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Comments: Forest Plan Revision Ideas

On behalf of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association and Colorado Public Lands Council, we offer the following perspectives and guidelines as the BLM advances through their planning process for the GMUG.

FLPMA

The review and subsequent plan must meet the regulatory mandate of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976 [hellip] specifically, the multiple use and sustainable yields clauses. In authoring FLPMA, Congress recognized the value of our public lands and wanted to ensure their ownership by the public. In doing so, Congress also wanted to ensure broad public use and benefit from these lands to include, but not limited to; energy production, recreation, livestock grazing, timber, etc., all the while balancing the preservation of natural resources. In concept, this is the term commonly related as multiple use. FLPMA further defines this concept as the "management of the public lands and their various resource values so that they are utilized in combination that will best meet the present and future needs of the American people."

IF the core tenants of FLPMA are ignored, the FS will risk irreparable resource impacts on public, state and private lands through narrow, if at all, consideration of associated resource conditions and implications; coupled with running contrary to state and local laws, rules and plans designed to address resource preservation at the local and state levels.

Landscape Scale Management

Local expertise has proven to better understand and have knowledge of local land use plans, regulations and laws. The plan must defer to local field office boundaries,. While the websee the value in Landscape Scale planning to allow for consistency of regulatory implementation, the approach of removing local field office planning through a prescriptive coordination between field offices is a preferred methodology.

Public Involvement

While public involvement is appreciated, and actually a needed change in planning; the lack of standards, criteria and assessment for the quality and type of information being offered is a glaring omission in planning. Furthermore, these omissions will create immeasurable expense through evaluation of submissions that likely will yield a haphazard approach toward verification and validation[hellip] thus jeopardizing the quality information being proffered by well-intentioned stakeholders. The resulting factors of this incomplete offering in the plan will lead to legal disputes and delays.

Best Available Science

The FS asserts that planning processes will allow them to improve the quality of their science and data. It is

commonly stated by the FS that the best available scientific information is "accurate, reliable, unbiased and not compromised through corruption or falsification; and is useful to its intended users". Again, the process does not offer standards, criteria and assessment for the quality and type of information being evaluated.

The Data Quality Act or Information Quality Act has been under great scrutiny recently due to the broad interpretation of its guidance. The plan offers an opportunity to further clarify the implementation of the Quality Act in order to ensure efficient and accurate acceptance of the best available science.

The Quality Act requires that each Federal agency issue guidelines "ensuring and maximizing the quality, objectivity, utility and integrity of information disseminated by the agency...". Furthermore, the agency must "establish administrative mechanisms allowing affected persons to seek and obtain correction of information maintained and disseminated by the agency that does not comply with the guidelines issued[hellip]"

The Quality Act has been widely debated in court proceedings due to challenges on the grounds that the information quality requirements are not being met. The lack of structure in determining acceptable citizen science will further substantiate legal allegations against the FS, which in turn will harm permitted users.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern

We do not support the special treatment of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) during the planning assessment period. The Congressional multiple use standard required in FLPMA is violated by the inclusion of the ACEC process. Rather, we believe any references should be eliminated.

General Observations Related to Grazing as a Threat:

Any determinations throughout the plan that livestock grazing is disruptive or causing landscape concerns, including range condition and water quality is of concern and likely unfounded. We do not find adequate data-based observations that substantiate these claims, and further finds the claims disproportionate in their overall representation in this document. CCA/PLC's findings indicate that BLM must take corrective action in the plan to reevaluate grazing, as the preponderance of the literature and regulatory community has - either "proper" or "improper" grazing. The determination lies within the analysis at a local level and is substantiated with a valid monitoring protocol, rather than the predetermination approach used in this plan.

We would acknowledge that certain livestock grazing practices may cause degradation to resources at a localized level. The responsibility of livestock grazers and BLM is to determine, isolate and correct these grazing practices[hellip]again at the local level. In all cases, grazing practices are evaluated on local ecological conditions[hellip]therefore a one-size-fits-all approach, as is being taken by this plan, does not exist. Rather, the overriding theme of the literature indicates that locally monitored, evaluated and managed herbaceous resources are complimentary to grazing and other species.

Land Health Assessments or Similar Approaches

Land Health Assessments or similar approaches that are utilized to make determinations that will ultimately affect the ecological function of the lands in question. Assessments are often based on Land Health Assessments (LHA) and short-term trends. According to Pyke et.al. management should not be changed solely on the findings of this approach, but this approach may be used in conjunction with quantitative monitoring data that do provide a temporal assessment of trend. LHA was developed as a tool for conducting a moment-in-time qualitative assessment of rangeland status. LHA provides a snapshot of ecosystem status relative to an expected status for lands within the identified ecological site. In addition, developers of LHA indicate that management should not be changed solely on the findings of LHA alone, but in concert with long-term quantitative monitoring data that do provide trend data. LHA does not determine the cause of the assessment. The LHA interpretation process is the critical link between observations of indicators and determining the degree of departure from a reference condition for the range. This degree of departure is the critical component of determining LHA.

Not meeting LHA standards does not take into account ecological site soil and hydrology. Specifically, research from the University of Wyoming shows that every acre will not meet the guidelines because of the limitations of the soil and timing of precipitation. Research has never determined what percentage of the landscape has to meet the guidelines to meet the species needs. There is tremendous ecological variation naturally across the landscape and this variation lends itself to areas not meeting guidelines. Range science will indicate that soil constraints will determine site potential.

To characterize reduced resource quality as reflected in LHA objectives and to extrapolate across to likely negatively impacting any specific resource attribute is not the appropriate use of LHA. Allotments cannot meet LHA objectives for numerous reasons outside of livestock grazing. Statements that indicate that allotments or areas are not meeting LHA objectives indicate that habitat conditions are likely degraded and that domestic livestock grazing is contributing to these conditions are outside the scope of use of LHA.

Species of Concern

Managed livestock grazing programs have the potential to maintain habitat diversity and quality for species. For example, research shows that grazed lands produce forb growth and are preferred to non-grazed lands by greater sage-grouse (Evans 1986). Additionally, research shows that nesting cover (under-canopy vegetation) remains adequate with up to 40 percent utilization levels and is not substantially diminished until later in the grazing season, thus indicating that a variety of grazing regimes may be implemented without adversely affecting nesting (France et al). In areas of high production, utilization in excess of 40 percent will still result in adequate nesting cover. Grazing systems should be implemented and managed to comply with the respective resource area management. Site-localized, long-term trend monitoring should be the basis for determining compliance with management plans. Utilization percentages or stubble-height measurements, set forth in a formula and applicable west-wide throughout any species range, are not effective tools for adaptive management. Adequate residual plant cover must be determined by short-term and long-term monitoring, which includes accounting for various environmental conditions.

Sound scientific research indicates that grazing is beneficial to flora and fauna in multiple ways. Grazing reduces the instances and severity of wildfires (Launchbaugh et al. 2007), and can be used to control invasive weeds (Olson and Lacey 1994, Walker et al.1994). Furthermore, grazing with appropriate range improvements can be utilized in some areas to improve habitat to mitigate for the disturbance caused by other multiple-use activities,

such as mineral development.

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