

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 11/12/2019 7:00:00 AM

First name: Christine

Last name: Sage

Organization: Southern Ute Indian Tribe

Title: Chairman

Comments: November 12, 2019

Ms. Jennifer Eberlein, Acting Regional Forester

U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region 1617 Cole Boulevard, Building 17 Lakewood, Colorado 80401

Re: Tribal Support for San Juan National Forest Valle Seco Land Exchange

Dear Ms. Eberlein,

This letter addresses the Tribe's strong support for a pending private/federal land exchange located within the Pagosa Ranger District of the San Juan National Forest. The proposal, referred to as the Valle Seco Land Exchange, will involve disposal of numerous small and dispersed federal parcels throughout the District (totaling 890 acres) in exchange for the single Valle Seco parcel, a 900-acre private inholding located $\frac{12}{100}$ mile east of the Tribe's reservation boundary.

The Tribe considers the Valle Seco region to be vitally important to wildlife, especially large portions of the San Juan Basin populations of mule deer and elk. Located at the southern end of the District and overlapping the eastern end of the reservation, Valle Seco provides severe winter range and crucial migration corridors for both species. The importance of the region to deer and elk has been documented through decades of annual aerial surveys by both the Tribe and State of Colorado, as well as through years of migration corridor research by the Tribe utilizing radio collar technology. This information is well-documented and readily available.

Local wildlife managers with the Tribe, State, Forest, and nearby Jicarilla Apache Nation are all in agreement about the importance of protecting the Valle Seco region for its critical winter refugia and habitat connectivity values. The current progress of housing and other development within the region is already having an impact on deer and elk, and continued development poses a serious threat. Future development on the 900-acre private inholding in question - located in the heart of Valle Seco - would result in devastating long-term or permanent impacts to the resource.

The Tribe is aware that the concerns of a local environmental group now jeopardize the land exchange from moving forward. We are aware that this opposition factors in the loss of federal designated roadless area, specifically an edge-parcel totaling less than 1% of the Forest's overall roadless acreage. The exchange would also include a relatively small net-loss of 28 acres of Wild and Scenic River Corridor. Finally, we are aware that the opposition may involve a personal dislike of the private landowner proposing the exchange, an issue the Tribe considers totally irrelevant in the final analysis.

The Tribe believes that an honest evaluation of the wildlife habitat values of the lands subject to this proposal would clearly favor the federal acquisition of the private inholding in Valle Seco. I therefore request that the U.S. Forest Service proceed with the Valle Seco Land Exchange without further delay, an action which will benefit not only the wildlife, but the local Tribal and non-tribal communities that value this important regional resource.

Sincerely,

Christine Sage, Chairman

Southern Ute Indian Tribal Council

Cc: Karen Chadwick, San Juan Forest Supervisor Kevan Khung, Pagosa District Ranger