



July 30, 2013

Doug Thompson, Fremont County Commissioner
Tim Wilson, Popo Agie Conservation District
Reg Phillips, Dubois-Crowheart Conservation District
Loren Grosskopf & Joe Tilden, Park County Commissioners
Steve Jones & Clara Mae Yetter, Meeteetse Conservation District
Randy Williams, Teton County Conservation District

Dear Commissioners and Conservation District Representatives,

As the revision of the Shoshone's forest plan is nearing its conclusion, the Wyoming Outdoor Council, Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, and Wyoming Wilderness Association want to thank you for your many years of government service and involvement in this important process. Many of you have been involved since the revision first commenced in the summer of 2005. We also have participated in this process since the beginning. As local conservation organizations who represent our many Wyoming members, we sincerely believe that those of us who live in Wyoming—despite the distinct ways in which we use and value the forest—have far more in common than not, when it comes to our shared priorities for a plan that ensures a healthy and sustainable forest, now and for decades to come.

As we anticipate the release of the final forest plan this fall and as the Forest Service is continuing to solicit and incorporate feedback from you as local government cooperators, we write to ask that you further consider the topics of: 1) wilderness; 2) oil and gas; and 3) motorized use on the Shoshone. These topics have generated the most disagreement, as they tend to connect to larger ideological viewpoints. For that reason, this letter does not seek to change your personal beliefs, but rather to present objective data collected over the course of this plan revision. As elected representatives of constituents, we ask you to consider these data as you continue to advocate changes to the draft forest plan.

Wilderness

Since the Shoshone began the forest plan revision process, many of us in the conservation community have highlighted parts of Franc's Peak, Wood River and Trout Creek as candidates for recommended wilderness. The Forest Service's own wilderness inventory illustrates that these are among the highest-ranking inventoried roadless areas on the Shoshone—and under any national rubric, these areas would be deserving candidates for wilderness recommendation. Another high ranking area, but one that some of us didn't prioritize (as it was already significantly protected by congressional legislation) is the 29,000-acre Dunoir Special Management Unit.

In prior rounds of forest planning, under the 2005 and 2008 planning rules, the Forest Service's preferred alternative included only the Dunoir as recommended wilderness. This was a nod towards compromise, as a recommendation for wilderness for the already carefully managed Dunoir didn't provide significant new protections, which is what the conservation community was seeking in a recommendation for Franc's Peak, Wood River or Trout Creek. But by recommending the Dunoir for wilderness, the Forest Service acknowledged the expectation and support for new wilderness from a local and national public. It also likely reasoned that the Dunoir would be the most palatable to select cooperators and other stakeholders opposed to new wilderness, as it was already managed largely within a wilderness framework.

Recommending the Dunoir for wilderness designation seemed an outcome most stakeholders could accept. However, when forest planning resumed in 2011, proceeding under the 1982 planning rule, the government cooperator meetings became contentious whenever the topic of wilderness was raised. In the draft forest plan released in July 2012, the Dunoir had been dropped. The preferred alternative now contains zero acres of recommended wilderness. This is an unfortunate outcome and one that several of you as government cooperators advocated. Although we respect your individual opinions about wilderness, this anti-wilderness stance is in contrast to the majority of your constituents' views on this.

As you will recall, the State of Wyoming contracted with Colorado State University to conduct a statistically valid social survey from a random sampling of residents in Fremont, Hot Springs, Park and Teton counties (the four counties bordering the Shoshone) to help inform decisions made within the forest plan revision process. The study's results indicated strong pro-wilderness values in local communities. Participants were asked whether they favored wilderness as a use on the Shoshone. 73 percent said they did.¹ When asked whether they favored wilderness as a use in roadless areas on the Shoshone, 74 percent said they did.² When told that 55 percent of the Shoshone is already wilderness, people were then asked whether they still favored the Forest Service recommending additional roadless areas on the Shoshone as new wilderness. A plurality—46 percent—wanted either some roadless areas to be recommended for wilderness designation (25 percent) or all of the roadless areas on the Shoshone to be recommended for wilderness designation (21 percent).³

Even though this was a survey the State of Wyoming and local government cooperators proposed, its results have largely been disregarded. While some of you hold anti-wilderness positions, we hope you will consider how that is contrary to the values held by the constituents you represent—values documented in a study you agreed was important enough to fund using taxpayer dollars. We ask you, as elected officials, to give further thought to supporting a wilderness recommendation for the Dunoir, a small, but highly deserving area. We also ask that you reconsider supporting wilderness recommendations for Franc's Peak, Trout Creek, and Wood River. Such support would illustrate your responsiveness to your constituents and what they have indicated they want.

¹ Clement and Chang 2008, *Report: Study of Preferences and Values on the Shoshone National Forest* at 7. 12 percent of respondents were neutral, 12 percent were opposed and 3 percent don't know. *Id.*

² *Id.* at 8.

