

Custer County Commissioners
USFS – Forest Priorities
Special Meeting
March 11, 2025

The Special meeting with the Salmon/Challis National Forest Supervisor- Heather DeGeest was called to order at 10:00 AM in the meeting room at the Challis Field Office. Attending were Commission Chairman Randy Corgatelli, Commissioner Gordon Vaden, Commissioner Will Naillon and Deputy Clerk Tina Hawkins representing Custer County. Heather DeGeest, Josh Milligan, Lance Stavast, John Runkle and Jeff Huntzman representing the Forest Service. Introductions were done around the table to help get acquainted.

Heather opened the meeting with a list of relevant topics. 1) Active Forest Management; 2) Roads/Travel Plan; 3) Forest Plan Revision; 4) Range/Grazing. Also discussed was the need for this type of meeting to be scheduled more frequently as work load allows.

FOREST MANAGEMENT: The new Forest Service Chief is Tom Shultz and the agency priorities are changing. Fuel reduction and forest health have moved to the top. The USFS will be maximizing the number of acres treated as well as providing timber sales. This will require a realignment of staff priorities, which will take some doing. Maintaining roads and access to the forest will be a necessity for fuel reduction and public access. Funding is also being cut, so maintaining the base use will be first to be funded. This forest is fortunate to currently have a re-established road crew. There is competition between the different forests for the project funding that comes in. Salmon/Challis Forest has been able to receive Disaster Relief Funding due to the wildfires of the past few years. These \$\$ are used to repair damage caused by the fires; ie: burnt bridges, noxious weed treatment, repair damaged roads, and rehab the burn scars. Heather was able to secure Disaster Relief Funding to repair the Pine Creek Road in Lemhi County.

Will offered his understanding of the administrative changes that are ongoing and sympathizes on the loss of employees, as he works in the mining industry. He appreciates the atmosphere of "customer service" and "project completion". Randy asked if there were any specific timber sales coming up? Heather responded "yes". Randy then broached the subject of local sawmills and how they are all gone. Heather feels that there are changes coming within the Forest Service timber rules, as they were made for a time long gone. Inquiry was made on cutting timber within the WSA's or Roadless Areas?

ROADS were then discussed. A good road system is required to do active forest management. The USFS Road Crew currently has 9 personnel, and a good amount of equipment. ie: backhoes, dozer, blade, loader and trucks. They set out to maintain 325 miles of road each year, but have a total of 2750 miles of roads in the Forest. The base funding amount for road maintenance is \$325,000.00. To complete a big project they have to request additional funding, such as the Pine Creek Road.

Heather explained the Pine Creek Road situation for the Commissioners. The Pine Creek Fire burned very hot at the upper end of the ranch. This area is very steep and the soils are highly erosive, especially now that they have been burned. Any big storm even will in all likelihood cause further erosion and blow outs. The funding she found to repair this road was through the Moose Creek Fire - Disaster Relief Funds. These \$ would have provided access for higher numbers of the public, had they been spent on

the Colson Cr. Road, but the Lemhi Co. Commissioners have demanded they be used on the Pine Cr. Road repairs.

TRAVEL PLANNING: Josh spoke on the 2009 Travel Plan and Forest Roads map. It is possible to do corrections when needed, as long as it is not a major change. The two maps, 1) over snow and 2) over dirt are out and it is the public's responsibility to understand the limitations of each. The USFS struggles with "user created routes" that just happen in the course of public use. There are three designations of roads; A: Designated public roads (on map) B: Necessary system roads (not on map) C: User created roads (not on map or necessary). During a wildfire the USFS may utilize any and all of these types of roads. When the emergency is over, they are required by law to re-hab such roads that are not on the map.

Will offered his phone # as well as the other Commissioners #'s to assist them with this problem. It was agreed by all that a "Road Meeting" needs to be held to discuss this huge problem further and arrive at some joint plan for solutions. An April date will be set up as a Special Meeting to be held at the Commissioners Room. It was suggested that the Lost River Highway District be invited as well as Custer Co. Road & Bridge. The past agreement for "Joint use and operation of Equipment" also needs to be revived.

FOREST PLAN REVISION: Jeff went over the current Forest Plan and how it is fairly benign although it is quite old. He felt that there are a lot of "needs" that are not being met, but it is not the Forest Plan that is blocking success. More thought needs to go into just "what" is stopping their ability to respond to the current NEED. Heather spoke on the current changing priorities within the Forest Service and feels unable to predict their future direction well enough to even attempt plan revision at this time. The Commissioners all understood her position.

RANGE: Randy asked why in 1970's there were 27,000+ head of livestock on the Custer County rangelands, and in 2024 there are only 15,000? Will requested the numbers for permitted AUM's as well as authorized AUM's on the Forest Service lands? Heather provided the numbers. In 2024 there were 74,000+ Permitted AUM's and 54,000+ Authorized AUM's, leaving a difference of 20,000 AUM's. Lance responded to the questions. The 20,000 unused AUM's are either from non-use at the permittee's discretion, or for resource protection. The Lava Lake sheep allotment is currently in non-use by the permittee for personal reasons. Wilderness designation has also caused the sale and closure of some allotments. The Bighorn Sheep interface with domestic sheep is also cause for closure of some allotments. He informed the Commissioners that if an allotment is lost by a permittee, then other users can apply for the grazing permit.

Final items of interest briefly discussed were:

- 1) Set up a joint Road Meeting in April. Dates to be finalized between the UFSF and Commissioners.
- 2) Allow chainsaw use in the wilderness. Enable clearing of the massive amount of down timber across the trail system, within a limiting time slot.
- 3) Fuel reduction / controlled burns to continue in Wino Basin. For range improvement and slow conifer encroachment
- 4) Faster project competition. Remove unnecessary regulatory paperwork burden on local staff.
ie: heritage inspections before a prescribed burn in an area that has already burned many times.

All attending agreed that more of these types of meetings need to be enjoyed, and the conversations were beneficial to all involved.

Meeting adjourned at 12:05 PM.



Lura Baker

Attest: Clerk Lura Baker

Randy Corgatelli
Chairman, Randy Corgatelli