

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 6/8/2024 11:49:11 PM

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Organization:

Title:

Comments: I had the great privilege of staying at Circle Z Ranch in Patagonia April 7-14, 2024. I spent the week riding beautiful trails, on a sweet horse named Jack, with a collection of people from all over the country. I reveled in the gorgeous wildflower display, gifted from abundant winter rains. I saw many new species of birds, including the Gray Hawks, who soar above, and nest in, the trees that form a riparian gallery forest on the property and serve as home and nesting sites to numerous other avian species. There were javelinas, deer, and even a Gila monster (which my friend who is a reptile expert still hasn't seen even though he's been looking for at least 50 years)! It is a naturalist's paradise and pretty much heaven on Earth. I also visited the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, whose guest list included many people from near and far. My first trip to the area proved to be an unforgettable one that I will always cherish.

In addition to the healing and uplift that all the time in the pristine outdoor setting and fresh air being on the ranch provided, there was also the human connection of quality time, well spent, with people from all walks of life. We shared meals and company, funny stories and life's heartaches, plus laughter and bliss, with each other, both on and off the trail. The Ranch property and rooms are exquisitely designed and cared for; no detail is left unattended. I was delighted to the core by the entire experience, and in tears the day I left. My batteries were recharged and new friends were made. It was a profoundly rich and unique experience that took me completely away from the stresses of everyday life as a high school teacher. The feeling was visceral; my very cells, heart, and soul were nourished by all of it.

Circle Z ranch is a gem, and I'm very concerned about the Permanent Access Route and the High Power transmission line that is proposed in the Mine's plan of operation. Of course, as a naturalist & person who cares deeply about the plants, birds, bees, butterflies, fish, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians who also share the land, I'm heartsick that the mine is being developed in the first place, and then that there are community members whose lives & livelihoods are also going to be negatively affected, if not destroyed, by its presence. Why this is allowed, I will never understand.

With regard to the Permanent Access Route and the High Power, I understand that, if allowed, it could foreseeably have a huge impact on the Circle Z Ranch's horseback riding opportunities onto CNFS lands. The routes would transect 10 of the Ranch's established trails that have been in use for years, trails that are permitted under their Special Use Permit. Circle Z would no longer be able take their guests out onto this small strip of land, which would significantly and directly affect their ability to continue to offer outstanding horseback riding onto adjacent forest service lands.

This route would also indirectly affect the Ranch's adjacent conservation lands, as more than half of the ranch riding trails would be in the visual and sound fields of this route. This would foreseeably cause significant visual pollution, a disturbance in enjoyment of the pristine and expansive vistas that are so rare in the world today. These are irreplaceable and invaluable benefits of the time I spent at Circle Z. Humans need to be in quiet places that are not despoiled by development and noise. Maintaining these qualities for residents of the area and guests of the ranch should be a top priority.

I ask that the Forest Service conduct an analysis of the impacts of the Permanent Access Route and High Power transmission line on the tourist business the ranch brings to this area, the elimination of their riding trails, and on the potential for visual pollution and disturbances on the USFS land and the Ranch Conservation Lands.

I understand that there are viable alternatives to the proposed routes that the USFS can mandate be considered. Using the already established FS road 49 to Lochiel would not have the significant impacts that the proposed

route would have. Also, an alternative to the visual pollution caused by the High Voltage transmission line is the burying of that line (which would also mitigate wildfire risk), or the requirement to bring the power in from the east as opposed to from the south.

I appreciate your consideration and implore you to protect the integrity of the Ranch and surrounding lands, the residents (both human and non-human) of this beautiful place, and to remember the ripple effect of the proposed changes being imposed on the landscape.

Sincerely,  
Ms. Melissa Witte  
Petaluma, California