



1829 10th Ave W, Suite B
Seattle WA 98119

www.conservationnw.org

SEPA Coordinator, WDFW Regulatory Services Section
600 Capitol Way N
Olympia, WA 98501

September 9, 2014

Dear Lisa Wood,

We are writing to submit comments on the Determination of Non-Significance (DNS) 14-059 and Environmental Checklist for the Stray Gulch Road Construction. We believe this decision and analysis are inadequate to address the previously recognized significant issues with a road in Stray Gulch, to recognize and utilize “environmental information you know about” relevant to this proposal, to be consistent with state legislative language and show responsible use of public funding, and to engage relevant stakeholders from diverse perspectives in developing the proposal.

We respectfully request that you withdraw the DNS and issue a Determination of Significance on the road construction and prepare an Environmental Impact Statement.

Recognized Significant Issues

This road construction project is fairly unique, as it benefits from extensive materials identifying natural resource issues related to the presence and use of roads in this landscape from the original 2012 Colockum Stray-Tekison Road Abandonment Decision¹ and accompanying documents as well as the application and documentation to the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO)². The project application documented 15 species and communities with special status in this “critical habitat”. The Scoring Criteria for the grant states that “the roads in Stray Gulch and Tekison Creek compromise the habitat functions of these drainages in several ways. Stream-adjacent roads impact water quality through erosion, lowering the value of the stream for aquatic life. Motorized vehicles contribute to the spread of noxious weeds, which invade and reduce the quality of habitats for wildlife species. These impacts affect adjacent habitats and even the entire Wildlife Area. For example, Stray Gulch and Tekison Creek are creeks that drain to the Columbia River. Noxious weeds, once established can spread and reduce habitat quality in entire drainages and watersheds.” The Scoring Criteria goes on to document the biological importance and uniqueness of the shrub steppe habitat that the Environmental Checklist indicates will be impacted by this road construction by stating the site is “dominated by big sagebrush and bitterbrush with an understory of native grasses such as bluebunch wheatgrass, sandberg bluegrass, and forbs such as lupine and balsamroot. Good condition shrub-steppe provides habitat for a diversity of fish and wildlife species, and for a

¹ May 2012 Notice of Final Determination, DNS #11-073, <http://wdfw.wa.gov/licensing/sepa/2011/11073fdns.pdf>

² PRISM Project #08-1528, Colockum Road Abandonment, <https://secure.rco.wa.gov/prism/search/ProjectSnapshot.aspx?ProjectNumber=08-1528>

comparatively high density of animals. Shrub-steppe habitats are one of the fastest disappearing habitats in Washington State, primarily due to conversion to agriculture, residential development, or damage from overgrazing. The Colockum supports some of the state's best remaining native shrub-steppe communities. The shrub-steppe habitats in Tekison and Stray Gulch are still intact due to the remoteness of the site, their protection from development, and they have not received livestock grazing for at least 30 years....The project is considered an important effort in the maintenance and restoration of the limited shrub-steppe habitats on the Colockum Wildlife Area and of Washington State. The Colockum is located between two remaining sub populations of sage grouse in eastern Washington, and is the only contiguous habitat between these populations. The State of Washington Greater Sage Grouse Recovery Plan (2004) identifies protecting the remaining habitat and restoring degraded habitat as key to maintaining sage grouse populations in Washington...the greatest need in this area is to close these roads to motorized vehicles and restore the damaged areas through grass, shrub and tree plantings, and by weed control....Infestation by noxious weeds has been an on-going problem in this area as well, as vehicles continue to carry weeds along the roads.” It states that into the future “WDFW will have full control and more management options to protect and enhance this area.”

These documents produced recently and in times when shrub-steppe has only gained recognition for its importance to biodiversity in our state, clearly document significant issues as recognized by the State. The DNS and environmental checklist for the road construction proposed do not recognize nor adequately address these issues including management of noxious weeds, disturbance of intact and remote shrub-steppe habitat, and impacts to sage grouse management and recovery plans. The DNS and Environmental Checklist also do not speak to how the new project is either consistent or changes the long-term assurances made to the public for how this area would be managed. The original decision went through both a public review process and competitive public funding process, both of which this new proposal must address.

