

**TESTIMONY ON RESOURCE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES
ON THE
AUSTIN/TONOPAH RANGER DISTRICTS
HUMBOLDT-TOIYABE NATIONAL FOREST
FOR THE
LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS**

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Committee Members for providing this opportunity to speak before the Legislative Committee on Public Lands. My name is Steven Williams and I am the District Ranger for the Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts. I have been the District Ranger for three months. Even though I am new to the Austin and Tonopah areas I spent the last 12 years on the Santa Rosa Ranger District in Winnemucca as a Rangeland Management Specialist. My testimony today will update the committee on management actions currently being implemented on the Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts. I will provide some background on the District and then address the following areas in more detail.

1. Wild Horse and Burro
2. Central Nevada Elk Plan
3. Noxious Weeds
4. Fire and Fuels Management
5. Austin/Tonopah Recreation and Tourism Framework Plan

BACKGROUND

The Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts are located in central Nevada within Nye, Lander and Eureka Counties. The Districts contain approximately 2.3 million acres on five mountain ranges which are the Paradise, Shoshone, Toiyabe, Toquima, Monitor, and Hot Creek Ranges. The bulk of the land area is within Nye and Lander Counties however, the north end of the Monitor Range is in Eureka County. We have two offices, one in Austin and one in Tonopah. There are also three wildernesses that comprise a total of 251,000 acres. They are the Arc Dome, Alta-Toquima and Table Mountain Wildernesses.

These Districts contain some of the most beautiful and diverse land in Nevada. These lands provide important recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, mountain biking, hiking and off highway vehicle use. The District has eleven campgrounds and all receive substantial use.

EXHIBIT C Lands Document consists of **4 pages**.

- Entire document provided.
- Due to size limitations, _____ and _____ provided. A copy of the complete document is available through the Research Library (775/684-6827) or e-mail library@lcb.state.nv.us.

Meeting Date: **07-20-04**

We also permit livestock grazing on 32 allotments. Permitted use is approximately 33,000 AUMs.

I'll now go into more detail about management activities on the Districts.

WILD HORSE AND BURROS

The Austin/Tonopah Districts contain 15 active Wild Horse and Burro territories containing approximately 1700 wild horses and burros. This is the most of any National Forest Ranger District.

We are cooperating with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to establish Appropriate Management Levels on these territories. This will enable us to initiate regular gathers.

Our Washington Office has transferred funds to the BLM to enable them to conduct gathers on National Forest System lands. This allows for a more efficient use of the funds since the Forest Service doesn't have the infrastructure to deal with the horses that the BLM has.

No gathers are scheduled for this year. However, in 2005 we are planning to remove 233 horses from Butler Basin Territory and the Little Fish Lake Territory in the Monitor Mountain Range.

We recently hired Tom Seley, a Rangeland Management Specialist. He comes from the Bureau of Land Management where he was a Wild Horse and Burro Specialist. He will be based out of the Tonopah Office and one of his priorities will be the Wild Horse and Burro program for the Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts.

In addition, Toni Strauss who is the Wild Horse and Burro Specialist for 5 Regions in the Forest Service is based out of the Humboldt-Toiyabe Forest Supervisors Office in Sparks.

In summary the budget for our Wild Horse and Burro program in Nevada is adequate to fund gathers and we will begin determining the Appropriate Management Levels in 2005.

CENTRAL NEVADA ELK PLAN

The Central Nevada Elk Plan was completed in March 2004. The next step is to complete a memorandum of agreement between all parties. This memorandum will identify and outline the responsibilities governing the interagency partnership for elk and elk habitat management in central Nevada.

The Coordination and Oversight Team, of which I'm a member, held our first meeting in Tonopah on July 15, 2004.

As part of the Forest Service responsibilities we are currently developing and implementing a habitat or vegetative monitoring program.

We are also submitting proposals to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Mule Deer Foundation to help fund projects that will improve the habitat for these species.

NOXIOUS WEEDS

Noxious Weeds have been identified as one of the top four threats to the National Forests. The Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts have the potential to contain and reduce the amount of noxious weeds that are present in this area. We are placing a very high priority to continue to address this problem.

A two person crew has been inventorying and treating noxious weed infestations throughout the summer. We estimate we have currently treated over 200 acres of the 700 acres that are known to exist on the Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts.

The best defense against noxious weeds is to prevent them from becoming established. The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest has implemented a Noxious Weed Free Forage policy. We are providing information to grazing permittees and outfitter/guides. We are also placing informative signs at trailheads and we are working with Nevada Department of Wildlife to distribute information.

Noxious weed prevention, treatment, and inventorying will continue to be a high priority on the Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts.

FIRE AND FUELS MANAGEMENT

Wildfires have also been identified as one of the top four threats to the National Forests. Historically the Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts have not had many large wildfires, although in 2000 and 2002 the Wall Canyon Fire and Ellsworth Fire burned approximately 12,000 acres combined.

We are finding a substantial number of pinyon trees dying from "Ips" beetle infestations. For approximately two years after these trees die they are very susceptible to wildfires because of the dead needles that are still on the trees. Many of our pinyon /juniper stands are now ripe for catastrophic wildfires.

During the spring of this year we successfully conducted a prescribed burn on 900 acres of pinyon/juniper. This was primarily in support of the Intermountain Research Station, to assist them in studying the effects of prescribed fire on pinyon/juniper habitats.

We are currently in the planning stages for a fuels treatment project to be implemented next spring. We are proposing to conduct a prescribed burn on 3500 to 4500 acres on the south end of the Monitor Mountain Range. This project will reduce the potential for catastrophic wildfire, improve habitats for wildlife and improve forage for livestock.

The burn will result in a mosaic pattern of burned areas interspersed with unburned areas. Of the 3500 to 4500 acres, approximately 50 to 70 percent will actually be burned.

We are coordinating with the Bureau of Land Management to construct fuel breaks around several of the communities in the area. This year we plan to complete a fuel break around Manhattan.

We are also beginning the analysis on the remainder of the Monitor Mountain Range and plan on expanding the prescribed burning program to 40,000 acres per year.

These types of fuels treatment projects will become a regular occurrence on the Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts. We believe we can't wait any longer to deal with this threat.

AUSTIN/TONOPAH RECREATION AND TOURISM FRAMEWORK PLAN

In April of this year Shapins Associates and BBC Research & Consulting assisted in preparing a Recreation and Tourism Framework Plan for the Austin and Tonopah Ranger Districts. This plan outlines recommendations for building partnerships and fostering a regional stewardship ethic in order to create high quality visitor experiences and help strengthen local economies. I'll talk about this plan in more detail as a later agenda item.

CONCLUSION

This concludes my prepared comments. Thank you Mr. Chairman and committee members for this opportunity to speak. I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have regarding the Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts.