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First name: John

Last name: Eschrich

Organization: Eschrich Trust

Title: Senior Trustee

Comments: To: Powder River Ranger District, Bighorn National Forest

Re: Pole Creek Vegetation Management Project

February 20, 2023

I am writing in regards to the Pole Creek Vegetation Management Project that is proposed for the Bighorn National Forest. I have some thoughts and concerns about proposed clearcutting, thinning, aspen regeneration areas that have been planned along Hazelton Road and Billy Creek Road.

I am the Senior Trustee of the Eschrich trust. My family has been fortunate enough to be property owners on Hazelton Road for over 100 years. In that time, we have seen various projects that have been completed by the U.S. Forest and State Forestry with varying degrees of success in this portion of the Bighorn National Forest. We have strived to manage our property for healthy, sustainable forest and protection of wildlife resources. In 2013 I became the first certified tree farmer in the Big Horns. With State Forestry we established a long-range stewardship plan. I encouraged others to do the same. Our plan has included clearcuts and thinned areas which we have closely monitored. I have walked our property and the surrounding forest areas extensively. It seems to me that this portion of the over 1 million acres of the Bighorn National Forest has seen more than its fair share of vegetation management. There have been previous aspen regeneration projects along the Billy Creek Rd, various clearcutting and thinning projects along Poison Creek, Dull Knife, and the Hazelton Peak areas. I question if this area is repeatedly chosen for these projects simply due to the ease of access.

Previous Aspen regeneration projects along the Billy Creek Road (fenced in areas near BC03 and BC04) have shown little to no regrowth of any trees. Further south of this area there have been mature trees felled in cross hatch patterns that were to facilitate new growth that seems to have only resulted in cross hatched deadfall with no new growth.

Clearcutting certainly has its benefits and seems best to me when it is used discreetly without causing vast areas of moonscapes. My concern is that the all-encompassing designation of clearcutting without consideration to water sources, erosion, existing stands of Aspens or other tree species (spruce, ponderosa pine, etc.) seems incomplete. There should also be concern about the large amount of weeds and thistle that often occur in the clearcut areas as well as in the slash pile areas and staging areas.

Previous timber sale and harvesting projects along the Hazelton Road have resulted in less than desirable execution in my opinion. The thinning that occurred along the Hazelton Road from Highway 16 resulted in blowdowns, poor esthetics, and wasteful burning of the huge slash pile of post/pole sized timber.

My biggest concern in the areas near our property are the loss of elk breeding and calving grounds. I strongly disagree with the proposed thinning and clear cutting labeled as BC01, BC02, BC03, and BC04. I believe that historical wind patterns should be considered due the great risk of blow downs after thinning and clearcutting.

The scope of this project is huge. It is my sincere hope that the thinning and clearcutting along Highway 16 will not detract from it being designated as a scenic route.

I appreciate your time and consideration in regards to my concerns and objections to portions of this proposed project.

John Eschrich

Eschrich Trust