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COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
OVERSIGHT HEARING
WORKING RANCHES, HEALTHY RANGE AND MAINTAINING OPEN SPACE
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MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to present the subcommittee with an overview of livestock grazing management by the Forest Service. The Forest Service has been managing rangelands for more than 100 years, and we have enjoyed a long history of partnerships with livestock producers who rely upon National Forest System (NFS) lands. Livestock grazing on National Forests reserved from the public domain is administered under a number of statutes, including the Granger-Thye Act of 1950, the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960, the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974, and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, among others. These laws augment the authority in the Organic Act of 1897, under which the forest reserves that became our National Forests were established and which directs the agency to regulate the use and occupancy of the forests to protect them from destruction. In addition to these statutes, the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 also applies to livestock grazing on National Grasslands. This law authorized a program of land conservation and utilization to improve past land use practices.

Livestock grazing on public rangelands has been and continues to be an important and appropriate use of our public lands and is important to the economic vitality and cultural identity of many rural communities. We recognize that most ranchers are good stewards of the land, and that they are essential contributors to retaining rangelands as open space and working lands across the nation. Maintaining sustainable rangeland health is dependent on proper planning, management, and use. Invasions of exotic and noxious

species, fire, drought, and overgrazing have occurred over time, have contributed to reduced productivity of rangelands in some locations, and have become management challenges. However, we are working diligently to maintain the health of the rangelands under our care. The Forest Service also works with landowners and other land managers to ensure rangelands are productive for current and future use.

Loss of Open Space – A Resource Management Challenge

Loss of open space has been identified by Chief Dale Bosworth as one of the four threats to our Nation's forests and grasslands. In many locations, loss of open space poses a great challenge to effective land management. Years ago, most the national forests and grasslands were buffered by miles of rural landscape and rangeland. Now those lands are increasingly developed into part of the wildland/urban interface. The Forest Service believes that these changes on the land have relevance for public lands and their management in the future. The agency also understands that the development of open space is driven by a multitude of social and economic factors, some of which are beyond the mission or ability of the Forest Service to address. However, for our part, we want to ensure that Forest Service policies help to keep working ranches in operation and the land whole, in the best tradition of conservation.

America is losing important working rangelands to development across the Nation. The loss of open space affects our air, water, and vegetation, degrades wildlife habitat, potentially reduces outdoor-based economic opportunities, and poses a threat to the health, sustainability, and viability of ecosystems. That is why protecting our public rangelands is so important. In 2005, we had almost 8,700 permittees authorized to graze on national forest lands, including about a quarter of the roughly 20,000 small ranchers in the West. Most family ranchers want to stay on the land, but many are under growing pressure to sell their lands.

The loss of open space results in fragmentation of the rangelands into smaller, more isolated patches. It also impacts biodiversity in the United States because larger ranches often contribute important wildlife habitat. Large animals such as elk use national forest lands in the summer and migrate to lower elevations in the fall. Without winter range, it

does not matter how good the summer range is on national forest land. The animals also require winter range to survive. Patches of land left over after development are often too small for the survival of certain species of birds and other wildlife. Corridors that connect natural habitats can be cut off, potentially leading to local extinction and reduced breeding success. Large-scale ranches can often protect and provide important habitat.

The Forest Service is not only concerned about the loss of open space; we work in partnership with others to address it. The Forest Service works with States and local governments, land conservation organizations such as Trust for Public Land, the Nature Conservancy and the Conservation Fund and willing landowners, through the Forest Legacy and Land and Water Conservation programs, to protect important and strategic forest and rangelands from conversion. The agency also recently completed the "Forests on the Edge" (FOTE) report which highlights the threats to private forests from housing developments. Based on the FOTE research, some 44.2 million acres (over 11 percent) of private forest across the conterminous United States could experience substantial increases in housing density by 2030. The Forest Service is currently undertaking phase two of the study which will assess housing density projections on forest and rangeland up to 10 miles from the edge of each National Forest and Grassland boundary. We believe that this information can be useful to resource managers and communities seeking to conserve natural resources.

The Forest Service Rangeland Management Program

Under the Rangeland Management program the Forest Service manages the vast and diverse rangeland resources on approximately 92 million acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands in 34 States. A major purpose of this program is to maintain a sustainable supply of forage for livestock and wildlife. The program also seeks to maintain open space and habitat connectivity across the nation by linking NFS grazing authorizations to privately-owned lands, and to support our nation's rural communities by helping sustain the ranching and farming lifestyle. Inspection of grazing allotments is conducted to determine the health of rangeland ecosystems, support collaborative and sustained watershed restoration efforts, and to monitor compliance with grazing authorizations. Data gathered through monitoring is also utilized to prepare National Environmental

Policy Act (NEPA) analyses and when making subsequent decisions for allotment management. These decisions are then translated to on-the-ground instructions for range managers and permittees through collaboratively-developed allotment management plans. In 2005, the Forest Service administered approximately over 9,300 active livestock grazing permits, and about 9.3 million animal unit months of permitted grazing by cattle, horses, sheep, and goats. Nearly all this permitted grazing is located in the Western states (99 percent), with only about one percent occurring in the Eastern forests.

