June 19, 2019 revised December 6, 2021

RE: Bridgeport Scoping letter on Cameron Canyon, Dunderberg, Summers Meadow, and Tamarack grazing allotment proposal in Mono County, California.

Comments e-mailed to: comments-intermtn-humboldt-toiyabe-bridgeport@fs.fed.us.

Leeann Murphy

Aaron Coogan/2021

Acting District Ranger

Bridgeport Ranger District

HC 62 Box 1000

Bridgeport, CA, 93517

RE: Cameron Canyon, Dunderberg, Summers Meadow, and Tamarack grazing allotments – and the HTNF Bridgeport RD segmented, piecemeal series of actions related to these allotments - in violation of NEPA.EA

https://www.fs.usda.gov/nfs/11558/www/nepa/104868\_FSPLT3\_4282282.pdf

Dear USFS Bridgeport Ranger District and Ranger Murphy,

WildLands Defense is submitting these comments on the Bridgeport Ranger District (BRD) environmental assessment (EA) addressing livestock grazing on the Cameron Canyon, Dunderberg, Summers Meadow, and Tamarack grazing allotments.

We request that the Forest Service prepare an EIS. Re-imposing ecologically damaging grazing of privately owned livestock for nearly free on sensitive public lands, watersheds and irreplaceable wildlife habitat is highly controversial. It also flies in the face of actions necessary to protect public lands from climate change stress. See Beschta et al. 2012. Now this latest dec 2021 twist where the FS schemes to amend Sage-grouse wildlife habitat protections in the forest plan just proves how poorly thought out this settlement has been. The FS stupidly committed to something illegal. Now it is scheming to legalize its stupid action. This is WRONG. This habitat is to be managed for the Bi-state Sage-grouse population that is sliding to extinction – and BSSG habitat should NOT be sacrificed for other species. It is long past time to end grazing by this ranching operation. The FS can readily cancel grazing permits. Please provide detailed information on the current footprint of this grazing operation on all federal lands.

Has the FS “treated” PJ and/or sage in this landscape? If so, when, what was done and how extensive are all existing and proposed/foreseeable PJ deforestation and and/or sagebrush thinning projects across the Bridgeport RD?

We request that the Forest permanently Close the allotments, remove all existing livestock facilities whose adverse impacts have never been studied in a hard look NEPA analysis, and do NOT construct even more damaging livestock facilities in this landscape. What is the current adverse ecological footprint of existing livestock facilities across all USFS and BLM BSSG habitat? This is necessary to understand all adverse direct indirect and cumulative effects – and synergistic effects – of building even more weed-causing, habitat-depleting, West Nile virus fostering livestock projects. There are also a host of lethal fences, The FS must conduct an honest science-based hard look assessment at the beneficial effects of closure. We are very concerned about the effects of both sheep and cattle grazing on bighorn sheep and other terrestrial and aquatic biota, riparian areas, cultural sites, upland vegetation communities microbiotic crusts, and public uses and enjoyment of these USFS lands. The allotments need to be closed, in particular to buffer vital wildlife habitats, riparian and upland vegetation communities and the myriad species that depend on them from climate change stresses and to increase ecological resiliency. See Fleischner 1994, Belsky et al. 1999, Belsky and Gelbard 2000, Steinfeld et al 2006, Catlin et al. 2011, Beschta et al. 2012, Reisner et al. 2013, Connelly et al. 2019, Williamson et al. 2019, ISGS Remington et al. Report on serious GRSG declines describes climate stresses on GRSG habitats and continued population declines.

The FS stated:

The project area covers approximately 22,926 acres. It was historically grazed by domestic sheep. The FS proposes imposing BOTH sheep and cattle, which will be highly destructive to riparian areas and watersheds.

Mapping shows there are allotments interspersed between the lands at issue. Full and detailed analysis of the manner and effect of livestock grazing on those lands, and the ecological conditions, land health, monitoring data, compliance, capability/suitability analysis of those areas must also be fully examined – just as this all must be assessed for the subject lands during the period when grazing took place.

Typically, domestic sheep operations roam and spread weeds over vast areas of public lands. This use is often accompanied by scorched earth predator killing. What is the complete public lands grazing footprint of the permittee that the FS cut this settlement deal that this EA is based on with? THIS current NEPA analysis must be fully responsive to public input and concerns – because the pubic was shut out of the settlement deal where the USFS sacrificed the health of the lands and watersheds and sensitive species and bighorn habitats.

