

**RESOURCE MANAGEMENT TESTIMONY
SANTA ROSA RANGER DISTRICT
HUMBOLDT-TOIYABE NATIONAL FOREST**

**FOR THE
LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS**

**November 6, 2009
Winnemucca, Nevada**

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Santa Rosa Ranger District**

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, and committee members, thank you for providing this opportunity to speak before your Legislative Committee on Public Lands. Jeff Ulrich, our new District Ranger, could not be with us today. He began in July as the Santa Rosa District Ranger on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. Jeff has a rich background in natural resource management; his biographical sketch is attached to the last page of this testimony.

My name is Tina Gast, and I am the Acting Santa Rosa District Ranger. You will notice that my oral presentation is a shortened version of this written testimony. This written testimony will also similarly update the committee on the District's following seven projects, programs, and issues, as well as supply additional background and information that was not addressed in the oral testimony:

- Martin Basin Rangeland Project Environmental Impact Statement;
- Cheatgrass invasion;
- Sagebrush and sage grouse management;
- Livestock management and water developments;
- Noxious weed management;

- Service First Agreement with BLM regarding fire management;
- Unauthorized livestock; and a
- Summary of our successes.

DISTRICT SUMMARY

The Santa Rosa Ranger District is located in north-central Nevada in Humboldt County. Some fast facts that may interest you include the following:

- The District contains about 290,000 acres, including the 31,000-acre Santa Rosa-Paradise Peak Wilderness Area.
- The District has one developed campground at Lye Creek, and manages a historic worksite in Paradise Valley.
- The Santa Rosa Ranger District currently permits approximately 10,000 head of cattle within 13 grazing allotments.
- The District has fascinating geology. Native Americans sought out the Santa Rosa's for its flint and obsidian quarries for making arrowheads. Arrowhead pieces termed lithic scatter are found throughout the District.
- The District has a surprising number of cool water trout streams for an arid desert landscape. Some of these streams contain remnant populations of Lahontan Cutthroat trout from the great Lake Lahontan, which covered the area in pre-historic times. They are federally listed as threatened. We are working cooperatively with the Nevada Department of Wildlife on recovery efforts.
- The Santa Rosas support some of the better habitat in Nevada for sage grouse and other upland game birds, and are one of the most productive grazing areas in Humboldt County. Big game species include mule deer, mountain lion, antelope, and big horn sheep. Elk are also becoming established in the area without land management agency assistance.

MARTIN BASIN RANGELAND PROJECT

The Martin Basin Rangeland project was initiated in 2003, to comply with the amended 1995 Rescission Act, which requires the Forest Service to complete environmental analyses on all livestock grazing permits by 2016. The Martin Basin Project includes 8 of the 13 allotments on the District and considers these three alternatives:

- Current management practices governed by the current Forest Plan and existing Allotment Management Plans.
- A proposed action that would base grazing use on ecological condition. The basic premise is, the healthier the vegetation, the greater the available forage for both wildlife and livestock.
- No grazing.

This is the second attempt at completing the Martin Basin Rangeland Project. The original decision, signed in June 2006, was appealed by the Western Watershed Project. In September 2006, the Regional Forester remanded the decision back to the Forest for additional analysis to address a number of issues identified in the appeal. The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest has been working to address the appeal issues, and will be releasing the Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision to the public in the next week or two.

CHEATGRASS INVASION

Cheatgrass is an invasive species that successfully replaces native vegetation, including sagebrush, after wildfires.

Across the Santa Rosa District, cheatgrass is currently a small component of many vegetation communities. A single fire can establish cheatgrass as the dominant species, especially on lower elevation sites. This places sage grouse habitat and big game winter range at risk; some sites have already been lost.

In the short-term, managing wildfire to avoid cheatgrass expansion is a high priority for the District. In the long-term, we understand that wildfire is a natural component of the landscape, and we need to continue to develop management strategies that will use fire to help us gain the species composition that we desire. State and federal researchers are actively looking for solutions that will give native species a competitive edge. We need effective solutions as well as economical solutions.