Issues and Approaches for Forest Service Rangeland Management

Grazing Allotment Planning, NEPA Analysis and Rangeland Decisions

One of the most significant issues associated with our management of livestock grazing for the past several years has been allotment planning. Specifically, the issue is the ability of the agency to ensure the necessary environmental analysis has been completed for all grazing allotments.

Section 504 of Public Law 104-19 (Rescissions Act) directed the Chief of the Forest Service to identify grazing allotments that required National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis and to "establish and adhere to" a schedule for the completion of that analysis. The end date established in the schedule was 2010. The Rescissions Act was needed given the Forest Service's challenge in 1995 of trying to complete the NEPA analysis on most allotments, with the approximately 50 percent of Forest Service grazing permits due to expire.

The 2003 Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, Public Law 108-7 (as amended by the 2003 Emergency Wartime Supplemental Appropriations Act) directed the Secretary of Agriculture to renew grazing permits for those permittees whose permits expired prior to or during fiscal year 2003.

The 2004 Interior Appropriations Act (P.L. 108-108) further directed the Secretary to renew grazing permits that expired or were transferred or waived between 2004 and 2008, and directed the Secretary to report to Congress beginning in November 2004, and

every two years thereafter, the extent to which analysis required under applicable laws is being completed prior to the expiration of grazing permits. This direction allowed the agency to continue NEPA analysis according to the priority needs as determined at the Forest level.

The 2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P. L. 108-447) further directed that for fiscal years 2005 through 2007, certain decisions made by the Secretary to authorize grazing on an allotment shall be categorically excluded, from documentation in an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement under NEPA. To be categorically excluded the following conditions would apply:

- The decision continues current grazing management of the allotment;
- Monitoring indicates that current grazing management is meeting, or satisfactorily moving toward objectives in the land management plan, and
- The decision is consistent with agency policy concerning extraordinary circumstances.

The total number of allotments that may be categorically excluded under this authority may not exceed 900.

In 2005, the Forest Service provided guidance for the national forests and grasslands in order to comply with P.L. 108-447 when preparing NEPA analysis for allotments. This legislation has helped the agency to reduce the number of allotments requiring NEPA analysis and focus on completing environmental analysis in an expedited manner on those allotments still remaining on the 1996 Rescissions Act schedule.

The Forest Service continues to complete NEPA analyses on grazing allotments. From 1995 to the end of fiscal year 2005, nearly 3,200 allotments have NEPA analysis completed. An approximate 480 allotments are planned for completion of NEPA requirements this fiscal year. The Forest Service remains committed to completing the NEPA analysis on the remaining allotments by 2010 without disrupting permitted livestock grazing activities. We will track our progress and report periodically to Congress.

Grazing Permit Efficiencies

For several years, the Forest Service has evaluated alternative procedures that would satisfy our legal obligations, provide the agency with management flexibility, shorten the decision-making time, and reduce the cost to the taxpayer associated with rangeland management decisions. The agency is continuing dialogue with our colleagues at the Bureau of Land Management and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to address the challenges of complying with NEPA in a timely and effective manner. In addition, the agency is working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Bureau of Land Management *on* the development and use of quantitative tools that assess rangeland health and sustainability by using indicators that are linked to existing monitoring data.

Expertise in Rangeland Management

Rangelands management expertise is necessary to fulfill our mission to manage National Forest System lands. The Forest Service is addressing the loss of rangeland management skills and strengthening on-the-ground expertise through recruitment, training and process efficiencies. The Forest Service, working with other State and federal partners, has supported a national Range School that provides training sessions for improving essential collaborative skills for managers, permittees, and other interested people focusing on ecology, economy, and social issues regarding rangelands. The Forest Service has been working closely with the Bureau of Land Management, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, the Society for Rangeland Management, and regional Forest Service leadership to conduct two training sessions so far in 2006.

A collaborative working group of Forest Service professionals, university professors and researchers developed a specialized training course for line officers and managers and that course was presented in April 2006. This “Rangeland Management for Line Officers” course stressed critical decision making that accurately reflects an understanding of federal land ranching, rangeland science, and an appreciation for the vital role ranching plays in reducing the loss of open space and the environmental benefits that come from grazing.

