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Organization: Holy Cross Cattlemen&#39;s Assoc.

Title: Membership Chairman

Comments: I have been contacted by some of our Holy Cross Cattlemen's Assoc. members with their concerns. We have 140 members spread between Garfield, Pitkin, Eagle Counties and into DeBeque of Mesa County in Colorado and in the area of Sweetwater Lake. 89 are producer/cattlemen members and 51 are contributing members-- businesses or individuals who value the importance of cattle and ranching for community and the ecosystem services livestock provide on the landscape. Ranchers depend on their public land permits to continue operating. If ranchers cannot continue to operate the ranch is likely to be sold and has a high chance of being developed and the ecosystem services like wildlife habitat and connectivity disappears. For longer periods of time during the year we are providing wildlife habitat as recreation seems to have an unquenchable thirst to be on the landscape no matter the impact.

Members contacting me expressed the following concerns which list some of the permits that will be impacted. The permits are the Lake Creek, and Deep Creek permit. There are 5 families on the permit with around 700 hd. There are only 2 public access points for the permit both in the Sweetwater drainage. The access point at the lake is the only all-weather access. The area is circled on the attached map. The trail that used for access and for moving cattle is also one of the main trails from the southeast corner of the lake. It is currently where the campground on the southeast side of the lake is. We have a drift gate about 100 yds up that trail to keep cattle from getting back to the lake. Our concern is that if that gate is left open, the cattle end up at the lake and with it being a park we have no containment facilities to either load them in or out; or a place to put them to minimize human livestock conflict. Ideally the best option would be a containment area with a loading facility. There is also an open permit/forest reserve on Sweetwater above the lake that has no access except from the north side of the lake. If that reserve is needed to be used there needs to be a loading facility there also and It should be large enough to accommodate tractor trailer rigs. The one on the southeast side does not have to be as large but is more important as we use it both as a turnout and a gathering place in the fall.

In short, we need to make sure that we have uninhibited access, no reduction of numbers, or other added restriction; and a place to contain and load cattle out. You can see on the map our permit area includes a lot of the park area. There is no mention in the NEPA document about our ability to continue our historical use. This has been brought up numerous times over the last 2 yrs. and they said they were working on it internally, yet nothing ever came out in the document. One other point is not to name it a state park, we don't need the publicity that that brings. We are trying to keep the scale close to what it has historically been. I think they are looking into that. So far, they have verbally agreed to that.

We ask you to consider the above concerns and include them in any environmental and operating assessments and documents including NEPA and follow through to make sure that permittees are not impacted with the consequences of losing more. Our permit is the Lake Creek, Deep Creek permit. There are 5 families on the permit with around 700 hd. There are only 2 public access points for the permit both in the Sweetwater drainage. The access point at the lake is the only all-weather access. I circled the area on the map. The trail that we use is also one of the main trails from the southeast corner of the lake. It is currently where the campground on the southeast side of the lake is. We have a drift gate about 100 yds up that trail to keep cattle from getting back to the lake. Our concern is that if that gate is left open, the cattle end up at the lake and with it being a park we have no containment facilities to either load them in or out; or a place to put them to minimize human livestock conflict. Ideally the best option would be a containment area with a loading facility. There is also an open permit/forest reserve on sweetwater above the lake that has no access except from the north side of the lake. If that reserve is needed to be used there needs to be a loading facility there also and It should be large enough to accommodate tractor trailer rigs. The one on the southeast side does not have to be as large but is more important as we use it both as a turnout and a gathering place in the fall. In short, we need to make sure that we have uninhibited

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We are asking that you include these concerns in the NEPA document and follow through to ensure no more agricultural land is put at risk from all the pressures livestock and ag producers face. American Farmland Trusts - Farms Under Threat reported, "If recent trends continue, 417,500 acres of Colorado's farmland and ranchland will be paved over, fragmented, or converted to uses that jeopardize agriculture by 2040. That represents an area more than four times larger than the city of Denver. In the worst-case scenario of runaway sprawl, Colorado could lose as much as 525,300 acres of farmland. 53% of the conversion will occur on Colorado's best land."

We ask you to take this into consideration for not only the decisions around Sweetwater Lake but in any future decisions you make that would have impacts on grazing permits and permittees. We also ask for open and transparent communication and acknowledgement of how important the private ranchlands are to the entire ecosystem and the risk that is inherent if grazing permits are negatively impacted in any manner.