

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Testimony

Testimony on
Oversight Hearing on
Tucson Rod and Gun Club
CHIEF MICHAEL DOMBECK
US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service
Before the
House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
February 12, 1998

MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE

I am appearing before you today to discuss target ranges on National Forest System lands. I am accompanied by Bob Joslin, Deputy Chief for the National Forest System, who will speak about the Tucson Rod and Gun Club permit on the Coronado National Forest, the subject of this hearing. I am also accompanied by John McGee, Forest Supervisor of the Coronado National Forest, and Carolyn Holbrook, Assistant Director of Recreation for the Southwest Region.

The Forest Service manages over 191 million acres of land. All National Forest System lands are open to recreational shooting and hunting unless specifically closed by law or closure order. Areas of National Forest System lands closed to shooting generally are those with developed facilities such as campgrounds, summer home tracts, and heavily used recreation areas as well as administrative sites. In addition to the large acreage of National Forest System lands open, there are recreational target range facilities operated under special use permits. As of 1996, there were approximately 75 such target ranges on National Forest System lands. A few of the target range permits are restricted to archery only or to use by local law enforcement agencies. In addition to permitted target ranges, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of areas where people informally gather to shoot. The lawful use of firearms for shooting and hunting remains a welcome and legitimate use of National Forest System lands.

At times, conflicts arise with shooting areas, especially in National Forests adjacent to urban areas. We deal with these situations on a case-by-case basis and at the local level. For example, the Hebgen Ranger District on the Gallatin National Forest in Montana had a number of target shooting sites around the town of West Yellowstone in close proximity to major highways or residences on private land. The public was asked to comment on a proposed location for a range that would be large enough for the use, away from high value wildlife habitat and that would incorporate National Rifle Association (NRA) target range safety standards. This proposal was approved by the Gallatin Forest Supervisor and a group is developing the range with the help of a \$10,000 grant from the State of Montana. This is an example of how well we can arrive with a mutually satisfactory solution, working cooperatively with all the local and interested parties.

The situation in the San Bernardino National Forest was much different from that on the Gallatin. The San Bernardino is one of four National Forests in Southern California. All are heavily used "urban forests" with

varied uses concentrated near dense urban areas. On the San Bernardino National Forest, much of the shooting occurred in the Lytle Creek area. People came from over 100 miles away to shoot in this uncontrolled open area. With heavy use came murders, gang activity, and illegal weapons of all types and the area became known as a 24 hour "free-fire zone". Assaults, carjackings, self-inflicted shootings, and shooting of other people occurred in the area. Weapons such as grenade launchers, pipe bombs, bazookas, black powder cannons and even a flame-thrower were confiscated. Trash became a significant problem as people hauled televisions, gas cans, refrigerators, and stolen vehicles to use as targets. The Forest Supervisor closed Lytle Creek to shooting in 1995 because the situation was beyond the ability of Forest employees and the County Sheriff to manage and because of the exorbitant costs of cleaning up the garbage.

The 1995 closure of Lytle Creek to shooting led to increased shooting pressure in other nearby areas. In the spring of 1996, the Angeles National Forest Supervisor closed all areas to shooting except for two permitted areas because of concerns similar to those associated with Lytle Creek. At the same time, fires caused by shooting increased. One of these fires ignited on September 13, 1997, and destroyed 11 homes. The cost of suppressing the fire exceeded \$1 million. Shortly afterwards, the San Bernardino National Forest Supervisor temporarily closed the entire National Forest to target shooting in order to address public safety and resource protection concerns. The San Bernardino National Forest is working for a local solution in concert with the NRA, target shooters, and communities to provide a safe place to shoot.

In the past 5 years, four target range permits have not been reissued. In all four cases the permittee elected not to renew the permit.

There are two key issues we must address in determining the future of target ranges on National Forest System lands: 1) public safety, particularly in areas of urban development adjacent to ranges and 2) contamination by lead and other hazardous substances and clean up costs associated with those hazardous substances. Hazards to human health and the environment may result in the need to cleanup hazardous materials associated with target ranges. The cleanup is governed by provisions in the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) and other applicable environmental laws. The future use of target ranges on National Forest System lands must conform to the requirements of applicable pollution control standards.

I would like to summarize the process by which we issue special use permits for target ranges. As with other uses which would result in placing facilities on public lands, an application for a special use permit must include a proposed master plan for development of facilities and operating procedures and an environmental protection plan. Both are subject to National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process including public participation. If the selected alternative in the NEPA analysis is to issue a permit for a target range, the permittee must prepare a final master plan, post a reclamation bond, and provide a certificate of insurance. After we issue a permit, we may still have to approve construction drawings and other matters before construction can begin. These steps do take time but are meant to ensure that safety, health, and environmental protection standards are met.

Madam Chairman, the Forest Service, through policy and actions, supports recreational shooting on National Forest System lands. Recreational shooting is addressed at the local level on a case-by-case basis. Individual National Forest Supervisors must sometimes take action to limit shooting to protect Forest resources and the safety of recreationists and residents who live nearby. I will be pleased to answer your questions.

#