Monitoring

The ecological conditions of rangelands often affect the social and economic stability of many rural communities. To assure these lands are capable of providing sustainable products for future generations, the Forest Service monitors the ecological conditions of these lands against specific standards. Standards, for the most part, have been developed in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Forest Service has put in place and is utilizing the many monitoring protocols necessary for proper management of the rangeland resources.

Implementation and effectiveness monitoring are two types of monitoring that the agency uses. Implementation monitoring is an annual measurement of rangeland resources, such as vegetation use, to assess environmental effects. Effectiveness monitoring is long-term (5 to 6 years) where rangeland resources are monitored to assess whether prescriptions and objectives set forth in Forest Plans, allotment management plans or other relevant documents are being met.

The Forest Service has worked with grazing industry representatives over the years to develop our implementation and effectiveness monitoring. In 2003, we signed a national Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Public Lands Council (PLC) and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) for the implementation of a cooperative rangeland monitoring program. We continue to collaborate with our permittees in order to improve the quality and quantity of short and long-term allotment level monitoring on National Forest System rangelands.

To further this collaboration the Forest Service, PLC and NCBA in April 2004 signed a joint letter which was delivered to Forest Service personnel and permittees requesting volunteers to establish pilots for monitoring under this MOU to facilitate the process and lead the way for others to follow. This is a great opportunity for both entities to collaborate on long-term goals and objectives for sustainable rangeland resources.

Several National Forests and National Grasslands such as on the Bighorn and Rio Grande

National Forests have established programs that encourage grazing permittees to conduct implementation monitoring in cooperation with the Forest Service. Permittees, in conjunction with the Forest Service, other Federal agencies, universities and rangeland consultants, have worked to develop monitoring programs.

In the Southwestern Region, the Forest Service has developed a cooperative agreement with the University of Arizona focused on collaborative monitoring. The goal of the agreement is to utilize the University's expertise to assist in the development of agency monitoring strategies for rangelands. For example, the agreement with the University of Arizona will focus on improving monitoring data collection and analysis related to natural resource management; developing collaborative opportunities between the Forest Service and non-governmental entities and organizations to monitor the ecological trends of national forest rangelands in Arizona; establishing uniform monitoring protocols that everyone understands; enhancing data collection processes, training, and reporting methods; and increasing the number of national forest allotments being monitored.

Most of our monitoring efforts have been on short-term implementation monitoring. The Forest Service is now attempting to increase long-term condition and trend monitoring. Although implementation monitoring can give valuable information, long term monitoring will help the agency determine if we are moving towards or meeting forest plan goals and objectives.

Drought

Drought still persists through areas of the West. The southwestern States continue to be the area of greatest concern. We continue to work with our partners in the livestock industry to improve coordination and communication, as we mitigate effects that drought has had on rangelands in the West. The agency recognizes that ranching is an important component of the economies of many western rural communities, and the agency is doing its utmost to maintain the forage resource for long term sustainability.

We have actively coordinated drought management with Federal, State, and local government agencies and officials. The agency is actively participating on national, state,

and local drought task forces coordinating drought relief to our permittees. We are working closely with industry representatives to provide up-front information to facilitate local communications and work together to resolve resource issues. We have managed drought impacts on a case-by-case basis with local managers to communicate as early as possible with permittees so they are informed and have enough time to implement temporary changes or a long-term strategy.

Invasive Species

A threat to sustainable use and proper management of our rangelands is the ever-growing presence of invasive species. The Chief of the Forest Service has targeted invasive species as one of four most significant threats to our Nation's forest and rangeland ecosystems. It has been said invasive species are a "catastrophic wildfire in slow motion." Thousands of invasive plants, insects, and other species have infested many hundreds of thousands of acres of land and water across the Nation, causing massive disruption to ecosystem function, reducing biodiversity, and degrading ecosystem health, including rangelands. Add great economic loss to massive ecosystem impacts and that is the threat we have.

The Forest Service has taken steps to improve its ability to prevent, detect, control, and manage invasive species and to rehabilitate and restore affected rangelands. We are working strategically with our scientists, managers, and partners. We now have a National Strategy and Implementation Plan for Invasive Species. It outlines both short and long term goals. We are working with our partners to streamline procedures so actions can be taken quickly before invasions become widespread. We call this early detection and rapid response. This is a national initiative that supports local partnerships fighting invasive species. We have a national website (http://www.fs.fed.us/invasivespecies) available to the public which provides information and links to many other sites focused on invasive species. In 2006 we held a national conference for managers and partners to improve our efforts and build capacity to combat invasive species.

In FY 2005 we treated over 120,040 acres for invasive weeds, greatly surpassing our goal of 75,456 acres. In FY 2006 our goal is to treat about 81,000 acres and indications are we will surpass this goal.

SUMMARY

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. We are committed to making maximum use of our legislative authorities and policy direction in order to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generation.

This concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.