In the meantime, the Forest Service and BLM will experiment with a number of management practices designed to slow or reverse cheatgrass expansion. Both the Santa Rosa District and the Winnemucca District BLM have implemented a green strip program. Perennial grass species that stay green longer are being planted in strips as defensive zones in stopping future grassland wildfires.

The Santa Rosa District is also examining the feasibility of planting shrub container stock (plugs of grass or shrub species) in established cheatgrass stands. These species would have the capability of replacing the cheatgrass over time, even after a fire. In the meantime, additional acres of native habitat will be lost to cheatgrass annually, making the solution even more urgent.

SAGEBRUSH & SAGE GROUSE MANAGEMENT

Over the last century, sage grouse populations have declined across the West. Total sagebrush acres have also decreased, whether through wildfire or intentional conversion to more desirable commercial agricultural species for grazing or crop production, mostly on private land.

Under historic conditions, sagebrush would eventually re-occupy a site after fire, but cheatgrass persistence or continual agricultural use makes the return of sagebrush problematic. Much of the remaining sagebrush occurs on public land, making areas such as the Santa Rosa District all the more critical for sage grouse habitat.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is considering whether or not to list sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act. If a decision is made to list sage grouse, the legal requirements of the Act will likely have significant multiple-use management implications. The best way to avoid a listing decision is to increase the population of the species in question.

The Santa Rosa District is one of the better places in Nevada to support sage grouse. The Forest Service, in cooperation with the Nevada Department of Wildlife, is looking for ways to better manage the ecosystems on the Santa Rosa District to increase sage grouse populations and conserve sagebrush.

LIVESTOCK MANAGEMENT & WATER DEVELOPMENTS

Domestic livestock have been grazing in the Santa Rosa Mountains for well over 100 years, and the Forest Service and grazing permittees share an interest in perpetuating sustainable grazing. Water developments are a critical tool in managing livestock and protecting riparian ecosystems. As previously presented in 2008 (see exhibit 1), current Nevada Water Law restricts our ability to use this tool.

- Many wildlife species depend on the riparian ecosystem as a critical habitat component, as do many rare plants and all fish. Riparian habitat is a very small part of the landscape, yet critical to the survival of many species.
- Livestock need water. Without herding, fencing, or other management techniques, grazing may occur at unacceptable levels in riparian areas while upland forage is still underutilized.
- Developing water troughs in the uplands, along with appropriate fencing and herding, conserves riparian areas while sustaining grazing operations.
- Nevada Water Law generally prohibits federal agencies from acquiring stock watering rights (NRS 533.503).

- Forest Service policy and regulations generally prohibit water developments on National Forest System land unless the Forest Service owns the water right (36 CFR 222.9(b)(2) and FSM 2241).
- Ranchers are caught in the middle, unable to develop water that would improve grazing operations and conserve the health of the land.

NOXIOUS WEED MANAGEMENT

The Santa Rosa Ranger District places a very high priority on working across political boundaries to address weed problems. The District employs four seasonal crew members that catalog and treat over a dozen noxious weeds throughout the growing season, and boasts one of the more aggressive noxious weed management programs in the state. The following accomplishments highlight the Santa Rosa Ranger District's past year's program and our upcoming plans:

- Over 1,600 acres of noxious weeds were treated during the 2009 summer season.
- Forest Service crews and employees work closely with the Paradise Valley Weed District, BLM, NDF, private landowners, and other partners to address weed infestations across administrative boundaries.

FIRE MANAGEMENT SERVICE FIRST AGREEMENT WITH BLM

The Forest Service has been working closely with the Winnemucca District BLM to capitalize on interagency fire suppression efficiencies in the management of the Forest Service Paradise Valley wildland fire engine crew. Historically, Winnemucca District BLM has staffed their program with a fire management officer and other fire leadership positions.