The FS states: The project area includes a small amount of designated critical Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep (SNBS) habitat, which was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1999. At that time, the Forest Service began consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) on domestic sheep grazing authorizations on these allotments to identify management options and operational controls to reduce the risk of contact and subsequent disease transmission between domestic sheep and SNBS.

Full and detailed analysis of the conditions of habitats and populations including population viability for Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep and all other sensitive, important and imperiled species must be undertaken. Please also provide detailed analysis of potential habitat areas for bighorns if domestic sheep grazing was not taking place in this region. Please develop an alternative in this EA that conducts such analysis and focuses on expanding areas that are not grazed. What area of USFS or other lands free of domestic sheep grazing and trailing are needed to enable the bighorn sheep population to expand to the level where they would not require ESA protection?

The FS stated: “The BRD and permittee engaged in cooperative planning that resulted in grazing authorizations for the allotments that contained multiple control measures to prevent contact between domestic sheep and SNBS. Initially the BRD recognized that owing to the gregarious nature of domestic sheep bands, they could be herded and were unlikely to scatter throughout the allotment, and so they prescribed which areas within the allotments could be grazed and when that grazing could occur. The permittee provided training and instructions to their employees that included detailed steps to be taken if SNBS approached the band of domestic sheep, or if sheep strayed from the band. No contact between SNBS and domestic sheep was recorded.

This is a very poor way to deal with these conflicts – as there is so much chance of lethal disease contact. It demonstrates the political power of the livestock industry - as does the settlement deal the USFS cut -holding public lands wildlife hostage to damaging grazing by sheep and cattle interests.

The FS stated: The grazing permits expired and were not reauthorized. This occurred on the Jordan Basin unit of the Dunderberg allotment in 2004 and on the remainder of the Dunderberg allotment in 2006, on the Summers Meadow allotment in 2005, and on the Cameron Canyon and Tamarack allotments in 2009. The sheep grazing permits for these allotments were subsequently cancelled, in 2010 on the Summers Meadow allotment, and in 2014 on the Dunderberg, Cameron Canyon, and Tamarack allotments. The decision to cancel the permits was solely driven by the SNBS issue. Otherwise, desired conditions and objectives were being met, and the impacts of domestic sheep grazing on other resources were at acceptable levels.

Please provide full and detailed information on all of the claims made in the above statement. When was an ecological evaluation conducted across the affected lands and watersheds? Was there water quality monitoring in areas suffering sheep grazing? What weeds invaded sheep-disturbed sites? What was the effect of sheep grazing on habitats and populations of sesnitve species and their viability? Etc.

The FS stated: In 2014, the permittee who had been operating on those allotments filed a suit against the BRD for damages sustained to their livestock production by the cancelling of those grazing permits. A 2015 settlement agreement between permittee and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, gave the permittee preference for cattle grazing permits on the Dunderberg, Cameron Canyon, and Tamarack allotments if an EA completed by the Forest Service supported conversion of the allotments from domestic sheep to cattle. The agreement also included a provision granting the permittee the right to submit a new application for domestic sheep permits for these allotments should such permits become available in the future (paragraph 3). The BRD included the Summers Meadow allotment in the analysis because it is an integral part of the proposed action.

The FS stated: “National Forest System land is an important source of livestock forage …”. This demonstrates the need for an EIS here to fully detail ALL of adverse socioeconomic impacts of livestock grazing/trailing/facilities/predator killing on public lands – from polluted water, loss of sustainable perennial water flows, soil erosion, weed infestation and spread and subsequent toxic herbicide use, predator killing disrupting ecological processes, wildlife habitat damaged/lost/destroyed, recreational uses and enjoyment lost/harmed, climate costs - including loss of ability of land to buffer climate stress, loss of carbon sequestration, etc.

WLD opposes the proposals to graze cows and/or sheep, the modification of allotment boundaries, the highly uncertain loose and controversial “flexibility” that includes occupancy rates, season of use, and grazing management strategies, grazing during harmful spring and early summer periods when sensitive species are nesting/birthing /caring for young, hot season grazing on riparian areas, etc. – and now in 2021 we also oppose the serious adverse effects of building even more damaging cow facilities in BSSG habitats. These alone and combined will cause significant adverse direct, indirect and cumulative impacts to the environment. We oppose the livestock water developments, “occupancy rates” and other harmful elements of the proposal. The full adverse ecological impacts of livestock facilities, salting, supplement use, sheep camps etc. must be fully disclosed and limited. This all causes intensive disturbance, irreversible weeds resulting in toxic herbicide use, damaged/destroyed/fragmented sensitive species habitats, dense areas of manure, loss of public recreational opportunities, etc.

