

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 12/18/2023 7:00:00 AM

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Comments: Please accept this letter requesting at least a 30-day extension to the comment period to allow for substantive comments, rather than just form letters.

RE: Draft Environmental Assessment for the Thompson Divide Withdrawal Project

Dear Mr. Edwards:

The notice of the opening of the public comments on the first full day of Hannukah initiated a comment period that extends over Hannukah, Christmas, and the New Year's holidays. The comment period will close just a week after the holiday season ends. This raises the question of whether the Forest Service really wants to receive informed comments from the public. While the timing may work for Forest Service employees, who do not have much of a role during a comment period other than holding one public comment meeting, the timing does not seem to maximize good public input.

Western Energy Alliance (Alliance) is the leader and champion for independent oil and natural gas companies in the West. Working with a vibrant membership base for over 50 years, the Alliance stands as a credible leader, advocate, and champion of industry. Our expert staff, active committees, and committed board members form a collaborative and welcoming community of professionals dedicated to abundant, affordable energy and a high quality of life for all. The majority of independent producers are small businesses, with an average of fourteen employees.

In order to rectify the situation of holding a major comment period almost completely over the holiday season, we urge USFS to extend the comment period by at least 30 days. While USFS cites to 60,000 letters received during previous comment periods, the vast majority of these were form letters expressing support for the withdrawal, something that is easy to generate from canned talking points. If USFS wants to actually receive substantive comments on the EA and all supporting documents rather than just form letters, it will extend the comment period. To do otherwise indicates that this comment period is not part of a truly deliberative process. Thank you for considering this request.