³ *Id.* at 7. 40 percent were opposed to new wilderness and 15 percent were "not sure." *Id.*

Oil and Gas

The nation's first, and arguably one of its most popular backcountry forests, the Shoshone is many things. Thankfully, it is not currently the site of industrial scale oil and gas development. Of the roughly 7,000 acres leased for this use on the Shoshone's nearly 2.5 million acres, there are no producing oil and gas wells on the forest. In the last 8 years, two different wells have been proposed—a gas well outside of Clark and an oil well near Dubois. Either one of these wells would have been the first drilled on the forest in more than 20 years. The lessees of the Clark well opted to let their lease expire, and the permit for the well outside of Dubois (the Scott Well #2) has been put on hold as a result of the BLM's failure to adequately consider impacts to groundwater. Judging from the public concern and recorded opposition to these wells—on a local as well as national scale—few people think this type of development is desirable on the Shoshone. In fact, in the same survey referenced above, residents from the four-county region surrounding the forest were asked whether they supported oil and gas development on the Shoshone. Only 25 percent did; an even smaller percentage (19 percent) supported this use in roadless areas.⁴

Even small-scale drilling operations would be highly disruptive to wildlife habitat and recreation on a backcountry forest like the Shoshone, yet would be irrelevant to our local economy and domestic energy production. With thousands of wells in existence in the Pinedale Anticline and Jonah Fields, tens of thousands of wells producing (or now plugged and abandoned) in the Powder River Basin, and thousands more proposed around Wyoming, including Moxa Arch (1,861 wells), Moneta Divide (4,200 wells), Normally Pressurized Lance (3,500 wells), Hiawatha (4,208 wells), Continental Divide-Creston (8,950 wells), Gun Barrel-Deep Madden (1,470) and the LaBarge Platform (838 wells), we can and should prioritize other non-industrial uses on the Shoshone.

As you are aware, the BLM is now revising resource management plans for its field offices that surround the Shoshone. These RMPs—one nearly final (the Lander RMP) and one still in draft form (the Bighorn Basin RMP)—have identified areas where oil and gas development is undesirable and areas with fewer conflicts where oil and gas development could occur. Notably, the Lander RMP identifies BLM land adjacent to the Shoshone National Forest in the Dubois and Lander areas as either unavailable for oil and gas leasing or subject to leasing with no surface occupancy stipulations. In the Shoshone's July 2012 draft forest plan, there was significant front country national forest acreage deemed suitable for oil and gas leasing with surface disturbance that was directly adjacent to BLM lands that were to be protected from this very use. This inconsistency was noted by local communities, particularly citizens in Dubois and Lander.

In response to local concern, Governor Mead encouraged changes to the draft forest plan. We understand some commissioners and conservation district representatives in Fremont County have also listened to their constituents and have been supportive of changes to the forest plan that will provide for greater consistency across jurisdictions, and result in better overall landscape management. Thank you. At the last cooperator meeting, the Shoshone introduced a new alternative (Alternative G) that is responsive to this feedback. Although we don't know all of the

⁴ Id. at 7-8.

details of this alternative, since the public has not had an opportunity to review it, we ask you as government cooperators to support changes that would ensure consistent management on the borders of BLM and National Forest land and to advocate further changes if necessary, after the public has a chance to review the final plan.

There is tremendous local support for keeping some of our best wildlife habitat and recreational areas in Wyoming—those on the Shoshone—free from industrial oil and gas development. The wildlife, open space and recreational values provided by the forest are economic drivers for local communities. New residents are attracted by the quality of life in these communities and bring their families and economic contributions with them. There is no doubt that Wyoming will continue to develop and export fossil fuels for decades to come; Wyoming alone currently supplies 15 percent of the country's energy resources. But Wyoming people seek a balance and know that some lands are best left undeveloped and are critical for maintaining our outdoor heritage. Making sure the Shoshone retains its niche as a wild, backcountry forest, free from industrial oil and gas development and a home to wildlife and unparalleled recreational opportunities into the future, means supporting appropriate designations (i.e. NSO stipulations in lands available for leasing) in the forest plan today.

Motorized Use

Although motorized interest groups have advocated greater motorized access on the Shoshone, greatly expanding this use on the Shoshone is not appropriate. Almost more than any other forest in the system, the Shoshone is renowned for its wild, backcountry character. This is the niche the Forest Service acknowledged for the Shoshone at the very beginning of this forest plan revision. That the backcountry qualities of this forest abound, is not a valid reason to expand uses that would degrade these qualities—especially in a forest so integral to the health of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, the largest nearly intact ecosystem in the lower 48 states. The Shoshone is special, and its wild, backcountry character is what contributes to the quality of life in nearby towns and to the quality hunting, angling and wildlife viewing opportunities that draw visitors from across the country and around the world. Any uses that threaten these qualities, including motorized use that can negatively impact wildlife and adversely affect stream quality and fisheries habitat, should be carefully managed.

