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Comments: Stearns Ruffed Grouse Habitat Management

The agency specific jargon throughout the Stearns Ruffed Grouse Habitat Management project proposal is beyond what the typical layman would want to wade through. Most of us don't understand it. Thus, in my opinion there will be a low response by the general public.

As I understand, the idea is to manage a target area(s) to improve the habitat of the Ruffed Grouse (grouse or the grouse). No doubt, not unlike any other wild animal in the forests across the eastern United States, the grouse has been studied immensely. Among other things, the experts have identified and determined what might be considered ideal habitat for grouse in these studies. Sometimes studies can be twisted to provide and intended outcome. So, many times I am skeptical of studies and their outcomes. Seems the thought (study results) is that habitat loss is why the grouse populations have declined.

The project appears to be an experiment to me. I disagree that loss of habitat has significantly affected the decline in grouse populations by 50% across the eastern United States over the last 25 or more years. In some areas the grouse has totally disappeared. Local observations in Whitley, McCreary and Pulaski Counties by residents and hunters alike know this to be true.

I never saw anything in the proposed project that addresses adjacent private property and it's vegetation status or how grouse might benefit from it. There is a major highly used railroad basically through the middle of the proposed project area. One must ask, was this site for grouse habitat improvement a good choice? It is also paralleled by a major secondary highway that is heavily used. Seems there is an outdoor shooter range adjacent to the proposed project area..

Although the project proposal says it is to increase the habitat for grouse and other species that would also benefit, does the project proposal consider the amount of competition grouse will receive by species such as deer, bear, and turkey. Grouse habitat is basically the same for those animals, including racoon, groundhog, and opossum. Point is, many species will be attracted to the bowl of candy. And, more importantly, the animals of prey (more about this later) will also be attracted to those at the candy bowl.

I've lived adjacent to the Daniel Boone National Forest all my life. In the 1960s when I was a teenager, I hunted the National Forest land, my father's property, my grandparents property (both maternal and paternal), my uncle's properties and neighbor's properties. All of these properties had forests and open lands that share a boundary with the D. Boone Forest. Today, those properties are basically the same with minor exceptions,

including the D. Boone Forest. The habitat's on these properties will still support grouse. Most all of them have had timber harvests, including the D. Boone Forest, that provide practically everything proposed in the management project proposal. But, there are no grouse today.

What are the treatments? Are they chemicals such as was used recently adjacent to the Alpine Picnic Park area? Will vines be killed? Does the US Forest Service realize that grouse eat poison ivy berries? Poison Ivy berries are also eaten by the Pileated Woodpecker. Vines in trees provide places for squirrels to build nests, including many bird species.

Have on-site surveys been conducted to determine if there are any rare or endangered plants that could be lost due to logging activities, deforestation, etc.? Will burns be conducted at times that will not harm the eastern box turtle? Could burns result in erosion due to the terrain of the project proposal area? Will the implementation activities affect the bat population in the proposed project area and adjacent areas?

It appears about 75% of the area drains directly into Lake Cumberland. Have erosion mitigation options been considered? How much temporary and permanent roads will be built? Will those roads be open to the general public once the project is considered implemented? Will "viewers" of these grouse have seasons to do so?

Has the proposed project area been surveyed for old growth trees? If so, are there plans to preserve them per the current administration's Executive Order relating to old growth forests dated April 22, 2022? Old growth trees contribute immensely to the bio-diversity of the forests.

It seems to me this project should include additional areas prescribed for late successional and old-growth management to ensure compliance with the National Old-Growth Amendment and provide for protections of mature and old-growth trees

Will grouse be re-stocked in this area? Grouse do have a home range. What is the success rate of re-stocking grouse? Are there any adjacent areas that have grouse populations that might venture into this new utopia? If so, has that habitat been surveyed to see what might be unique about it from a habitat standpoint?

This is my take on the demise of the grouse. First, there is no way that the habitat across the entire eastern United States has changed so drastically over the last 25 to 30 years to account for the decline of 50% of the grouse population. Grouse have been gone almost 30 years in the in southern Whitley and McCreary Counties. The last grouse I saw was a hen with chicks. In a place on my property very close to the D Boone National Forest, as I walked past a rather huge poplar tree a hen grouse hit me in the face coming upward. As I looked toward the ground, little chicks disappeared in an instant into the leaves. I've not seen a grouse or heard one drumming since that day, spring of 1996 (over 28 years ago).

The first time I encountered a Coyote was in the spring of 1989 in southern Whitley County. Today, the Coyote population is exploding. I've not seen or heard a gray or red fox bark in 30 years. I used to see both red and gray foxes on my county road on a regular basis. No more! We do not see the number of wild turkey and deer we used to see either. The bobcat population has increased over the last 40 years. We see them quite often. Back in the 1960s and 1970s we never saw a bobcat. When you see them killed on the highways, including Coyotes, you know the numbers are high. I've not seen a dead fox on the highway in 25 or more years.

So, in my opinion, Coyotes have preyed on grouse by eating eggs, the chicks, and the adults. Coyotes will be at the candy bowl. Coyotes are the reason for the decline in the fox populations as well as turkey and deer. We used to see as many as 10 to 15 deer together standing at the edge of a field not far off the county road. Today, we are lucky to see three or four deer together.

I think it is past time that both the US Forest Service and the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources face the Coyote head-on and consider and treat them like an invasive species. They are the smartest animal in the Kentucky forests.

The Daniel Boone National Forest Plan should be updated or re-written with public input. It is over 20 years old. It is basically obsolete.

Lastly, I see this as a means to log the forest land, sort of a backdoor approach, if you will. And, again, it best, the project is an experiment. I may never live to see the outcome, but my view will always be in the public record.

Thank you.