

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 2/17/2022 6:20:10 PM

First name: Louis

Last name: Esposito

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the draft revised forest plan and draft environmental impact statement that will guide future management of the Ashley National Forest. As someone who cares deeply about the Ashley's 1.4 million acres of public land, I offer the following suggestions to improve the plan before it is finalized:

Select a final plan that more closely reflects Alternative C. Alternative C emphasizes the preservation of the forest's natural setting and would do more to ensure the Ashley's ecological integrity than the proposed Alternative B, which has a greater emphasis on development.

The draft plan includes no explicit direction for preserving wildlife migratory corridors and only vague references to the need to maintain habitat connectivity. Yet the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has identified multiple migration corridors and other crucial seasonal habitats throughout the forest. The plan should use this data to recognize known corridors and associated habitats, and to address and sustain connectivity. Specifically, the final plan should designate high-value migratory habitat as wildlife management areas and limit disturbance to wildlife and habitat.

The forest plan should recommend areas for wilderness designation, including Goose Egg Peak, Flat Top Mountain, Queant Lake, and the East Uintas areas proposed in Alternative C, recognizing the wild character of the Ashley. Wilderness areas are important for securing core wildlife habitat, clean water resources, dispersed opportunities for quiet recreation (such as backpacking and fishing), and economic benefits. Unfortunately, the preferred alternative recommends only two small areas adjacent to the existing High Uintas Wilderness for wilderness designation.

The draft plan's proposal for an extensive network of backcountry recreation areas would help to maintain vital primitive and natural characteristics in places that are worthy of conservation-oriented management, though they may not be eligible for wilderness recommendation. However, the final plan should facilitate improved management of these areas by explicitly restricting motorized travel and avoiding commercial timber harvest within them. Incorporating the full range of backcountry recreation areas identified in Alternative C would better reflect the extent of these areas across the forest.

Thank you for your consideration of these improvements to the draft forest plan for the Ashley, as they will help sustain healthy forests, waters, wildlife, and communities.