



April 25, 2014

Jake Lubera, District Ranger
Jemez Ranger District
PO Box 150
Jemez Springs, NM87025

Dear Mr. Lubera,

This letter, which was unanimously approved by our Board of Directors last night, contains New Mexico Trout's comments on the project on the Rio Cebolla described in the CE (Categorical Exclusion) scoping document issued on March 28, 2014. We strongly support the project described in the CE for all the reasons described below.

Just for the record, New Mexico Trout is a 400-member, all-volunteer, 501c(3) organization whose mission is the preservation and enhancement of trout fishing in New Mexico's waters through restoration of riparian habitats and through the education of the public about trout fishing and the value of trout habitats. We have three major programs that are supported by member dues and annual fund raising activities: (1) Conservation; (2) Youth education; and (3) Project Healing Waters. The Youth program sponsors classroom and on-stream fly fishing, fly tying, and riparian habitat and entomology classes. We also sponsor two awards at the NM State Science Fair for projects related to our mission. Project Healing Waters teaches the restorative benefits of fly fishing to returning military veterans. The Conservation program does volunteer projects with Federal and State land management agencies to restore and improve riparian habitats in New Mexico's coldwater streams.

As you know, our organization has done many volunteer restoration projects with the Jemez District. We have donated money and have provided significant in-kind match to many District projects and our work has received favorable recognition and awards from such programs as the EPA-funded Respect the Rio.

Although the CE letter is framed primarily as a demonstration project for the New Mexico Meadow Jumping Mouse, the work described will have very significant benefits to the condition of the Rio Cebolla itself, including the fish and other aquatic organisms that live in it. Unregulated cattle grazing along the Cebolla, as described below, has effectively destroyed this part of the river as a sport fishery. Even though the riparian fencing described in the CE will protect only a small part of the stream, we expect it to have major benefits to fish habitat and water quality.

Presently, large numbers of privately owned cattle graze on the allotment that includes the project area. The cattle flock to the same part of the stream and riparian area that draw human recreationists, such as fly anglers like our New Mexico Trout members. This has created conflicts, since almost continuous grazing in the riparian zone has been extremely destructive to the stream and has destroyed what was once a prime recreational fishery. Forest Service regulations allow the cattle to be in that riparian area for only a few weeks of every season, but the regulations are widely ignored and Forest Service enforcement is lax.

The degradation caused by grazing is widely recognized. For example, in describing the Rio Cebolla, the guidebook, *Fly Fishing in Northern New Mexico*, 2nd ed., UNM Press (2002), p.69 states, “In the early 1990’s, fences that kept livestock out of the stream channel were removed. Grazing cattle immediately trampled the incredibly deep undercuts, destroying the holding lies of some of the biggest brown trout in the mountain range.” What was once one of the prime trout fishing destinations in northern NM has become a shallow, muddy stream, denuded of willows and alders, and worthless for fly fishing and most other recreational uses.

The Forest Service’s own Rio Cebolla Stream Inventory Report (January 2003) states, “The Rio Cebolla is not properly functioning (see Table 5) for all of the criteria in categories of water quality, habitat characteristics, and channel condition and dynamics (except pool quality) and [is] at risk for State Standards for...streambank condition.” (p.7). “This bank erosion is removing the undercut bank habitat and adding fine sediments to the stream, as well as allowing elevated stream temperatures.” (p. 10).

The Term Grazing Permit and Annual Operating Instructions for the San Diego allotment require practices that should minimize stream damage. However, we consistently observe that the Permittees do not follow the best management practices required by the Instructions. As far as we can tell, the Forest Service does not enforce the regulations and the Permittees feel no

pressure to comply with them. We see cattle on the allotment whenever we are up there, well outside the allowed periods and practically all summer and fall. For just one example, the two grazing periods stated in the Instructions are 5/1 – 5/18 and 10/13 – 10/27 for the Cebolla/Lake Fork Pasture where the CE project would be located. However, on Friday, April 18, 2014 (just a week ago), I observed at least 25 head of cattle in almost the exact the area shown on the maps in the CE. I counted over 50 head in that same meadow on November 18 of last year.

The Term Grazing Permit describes other best management practices that are being ignored. I won't repeat them here, but call your attention to Part 3 of Permit number 10-0018-1 for Permittee number 03310-1, which lists a number of very good guidelines that any on-ground inspection will show are not being followed.

It is clear to us that the only practical way to keep cattle from degrading the stream is to fence them out. The CE describes fencing a very short length of stream as a demonstration project. The inconvenience to the Permittees will be insignificant. Their cattle have destroyed a recreational resource that New Mexico Trout members have a right to use and enjoy. This is in direct contradiction to the Grazing Permit requirement to “Give preferential consideration to resources dependent on riparian areas over other resources when conflicts among uses arise.”

We believe that the facts on the ground and the Forest Service's own rules and regulations strongly support a decision to approve the project described in the CE letter of 03/28/2014. We look forward to learning that you have approved it.

Sincerely yours,

Ronald Loehman
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