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Organization:

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Comments: Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Benchmark Vegetation Management Project.

We are the owners of Corral Creek Ranch; a privately owned property of more than 140 acres located within the Benchmark Project area. The ranch is surrounded the majority of its perimeter by National Forest Service lands and is managed with a primary emphasis on wildlife habitat enhancement, ecological restoration, and long-term stewardship of the land.

We appreciate the Forest Service's efforts to improve forest health, reduce wildfire risk, increase ecosystem resilience, and address the impacts of insects and disease. We support active, science-based management of public lands and recognize the importance of maintaining healthy forests and resilient landscapes throughout the Black Hills. We also recognize the important role that National Forest lands play in providing a sustainable supply of timber products for local industry and for housing and infrastructure needs. We believe responsible forest management can support both ecological resilience and the production of renewable forest products.

Corral Creek Ranch contains a diverse mosaic of meadows, wetlands, ponds, riparian areas, and forest-edge habitats. Ongoing stewardship efforts include habitat enhancement, wetland and pond restoration, native vegetation management, invasive species control, installation of beaver dam analog structures, and removal of internal fencing to improve wildlife movement and habitat connectivity.

Given the extent of National Forest lands adjacent to Corral Creek Ranch and our ongoing restoration investments, we have a strong interest in understanding how treatments will be implemented near the property. We would appreciate communication regarding treatments adjacent to the ranch during project implementation.

Specifically, we request consideration of the following:

1. Wildlife Habitat and Connectivity

Please consider wildlife movement, habitat connectivity, and seasonal habitat use when designing and implementing treatments adjacent to the ranch.

2. Recognition of Existing Natural Fuel Breaks

Corral Creek Ranch contains extensive meadows, wetlands, ponds, riparian areas, and other open habitats that already contribute to fuel discontinuity and landscape resilience. We encourage the Forest Service to consider these existing conditions when designing fuel treatments adjacent to the ranch and to tailor treatment intensity where appropriate.

3. Temporary Roads, Landings, and Prescribed Fire

We request notification regarding temporary roads, skid trails, landings, haul routes, and prescribed fire activities adjacent to the property and encourage the use of existing disturbed corridors whenever practical.

4. Scenic Character

We recognize that some treatments are intended to create younger forest age classes. Where treatments are proposed adjacent to the ranch, we encourage consideration of visual transitions and treatment design that maintain the natural character of the landscape while achieving project objectives. Thoughtful treatment boundaries, feathered edges, and retention of natural visual character can help balance management objectives with the scenic qualities that contribute to the Black Hills.

We appreciate the effort that has gone into developing the Benchmark Project and support its overall goals of improving forest health and resilience. We believe there may be opportunities for collaboration between public-land management and private stewardship efforts that would benefit wildlife habitat, ecological resilience, and the broader landscape.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with project staff on-site at Corral Creek Ranch to discuss ongoing restoration efforts and explore opportunities for coordination and partnership.

Thank you for your consideration.

Jerry and Lori Fussell