The proposed forage appears to be greatly exaggerated. What data and models on production, soils, capability and suitability, and what assumptions and metrics, were applied? What rates of soil erosion? Where are all moderately or highly erodible soils, and how much soil loss is caused by running a herd of a thousand domestic sheep across a 50 degree slope in these soils? What is the soil replacement rate? What magnitude of conflicts with wildlife habitat needs and maintenance of viable populations of sensitive, important and imperiled species? What weight of livestock was used in any forage calculations?

The proposed expensive fencing will be greatly harmful to many sensitive and important wildlife species. See Fleishcner 1994, Freilich 2003. Minturff et al. 20w0. See also Rosenbeg et al, 2019 describing serious declines in migratory birds. Birds and bats collide with fences and die. Livestock concentrate and trail near fences, causing significant disturbance. Water developments drone wildlife, gut natural springs and destroy them forever, create sources for mosquitoes that may transmit West Nile virus, etc. Areas where they are placed become seas of stinking manure, weed expanses, etc. and wildlife habitat is fragmented and seriously degraded.

The FS states: “Grazing Management Strategies. The allotments would be grazed under a simple deferred or rest rotation strategy. Adjustments would be made as necessary to the timing, intensity, and duration of grazing use to attain desired conditions. Strategies would be designed to incorporate the following guidelines:

* Do not graze any one pasture twice in the same grazing season.
* Vary the time of year livestock are in any one unit over several years.
* Provide periodic rest when possible.
* Limit the amount of time cattle are in any area so as to minimize impacts of grazing regrowth.
* Provide adequate time for growth prior to grazing or for regrowth after livestock have been removed.
* Do not allow for multiple entries into a given pasture within a season unless necessary for trailing …

There are so many problems with this scheme --- “flexibility”, incessant trailing and BSSG and other wildlife habitat disturbance, stray animals, carrion, rugged steep terrain that restricts and constricts movement causing livestock to intensively use and beat out any relatively less steep area or path to move through which causes particular damage to drainage networks, the lack of cutting stocking to accommodate “rest” – and of course the fact that herds of domestic livestock congregating on arid lands are not native and are highly damaging to the Sierra Nevada ecosystem.

The grazing standards and use levels (copied below) are unclear, and are not adequate to protect watersheds, riparian areas, and sensitive species habitats, including potential Bi-state sage-grouse habitat. It is madness to propose impose grazing on BSSG habitat, given the low numbers of the birds, and the great need to expand the population. Under this scheme, thousands of sheep or hundreds of cows could stumble all over BSSG nests, devour the forbs that produce the insects that chicks need to survive and trample and grossly pollute meadows, as well as devour shrubs that provide crucial nesting cover as well as winter habitats.

ANY standards must be triggers for livestock removal, not “end of season” because extreme damage can be done to areas grazed in spring, early summer that may regrow.

We are greatly concerned at the supposed rest and rotation that has bene described, because many areas are steep, rugged and soils/veg are not suitable for earlier season grazing especially on north and east faces. This is a highly complex landscape, and soils/veg/habitat can be rapidly damaged by thousand+ pound cows or many thousands of sheep hoofs.

*Meadow Areas*

According to SNFPA, grazing would be managed to leave a 4-inch stubble height in meadows that are in Functioning (late seral) condition or a 6-inch stubble height in meadows that are in Functioning at Risk (early seral) condition. Degraded meadows (Non-Functioning) receive total rest from grazing.

*Riparian Areas*

The SNFPA limits utilization of woody riparian species to 20 percent. Disturbance to streambanks and natural lake and pond shorelines is limited to 20 percent of the stream reach or natural lake and pond shorelines. The Bi-State Amendment directs that utilization on herbaceous and shrub species be less than 35 percent in riparian and wet meadow habitats.

