Data Submitted (UTC 11): 3/28/2023 3:49:27 PM
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Comments: Attention US Forest Service, Black Hills National Forest
Supervisors Office, Custer South Dakota
Hell Canyon Ranger District

I am writing this letter in OPPOSITION to the Proposed Exploratory Drilling project by F3 and hereafter referred to as the Newark Exploratory Drilling Project #63527.

I attended the Feb. 16th meeting (at Custer High School). Nearly 300 people were led to believe that this "informational meeting" was to allow for public comments and to establish some type of dialogue & transparency about Project#63527. What soon became apparent was just the opposite. The meeting followed no "established official format" and as F3 representatives vanished from the room without answering questions, a climate of distrust and suspicion (by those attending soon developed). By definition the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is intended to establish a "process" of "Policy and Procedure" that ensures the public an opportunity to ask questions and respond/comment on proposed project "Actions" planned on USFS Public Lands. As witnessed by everyone in the room that night, the Forest Service made it clear of their intention to streamline the NEPA process and fast-track the F3 project. When the Hell Canyon District Ranger announced, that regardless of the concerns and objections voiced during this meeting, "This Project was going to go through", this statement was in direct violation of the "Spirit" of NEPA. Pre-determining the outcome of ANY project of this magnitude in a public forum, regardless of public participation, circumvents the USFS' own internal NEPA process for Forest Projects.

NEPA is a policy & procedural process that must be followed by the USFS. There are no arbitrary short cuts to its established checks and balances. The USFS cannot pre-determine the outcome of any proposed project of this magnitude (on Public Lands), without being held accountable to both the public and NEPA policy. The February 16th gathering of concerned citizens hardly meets the definition of a "scoping meeting" as defined by NEPA. What was intended to be a question and answer session between F3 representatives, the public and USFS personnel, quickly deteriorated into a one sided "grievance session" by members of the public voiced in the presence of at least 3 Forest Service "Official" representatives. The entire (sic. "meeting") and subsequent comments are a matter of public record (witnessed by Custer County Chronicle Staff) and have been documented and captured on video by several members of the public.

A similar proposed Exploratory Drilling Project by F3 in the Jenny Gulch area of Pennington County and on USFS lands ultimately resulted in F3 hiring a private consultant to prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) to determine anticipated impacts of the proposed F3 Jenny Gulch Project. Meetings were held, public comments were submitted, and technical field studies and surveys for sensitive forest and wetland habitats as well as biological & archeological resources were conducted during the preparation of this Environmental Assessment. Are these surveys available for public review? Who determined survey protocol and more importantly, who will determine similar survey protocol for the proposed F3 Newark Exploratory Drilling project? The level of detail included in the Jenny Gulch EA covered specific aspects of that project proposal. The Newark Exploratory Drilling Project differs greatly from the Jenny Gulch project in location, aspect, site conditions & neighborhood proximity, wildlife habitat, existing water resources, the distance of nearby homes and private structures as well as the existence of a critical and extremely sensitive water source "the Headwaters of French Creek". These two projects are in no way environmentally similar due to terrain and other aforementioned differences. The only similarity is the planned use of equipment utilized for the exploratory drilling proposed and the techniques employed (and water requirements) for both of F3's proposals. As such a seperate and site specific Environmental Assessment is warranted (at a minimum) for the proposed Newark Exploratory Drilling

Project.

The proposed Newark Exploratory Drilling Project (at a minimum) must be re-evaluated with the minimum scrutiny of an Environmental Assessment as defined by NEPA. The location of this project (situated at/in the headwaters of French Creek and its tributaries) alone makes this an example of an "extremely environmentally sensitive project proposal" and as such clearly meets the "Extraordinary Circumstances" definition in NEPA, thereby eliminating it from consideration by the USFS' proposed "Categorical Exclusion" level of environmental review, they currently are presenting. This project (as currently proposed) may result in potentially "significant" impacts not limited to: the neighboring immediate adjacent homes/community , local domestic well water supplies, baseline noise & traffic levels, Identified "critical" resident Elk range/populations, potential sensitive plant and animal species, cultural resources, the frail ecology of French Creek, groundwater levels, groundwater quality, soci-economic impacts on the local tourist economy, and more. The amount of water required for the exploratory drilling (by F3s own proposed plan) is estimated to be between 5-10,000 gallons of water per day and yet no domestic or municipal source has clearly been identified to supply such a huge demand. Where will F3 obtain this water? Custer County is currently in a drought and has been (locally) these past three years. All these potential impacts (and more) must be carefully considered as potential "significant cumulative impacts" during the USFS evaluation of this project. These are just some of the many concerns surrounding this project proposal which could have far reaching impacts. As such, these identified "Extraordinary Circumstances" are just cause for the USFS Black Hills National Forest Hell Canyon Ranger District to reevaluate their position and to logically abandon their choice of a proposed "Categorical Exemption" for the project. Anything less than an Environmental Impact Statement (level of evaluation) at this time would by arbitrary and capricious.

Categorical Exclusions and Special Use Permits are hardly adequate for a project of this scope & magnitude. It is also highly unlikely that the proposed 39 drilling pads could all be completed in the amount of time (1 year) as proposed in F3s "Plan of Operations". Without the completion of such an ambitious and (in my opinion unrealistic) plan, F3 would need to be granted an extension of their project proposal. Extending past the 1 year deadline also kicks the project out of being cleared under the section 36 CFR 220.6(e)(8) Categorical Exclusion "category". If the USFS granted an extension to F3, this is yet another classic example of "piecemealing" a project, and as such, the USFS could be (through this action) violating their own internal Forest Management Plan NEPA policy. I respectfully request that the Black Hills National Forest Hell Canyon Ranger District Staff abandon the proposed "Categorical Exclusion" approach and require the applicant F3, to resubmit a realistic and truthful "Plan of Operation".

This is just one of many letters in opposition to the proposed F3 project. Please require F3 to revisit their "Plan of Operations" and to hire a consultant to do a full blown analysis of the current conditions of the French Creek Watershed. In addition, examine and analyze and conduct the appropriate geo-physical, cultural, biological, and socio-economic studies taking into account all the potential "cumulative impacts" that could result from a project of this scope and magnitude. I respectfully request that the USFS NOT grant F3 a "Categorical Exclusion" but instead require the applicant to conduct an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for "potentially significant impacts" or at a bare minimum, to complete a full blown Environmental Assessment (EA) as was completed by the applicant for the Mystic Ranger District regarding the "proposed" Jenny Gulch F3 Exploratory Drilling Project.

sincerely,
Craig Olofson