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Title:

Comments: At the request of San Juan County Commission Chairman Willie Grayeyes, I am forwarding the Commission's letter regarding the Manti-LaSal Nat'l Forest Plan Revision (attached).

Please confirm receipt of the letter.

The San Juan County Commission appreciates the opportunity to provide comments for the Manti-LaSal Forest Plan revision. Much has changed in the 35 years since the existing Manti-LaSal Forest Plan was finalized and put into effect in 1986. The revised Forest Plan should incorporate and adapt current scientific data and information to address the new ecologic, social and economic pressures that the forest lands and resources face today, and will continue to face in the upcoming years.

The Manti-LaSal National Forest lands and resources are integral to the quality of life, health and welfare of San Juan County residents. The Abajos and LaSals, two of the three geographical areas of the Manti-LaSal National Forest, play a major role in the health, enjoyment, and public welfare of San Juan County residents. These lands and resources are used regularly by residents from across the county for hunting and fishing, recreation of many types, firewood gathering, family gatherings, traditional and cultural ceremonies, wildlife [bull] viewing and many more activities.

We have heard from constituents regarding their concerns about the effects of climate change on these forest resources. Climate change is clearly the most significant issue that has been identified, scientifically documented and studied since the 1986 Forest Plan was put into effect. The effects of climate change and the long-term drought we are experiencing in San Juan County should be emphasized in the new Forest Plan. Drier soils, stressed vegetation, wildfires (natural and human caused), stressed wildlife and wildlife habitat, decreasing volumes of and earlier melting snowpack, drier watersheds, dried up springs - all have direct, indirect and cumulative impacts on San Juan County residents' well-being and cultural traditions. The revised Forest Plan must prioritize the long-term sustainability of the forest lands and resources for future generations.

To ensure that decision-makers undertake a robust review and analysis of the management of forest lands and resources, taking into account the effects of climate change and drought, we urge the Forest Service to include the Conservation Alternative, submitted by conservation organizations with expertise in the Manti-LaSal's natural resources, as an alternative in the Environmental Impact Statement. Analyzing and comparing the Conservation Alternative (and its goals and guidelines) with the Forest Service's own draft plan is the best way to ensure that all the issues that San Juan County residents care deeply about are fully and openly addressed.

We emphasize that several San Juan County communities depend entirely on the forest's watersheds for their drinking water. In addition, many residents depend almost solely on the forest lands for hunting and wood gathering to provide sustenance for their families and heat for their homes. The Conservation Alternative proposes a conservative approach to managing these resources in order to sustain and maintain them taking into account climate change impacts.

The Abajos and LaSals are significant to a multitude of Tribal entities and native peoples. The significance of the irreplaceable and unique cultural and historic resources of the forest cannot be over-emphasized. These resources support ongoing traditional practices. Yet they are at risk from natural degradation and human-caused damages, whether intentional or accidental. The Conservation Alternative includes strong consultation and management prescriptions for these irreplaceable, non-renewable resources that are important to all residents of the County.

The increase in the number of recreationists visiting forest lands has become a growing concern. As the number as the number of recreationists have increased, so too, have the impacts to cultural resources, soils, vegetation, wildlife, streams and watersheds. The Conservation Alternative recognizes the benefits outdoor recreation provides for people's health and well-being, and includes guidelines to ensure resources are not destroyed or otherwise negatively affected by recreation activities.

Wildfires on forest lands are increasing in severity with climate change. Although fire is part of the natural process to maintaining a healthy forest, there are steps the Forest Service, in partnership with local communities and residents, can take to reduce the fire risk to forest resources, homes and human life. We urge the Forest Service to consider the guidelines discussed in the Conservation Alternative to improve partnerships with residents and communities, and fire-smart management of forest resources.

Thank you for your commitment to revising the outdated forest plan. We hope the new Plan will prioritize the changing environment, changing uses, and changing climate in all future management decisions. We want the forest's resources managed sustainably for the health and welfare of our communities and for future generations to enjoy. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this process and look forward to reviewing the Draft Plan and Environmental Impact Statement in the coming months.