



File Code: 1950-3

Date: October 10, 2008

Dear Interested Party,

In April 2007, the USDA Forest Service acquired 5200 acres of land where the 26th President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, spent time ranching in the North Dakota badlands. These lands are known as the “Elkhorn Ranchlands”. Over 50 conservation groups supported and helped to make this acquisition possible. These lands played a key role in forming Theodore Roosevelt’s conservation ethic and are considered to be the “cradle of conservation”. Just over a year ago, a commemorative event was held in Medora, North Dakota to celebrate the acquisition of these lands.

Around the time of the commemoration, the USDA Forest Service engaged the public in a series of open houses to share information about the newly acquired lands and join in a dialogue about future management. An assessment of the newly acquired lands was assembled, along with the input from the public, and is posted on the Dakota Prairie Grasslands website (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/dakotaprairie/>).

Now, I am asking for your participation in developing an amendment to Dakota Prairie Grasslands Land and Resource Management Plan (DPG Plan) for the Elkhorn Ranchlands. The Forest Service is proposing to amend the 2002 DPG Plan to establish management direction for the 5,200-acre Elkhorn Ranchlands purchase and to adjust the management direction assigned to the associated national grassland range allotments (18,000-acres). My proposal also includes several site-specific projects for the purchased lands and the adjoining allotments. I have enclosed a detailed description of the entire proposed action with this letter.

A key part of the proposal includes designating over 21,000 acres as a forage reserve or what some also call a “grassbank”, which is basically defined as “forage exchanged for conservation benefits”. Even though the Forest Service will continue to provide the permitted grazing associated with the lands to the Medora Grazing Association, the agency considers the two allotments vacant. That is, upon the sale and acquisition of the lands, no one ranching family or livestock grazing operation holds a priority permit to graze the lands.

The core of the proposal is to take advantage of the flexibility that the acquisition provides to the livestock grazing program and to make the lands available to all Medora Grazing Association members during periods of wildfire, drought and land restoration activities on their individual or community allotments. Restoration activities would include the use of prescribed fire to reduce juniper encroachment and to stimulate growth of forbs and grasses, resting regenerated cottonwood stands and riparian areas, and reversing sod forming short-grass prominence on sites that have replaced more productive mid-grasses such as sideoats grama and western wheatgrass. A paper titled, “An opportunity for Flexibility” provides more detailed information on the forage reserve and can be found on the DPG website.



I am interested in hearing what you think of my proposal. I'm particularly interested in receiving feedback describing any problems you see with the proposal, and suggestions you may have for addressing those concerns. I'd also like to hear about those aspects of the proposal you like and want to see carried forward. Comments provided in this way will be most useful in developing alternatives that can be analyzed as part of the planning process. In addition to your comments please include your name, address, telephone number, and the title of the project you are commenting on.

Your comments, including your name and address, will be considered part of the public record on the proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered regarding this project. If you need more information on submitting comments anonymously, please contact us or refer to 36 CFR 215 and 7 CFR 1.27(d).

While I am interested in hearing your comments and concerns throughout the planning process, to be most helpful in developing issues and alternatives for this project, please submit your comments by **November 24, 2008**. Opportunities to review and comment on the environmental analysis will be provided when the Draft Environmental Impact Statement is completed (Spring 2009). Written comments should be submitted to:

Dakota Prairie Grasslands Supervisor's Office
ATTN: Elkhorn Ranchlands Amendment
240 W. Century Ave.
Bismarck, ND 58503

Or by email to comments-northern-dakota-prairie@fs.fed.us.

If you have questions about the proposal or the process, please contact Sherri Schwenke, Planning and Public Affairs Staff Officer for the Dakota Prairie Grasslands, and the Team Leader for this project at the address above or call 701-250-4443

Thank you for your interest in the management of the Dakota Prairie Grasslands and in the future of the Elkhorn Ranchlands.

Sincerely,

/s/ Sherri K. Schwenke (for)
DAVID M. PIEPER
Grasslands Supervisor

Attachment