*Upland Areas*

The Toiyabe LRMP limits livestock utilization of herbaceous species in Functioning upland sagebrush and mountain brush sites to 45 percent. Utilization is limited to 35 percent on upland sites classified as Functioning at Risk and 10 percent on sites classified as Non-Functioning. Utilization of woody upland species, such as sagebrush, aspen and bitterbrush, is limited to 40 percent in Functioning sites, 30 percent in Functioning at Risk sites, and 20 percent in Non-Functioning sites. The Bi-State Amendment directs that utilization on shrubs be less than 35 percent in upland sagebrush habitats, and that utilization on herbaceous species be less than 45 percent (mountain big sagebrush communities) or 35 percent (black sagebrush, Wyoming and basin big sagebrush communities).

**DESIRED CONDITIONS**

The desired conditions for the Dunderberg and Cameron Canyon allotments will be:

1. Rangelands will be in satisfactory condition (1986 LRMP p., IV-4).
2. Riparian areas and meadows will be in late seral condition (2004 SNFPA, p. 42).

3. Rangelands in the project area that provide Bi-State greater sage-grouse habitat will meet the desired habitat conditions at the landscape scale (Bi-State Amendment p. 37-38).

The Amendment was greatly inadequate to protect the declining BSSG population. Recent Court ruling found the USFWS acted in illegally in relying on it.

Have there been vegetation treatments in this landscape? If so, what treatments and when, and what have their impacts been?

Please provide all stream and spring flow data for all periods of time – as the loss of sustainable flows is crucial to understanding loss of BSSG brood rearing habitats – and livestock water developments grazing degradation, harmful cow facilities and climate stress all feed into this.

Please provide detailed mapping and analysis of all BSSG habitats and lek count numbers for all periods of time for which records have been kept,. How viable is the current population, and what is the population trend?

The FS described: **TERRESTRIAL WILDLIFE**

Livestock grazing may affect terrestrial wildlife populations or their associated habitat. Livestock grazing has the potential to transmit disease from cattle to SNBS, and portions of the Dunderberg allotment are included in designated critical habitat. The project area also provides nesting habitat for bi-state greater sage-grouse and lies within 4-mile lek buffer zones. However, there are no known leks in the project area. The project area also includes potential habitat for flammulated owl, northern goshawk, bald eagle, great gray owl, willow flycatcher, mountain quail, American marten, Townsend’s western big-eared bat, spotted bat.

There MUST be multi-year systematic baseline studies conducted to determine the use and quality and quantity of habitats for native biota here. We can find no such info in this latest 2021 scoping notice, either.

**FISHERIES AND AMPHIBIANS**

No special-status fish species occur in the project area, though there are populations of brook, rainbow, and brown trout. There is no occupied Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog or Yosemite toad habitat in the project area, though potential habitat is present for both species. Livestock grazing may affect fish or amphibian wildlife populations or their associated habitats directly or via water-quality effects.

The great importance of this area to many rare and important species and the info in the notice referencing livestock impacts to soils, watersheds, etc. demonstrates why an EIS is essential, and why allowing any grazing here is a an ecologically harmful and destructive action. BSSG, Sierra Nevada Yellow-legged frog, Yosemite toad all have potential habitat here. The lands should remain closed to grazing and habitats here used for species recovery. Full and detailed analysis of habitat conditions in the landscape, populations, trends, etc. for all sensitive species must be fully disclosed. Intensive baseline inventories must be conducted

We strongly oppose the latest segmented action from 2021 – and that is to amend the Forest Plan for some greatly harmful cow water troughs.

It is clear an EIS must be prepared for this whole project. If the FS had had any kind of baseline and proper management whatsoever – it would not have gotten itself into this 2021 mess.

We are also greatly concerned at the existing grazing conditions across the Bridgeport RD, and the massive vegetation treatments taking place as we observed in 2021 site visits – such as the Marine Warfare massive deforestation scheme that threatens a host of native biota, the extremely abusive BLM grazing taking place in the Bodie Hills, and extensive highly degraded USFS grazed sites. It is clear from our observations of the domestic sheep being run all over “treatments” in the Marine War area, and from our observations of cow grazing riparian impacts on the HTNF that both agencies are greatly mismanaging livestock across the Bridgeport region and across BSSG habitats.

We are also concerned at ever-increasing mining schemes and potential geothermal projects in this area. Full assessment must be provided.

Sincerely,

Katie Fite

Public lands director

WildLands Defense

PO Box 125

Boise, ID 83701