The Forest Service has similarly explored a number of options to economically support the single Forest Service engine in Paradise Valley. Under a proposed Service First Agreement, the Forest Service fire suppression forces would work

under the BLM fire management officer and duty officers. Such a consolidation will provide better integration, cost savings, and most importantly, safer working conditions for the Paradise Valley fire engine crew.

UNAUTHORIZED LIVESTOCK

Unauthorized livestock on the Santa Rosa Ranger District is a continuing resource management challenge on several of our allotments on the north end of the District, specifically near Fort McDermitt, Nevada:

- The majority of trespass livestock are horses. These animals consume forage otherwise available to local ranchers through authorized grazing permits.
- Livestock permittees that legally use public forage and abide by National Forest grazing rules are penalized by those who illegally use the forage.
- The District has been attempting to address the situation for over 20 years.
- As indicated by the length of time we have been working on this problem, it is not an easy problem to solve.

The economics of trespass livestock are unfavorable to conserving forage and key habitats on the National Forest. Some examples that better explain this present situation include the following:

- We will likely spend thousands issuing a warning, then a ticket, documenting a case, and finally taking the owner of trespass livestock to federal court, where past fines have been less than \$400.
- The economics of a trespass livestock roundup are not any better. An interagency roundup between the BLM and the Forest Service has been estimated to cost \$400,000 to gather up animals worth less than \$10,000.
- We are required by law to safely drive impounded livestock to a temporary central location, document the ownership of each animal, transport them to a permanent facility, care and feed the animals, contact the owners to see if they want to pay fines to retrieve their livestock, and then attempt to

sell the animals remaining or turn them over to the State of Nevada (which then faces the financial burden of caring for and selling these animals).

- Cattle are valued for their meat, and are easily sold.
- Horses cannot be sold for meat by law, making it very difficult to sell horses given that other federal programs give horses away for a small fee through an adoption program. There are unfortunately more horses than people are willing to adopt.

SUMMARY OF OUR SUCCESSES

The District has continued to restore wet meadows through headcut mitigation, build fences to better manage livestock and habitat, restore historic burns, and treat noxious weeds, helping to retain a viable livestock industry, and providing one of the better places to grow sage grouse in Nevada.

We are successfully implementing our District Travel Management Plan by posting open motorized travel routes and decommissioning some routes that are redundant or are causing resource damage. These are routes that have been pioneered or created by visitors, routes that go to the same location, or routes that do not add significantly more distance before ending (usually less than one-eighth - of-a-mile). We worked cooperatively with interested parties in Humboldt County to complete the travel plan. We hope this success serves as a model for development and implementation of other travel management decisions

We will continue to work hard to promote a rich and plentiful mix of plant and wildlife species, outstanding scenery, and sustainable resource uses, such as domestic livestock grazing.

CONCLUSION

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and committee members, for today's speaking engagement that enabled us to discuss our concerns and highlight our successes. I will be happy to discuss any questions that you may have regarding the Santa Rosa Ranger District, as will our new Ranger, Jeff Ulrich, who can be reached any time at 775-443-6999 or 775-623-5025, ext. 115.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jeff has a bachelor's degree in biochemistry and two separate master's degrees; one in recreation and one in forestry. Jeff has served at all levels of the Forest Service (District, Forest, Region, and Washington Office) from the District where he began his career in Aspen, Colorado, to the Washington Office, and is now back serving as District Ranger. He has also worked for a number of different Forests and Grasslands in Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Wyoming.

Jeff served as a wildland fire fighter throughout much of the western United States for over 25 years, serving as a basic boots-on-the-fire-line fire fighter for over 10 years, and later serving in various fire planning functions with numerous overhead teams.

Jeff has been learning throughout his career and brings an active-management ecosystem approach to managing the Santa Rosa District. Jeff enjoys both the physical as well as the intellectual challenge of being District Ranger. Jeff views the Ranger District as the foundation of the Forest Service.

-END OF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH-