concern is secondary poisoning of nontarget species protected by the ESA, MBT A, and BG EPA, that continues to occur where anticoagulant rodenticides are used for prairie dog control. Although approved for use by the Environmental Protection Agency and some State government entities, the Service has observed that secondary poisoning of non-target species of conservation concern occurs and is largely due to a lack of compliance with label instructions in practice. Additionally, anticoagulant rodenticides are more expensive (if used according to label) and no more efficient than other products used to control rodents. Consequently, the Service recommends the use of less environmentally damaging alternatives to anticoagulant rodenticides. We recommend the current Forest Service policy of not authorizing the use of anticoagulant rodenticides on Forest Service lands continue in any revision of the TBNG Plan.

We recognize the importance that the Forest Service consider the needs of all affected stakeholders within the TBNG management area, and the desire to maximize the number of tools in the box in order to manage for healthy and sustainable populations of prairie dogs. Consequently, the Forest Service may select Alternative 3, or some other combination of existing Alternatives, that allows for the use of anticoagulants in controlling prairie dogs under certain conditions. Prior to their selection of any alternative that includes use of anticoagulants under any conditions, we recommend the Forest Service complete an economic analysis comparing the use and application (including disposal of carcasses) of anticoagulants compared with zinc phosphide- this analysis should be included in the Final EIS. We further recommend that the Forest Service analyze the effectiveness of using zinc phosphide in controlling prairie dogs compared with anticoagulants when labels of each type of poison are followed closely. Based on our review of the relevant literature and best available information, as stated in our previous letters outlined above, the Service has found that the use of zinc phosphide- when correctly applied- is at least as effective, and more economical to apply, than any anticoagulant product.

In the event that the Forest Service selects any alternative, or combination of alternatives, allowing the use of anticoagulants, we recommend the following:

1. Clearly define the meaning and criteria of the term " ineffective" as used in the statement included in Alternative 3: "Anticoagulants and fumigants allowed in the boundary management zone only after 3 applications of zinc phosphide prove ineffective."

The Forest Service should clearly define its management objective in advance of any treatment with rodenticide and articulate explicitly what it considers to be "effective" control of prairie dogs using zinc phosphide or other means within the boundary management zone.

2. Prior to treatment of prairie dogs with any rodenticide (zinc phosphide or any others), the Forest Service should develop a written protocol for all applicators to follow to ensure that a consistent approach is taken toward achieving management objectives described in #1 above. Further, all applicators should be required to document their use and application of all rodenticides in the field and provide these notes to the Forest Service after each application. Doing so will ensure that a consistent and effective approach to treatment is occurring, and that product labels are being followed closely, so that achievement of management objectives and "effectiveness" may readily be evaluated and definitively determined.

3. If the Forest Service approves the use of anticoagulants of any type, we recommend the following:

a) First, document the details of how and why tools that were used over the course of three years failed to achieve management objectives and thus were deemed "ineffective." Ensure that labels and Forest Service

protocols for use of zinc phosphide, for example, were followed correctly over the three years, based on a detailed review of field notes provided by applicators to the Fore st Service as outlined in #2 above.

b) Develop a written protocol for application of all anticoagulants, including explicit reiteration of all label requirements for application. Applicators should be required to document on a daily basis application of poisons per label as well as details of daily follow-up visits to treated sites for removal of dead prairie dogs for at least 21 days.

c) Consider applying for an incidental take permit for bald and golden eagles. As noted in some of the enclosed references, secondary poisoning of federally protected species continues to occur where anticoagulant toxicants are used for prairie dog control. Golden eagles and other raptors that prey on prairie dogs are very common on the TBNG and at risk of secondary poisoning if anticoagulants are used.

d) Consider the need for larger acreage of prairie dog occupied habitat due to increased edge effect when anticoagulant toxicants are used.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the TBNG Plan Amendment and for your consideration of our joint wildlife conservation interests. If you have any questions concerning this matter, please contact me directly at (307) 757-3707.

Enclosures (11)