

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 10/1/2015 12:00:00 AM

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21Sept2015

To: USFS Landscape Team Magdalena Ranger District

From: James M. Travers, D.V.M., President, Whitehouse Ranch Inc. Datil, NM

I am writing in regards to the present study regarding the suitability of lands within my grazing allotment that are being looked at as possible Wilderness Act areas. It is my understanding that giving these areas a Wilderness classification would prevent all mechanical devices from being used in these areas. This would, I believe, make motorized vehicle use including tractors and excavating equipment illegal to operate within these areas. I believe this classification and the ramifications of the mechanical restrictions would be seriously deleterious to the area and it's surroundings. I believe that Wilderness classification would limit the ability to manage this area for wildlife, timber and natural beauty.

The fire suppression practices and European settlement practices of the last century have changed the flora and fauna of the Datil Mountains from the pre-Columbian era. The elimination of buffalo and migratory grazing caused a change in forage harvest characteristics. These changes have been addressed with domestic livestock grazing but less intensive and less migratory patterns caused changes in the grass to broadleaf ratios due to continuous and specific grazing of more desirable species. This caused the overproduction of some less desirable species such as rabbit brush to overpopulate specific areas. Forest fire suppression restricted ground water availability to grass and broad leaf species causing excessive erosion.

Although the above paragraph only touches on the changes in the natural environment in the Datil mountains, the two situations mentioned above can account for the need of human and mechanical intervention in this area to manage the resultant changes in the environment caused by European settlement. The infinite repercussions of these two situations are most likely incomprehensible. Mechanical augmentation of grazing through management of invasive weed species has been shown to help rejuvenate prairie flora diversity on private lands. These practices are needed on the federal lands.

Mechanical thinning of timber to manage timber stands was a given when fire suppression was instituted in the twentieth century. It was only put in bad favor due to transient political policies enforced in the last few decades. The forests were allowed to become overpopulated in order to have a continuous supply of timber in the area. Now that the timbering industry has been destroyed in the area, timber management is an expensive but necessary practice to maintain the ground water levels and prevent super fires that have proven to be extremely damaging throughout poorly managed forests throughout the western United States and Canada.

The Wilderness classification would make all of the management practices illegal. The unnatural forest density, although aesthetic to some, is not sustainable in the New Mexican climate. It is not a matter of if the forest will burn, it is a matter of when. Experience has shown that overly thick forests burn to the point of soil sterilization resulting in unprecedented erosion and poor regrowth potential. Overly populated forests use up ground water that is needed by lower vegetation. It is the lower vegetation such as grasses and broad leaves that inhibit soil erosion. It has been shown on private land that decreasing tree density increases lower vegetation and inhibits erosion.

Springs and natural water in the area has also decreased within the last 100 years. This makes human intervention in the form of dirt tanks, wells and spring development necessary for wildlife and livestock watering. These are practices that need mechanical intervention at this time. Again, Wilderness

classification will not allow these practices to occur.

As a permittee in the Datils for close to fifteen years, I have seen and appreciated the amount of use that this permit area gets from the public. Most of the public use revolves around hunting, antler gathering and pinion nut harvest by locals and out of state visitors. Few if any that I have consulted with are in favor of Wilderness classification. The resultant changes in road use would make 90% of the forest permit unavailable to the people that are using it now.

I have noticed that water levels in most of the 24 wells that I have water rights to on and around the permit have fallen over the last 40 years. All wells produce less water than they did when first permitted and registered. It is also readily evident on the permit that the vast number of invasive trees are less than fifty years old. The recent overgrowth of pinion and juniper in the area is most likely the reason for the decrease in ground water. Photos of the area from the early twentieth century show a much less forested ecosystem than what is apparent today. Wilderness classification will destroy any chance of returning the area to a more natural and balanced environment.

Eventually with the use of mechanical intervention, the forest may be able to be maintained more naturally with fire and grazing. At this point in time, we need to cope with the problems that our predecessors have created. Wilderness classification will not allow the necessary steps needed to return the area to it's previous state of balance.

There is also the obvious concern that I have as a permittee. That concern centers around the ability to maintain and improve the multitude of improvements that are already present and active on the permit. These improvements include but are not limited to 26 wells, 30 dirt tanks (40 more in the NEPA plan) two pipelines, close to 80 miles of fence, miles of approved and unapproved roads as well as multiple wildlife umbrella tanks. As grazing permittee, these improvements are more or less my responsibility.

The Datil mountains contain quite a bit of private land. The Whitehouse Ranch Inc., of which I am president, owns multiple parcels throughout the permit. These parcels are important to the grazing and are all used as temporary domiciles for myself and my workers as well as water and management sites for cattle. The access to these areas is vital to the continuation of their usefulness. The improvements necessary for the usefulness of these areas predicate the use of motorized vehicles. This vehicular use would be jeopardized by Wilderness Classification.

Before I came to New Mexico, I was a ranch veterinarian and also a part time Texas Parks and Wildlife veterinarian in central Texas. I was involved in rehabilitation and management of wildlife in my area. This experience has shown me how important hunting can be to prey species control as well as predator control. The balance of native species is greatly augmented by hunters. The state also gets an incredible financial reward from wildlife management. I believe that the hunting income to the state and the amount of management benefit we get from local hunters in the Datils will decline drastically if Wilderness classification is instituted. Modern hunters rely on their vehicles more than some of us feel is good, but never the less they do. Decreasing vehicular access to the area will decrease hunting pressure at least in the near future.

These are just a few of the reasons that I oppose any Wilderness classification for areas 03 SK 10-13 in the Cibola Forest.

Sincerely

James M. Travers, D.V.M.