As local elected officials, we ask you again to refer to the study you proposed and the Wyoming taxpayers funded that surveyed values of people living in the four counties surrounding the forest. These are your constituents. The most favorable local preferences for use of the Shoshone included: wildlife viewing (98 percent); fish and wildlife habitat (96 percent); non-motorized recreation (89 percent); horse packing (85 percent) and wilderness (73 percent).⁵ Please compare these figures to OHV recreation, which was viewed favorably by only 39 percent of respondents.⁶ Further, 37 percent of respondents opposed OHV recreation on the Shoshone.⁷ In comparison, non-motorized uses and wildlife preferences on the landscape received less than

⁵ Id.

⁶ Id.

⁷ Id.

1 percent opposition.⁸ Wilderness received only 12 percent opposition – one-third the opposition that OHV and motorized recreation received.⁹

The same study also looked at preferences specific to roadless areas on the Shoshone. The results clearly suggest that motorized recreation is not a favorable use of the Shoshone’s roadless lands. Survey respondents overwhelmingly preferred non-motorized use of these landscapes to OHV use. Non-motorized recreation is viewed favorably by 93 percent of respondents.¹⁰ Only 2 percent of respondents were opposed to non-motorized recreation.¹¹ In contrast, OHV recreation in roadless areas is viewed favorably by only 26 percent of respondents.¹² A majority (56 percent), oppose this use in roadless areas.¹³

This is not to say that OHV use, responsibly done, is not a valid use on some areas of national forest land, including the Shoshone. What is problematic is the harm that results when OHV users create illegal trails on the forest. The Forest Service knows this, the OHV community acknowledges it, and visitors to the forest can see for themselves the lasting damage illegal OHV travel causes. The Forest Service concedes that its prevention efforts are often futile and restoration is usually beyond the financial capacity of the agency. We are thus concerned that designating additional areas as suitable for motorized travel will only exacerbate the problem. We recognize that no trail authorizations will be made in the plan itself, and that these decisions will be made in subsequent travel management planning. Nevertheless, as representatives of constituents that have unequivocally voiced concerns about OHV travel and its impacts, we ask you to reconsider your past support for a forest plan that creates a framework that would allow expansion of motorized opportunities without specific goals and objectives to address and remedy current resource damage from this very use.

The public has no further opportunity to submit formal comments or attend public meetings prior to the release of the final forest plan this fall. But as government cooperators, you continue to meet with the Forest Service and have influence in the process. Thus, you have a responsibility to fairly and accurately represent the documented desires and values of your constituents. The Forest Service also has a responsibility to review relevant local and national data and not be unduly influenced by strongly held, but often unsupported, opinions about how the forest should be managed.

To summarize, there’s no question a national and regional public overwhelmingly favor management decisions that maintain the Shoshone’s backcountry character, demonstrated by the 98 percent of the 20,000+ comments received on the draft forest plan that favored more wilderness, no increase in areas available for motorized use, and no surface oil and gas development. The data from the 2008 study indicate people in communities around the Shoshone feel much the same way. And, an analysis of the 1065 “non-form letter” comments on the draft forest plan (those that were individually written and submitted) reveals that 70 percent favored

⁸ Id.
⁹ Id.
¹⁰ Id.
¹¹ Id.
¹² Id.
¹³ Id.

protecting the backcountry character of the forest.¹⁴ Of those letters written by Wyoming residents, 69 percent favored backcountry protections (e.g. additional wilderness, limits on oil and gas development and no increase in areas available to OHV use).¹⁵ These comments from your constituents should inform your positions as you continue to provide input to the Forest Service. We ask that you consider them.

Again, thank you for your service and participation in the Shoshone National Forest's plan revision process. On behalf of the Wyoming Outdoor Council, Sierra Club, Wyoming Wilderness Association and The Wilderness Society, we appreciate your consideration of these issues during this final phase of forest plan revision.

Sincerely,

Lisa McGee
Program Director
Wyoming Outdoor Council
262 Lincoln St
Lander, WY 82520

And on behalf of:

Connie Wilbert
Sierra Club, Wyoming Chapter

Sarah Walker
Wyoming Wilderness Association

Peter Aengst
The Wilderness Society

cc:

Daniel Jiron, Regional Forester
Joe Alexander, Supervisor
Carrie Christman, Forest Planner
Matt Mead, Governor

¹⁴ Please see analysis of non-form comments on Shoshone Draft Forest Plan in narrative and graph form. There are two separate documents as attachments to this letter.

¹⁵ Id.