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First name: Yvette

Last name: Herrell

Organization: U.S. House of Representatives

Title: Congresswoman

Comments: I write today to express my concern with proposals contained within the Draft Forest Plan for the Lincoln National Forest. Of particular concern are proposed new wilderness designations located in the Sacramento Ranger District that I believe will inhibit livestock grazing and make the forest more susceptible to wildfire. My office has been contacted by many affected constituents who believe these areas do not meet the criteria for wilderness and are concerned that any wilderness designation will harm their day-to-day operation and make their land more difficult to manage.

The main pillar of federal lands management should be the multiple-use principle and the imposition of wilderness areas is the antithesis of multiple-use. For example, the proposed wilderness designations would negatively affect over a half-dozen grazing allotments that ranchers in the region have utilized for decades. Grazing on federal lands is a fundamental part of multiple-use and essential to the environmental health and economic viability of rural New Mexico. The ranchers who hold these allotments are charged with being good stewards of these lands and they have proven themselves to be so to the benefit of the forest and their community.

In addition, the allotments that will be affected by these proposed wilderness designations have many improvements included within them that should disqualify them for wilderness. These allotments have cherry-stem roads, pipelines, wells, and other forms of infrastructure, all of which are not wilderness characteristics. From discussions that you have had with the affected ranchers and my office, it is clear the Forest Service was not aware of these improvements before proposing these areas for wilderness, which is concerning. However, now that you are aware of these improvements, I implore you to follow the definition of what constitutes wilderness and disqualify these areas.

I am also concerned that the imposition of more wilderness in the Lincoln National Forest will increase the risk for catastrophic wildfire in the area. Wilderness designations significantly hinder the ability of the Forest Service to conduct management activities within the forest, including mechanical thinning and maintenance, as well as limiting access for wildland fire fighters. The consequences of this can be seen within the Lincoln National Forest at the burn scar of the Little Bear Fire, which occurred in the summer of 2012. A wilderness area inhibited the suppression of the fire and allowed it to spread out of control. The economic and ecological consequences of this were enormous and are still being felt nearly a decade on from the fire. For example, Benito Lake, once a thriving ecosystem that supported many wildlife species, recreation, and provided a water source for the City of Alamogordo is still empty and unusable for animals and humans alike,

Therefore, I ask these important questions:

1. How were the areas proposed for wilderness in the management plan determined to be potential wilderness?
2. Why were these areas proposed for wilderness now and not in previous management plans issued by the

Forest Service?

3. What impact will these wilderness designations have on wildland fire preparedness and suppression in these areas?

4. How will the Forest Service work with allotment holders to mitigate the impact of these designations, if they were to move forward?

I simply ask the Forest Service to heed the calls of those most affected by these proposals and abandon the idea of creating these new wilderness areas. The evidence does not support a wilderness designation, nor do the potential side effects. Allowing the people who have lived and worked in the Lincoln National Forest for generations to continue their conservation of the area is the best path forward. I ask that you respond to this letter within two weeks of receipt and please feel free to contact my office with any questions you may have.