Utilization of Existing Science to Inform Decision

Question #8 on the Environmental Checklist states “List any environmental information you know about that has been prepared, or will be prepared, directly related to this proposal” and the only answer provided was “the location has been reviewed for species of concern with no findings.” This ignores recent environmental analyses conducted by your own agency specific to this landscape and recreational use in the Naneum to Columbia River Recreation Plan, science that your agency has led in the creation of through the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Working Group, and conservation planning conducted through the Arid Lands Initiative.

Natural resource staff from your agency in coordination with the Department of Natural Resources have generated and presented biological assessments of the Naneum to Columbia River Recreation Planning Area that produced tri-composite maps for summer, summer plus seasonal, and winter recreational motorized use that incorporated biological factors, soils and geology, and management issues. In a review of the maps compiled on March 20, 2013 available online³ the Stray Gulch is is rated as “low suitability” under all seasons for motorized use. According the biological component⁴ of the tri-composite the Stray Gulch Road Construction project area overlaps (or appears to from the maps available as PDF, although Section 32 is

³ Naneum to Columbia River, DNR & WDFW RECREATION PLAN RECREATION LAND SUITABILITY, 2013.

http://www.dnr.wa.gov/Publications/amp_rec_naneum_suitability_tri.pdf

⁴ Naneum to Columbia River, Recreation Plan Recreation Land Suitability.

http://www.dnr.wa.gov/Publications/amp_rec_naneum_suitability_bio.pdf

color blocked out) wetlands, fish habitat, riparian habitats, elk winter range, bighorn sheep habitat, mule deer habitat, cliffs and bluffs, and shrub steppe habitat. Of these issues that the proposed action overlaps, six were identified in this analysis to offer “low suitability” to recreational facilities. Low suitability was defined for this analysis as “Areas with long-term considerations. These primarily include Habitat Conservation Plan protected habitats and State priority habitats.” The Environmental Checklist notes the presence of species and habitats in the project area, but offers no discussion of the potential impacts or reference to this existing agency analysis.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife has been the co-lead agency for the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Working Group since its inception in 2007. In 2010, the *Washington Connected Landscapes Project: Statewide Analysis*⁵ was released identifying landscape scale patterns to maintain a connected network of habitats for wildlife in our state. Of the focal species analyzed that are listed as present within this landscape included bighorn sheep that shows the project proposal overlaps key habitat in a habitat concentration area and areas of low resistance for bighorn movement on the landscape (Appendix B). This analysis was followed by a finer scale analysis of the Columbia Plateau ecoregion in recognition of the importance of remaining options for conservation and restoration in this highly fragmented landscape. As the Scoring Criteria in the RCO grant indicated, this analysis confirmed the importance of the Colockum Wildlife Area including the Stray Gulch shrub-steppe in providing habitat connectivity for sage grouse (Appendix A). In addition to the analyses, the working group has produced tools to allow individuals and organizations to test scenarios for restoration and management in the Columbia Plateau that are available online. Although the definition of connectivity in these efforts is broader than the “migration routes” in the Environmental Checklist’s Question 5c, it is important information recognized by the State and federal government in policy (federal government relevant due to ownership of Section 32).

Finally, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife has invested staff capacity and resources to the conservation planning within the Arid Lands Initiative. The Arid Lands Initiative (ALI) is a diverse group representing public, private, and tribal interests (including the Service) working together to conserve and restore a viable, well connected ecosystem in eastern Washington’s arid lands – including the related freshwater habitats that sustain native plant and animal populations and support local communities with compatible economic development. In 2011 ALI produced a “Threats Ratings - Table” (Appendix C) that identifies that roads pose a medium threat to shrub-steppe grassland, a very high threat to sage grouse habitat, and a combined high threat to the arid landscape. Additionally, recreation poses a “medium” threat to sage grouse habitat with a medium threat overall to the arid landscape. While these are generalized rankings of threat on the landscape, it would seem the exercise is informative to considering proposals to change the status quo in a manner that would increase the threat in relevant habitats after the creation of this table.

For the range of habitat and species values in this landscape, it is inadequate for the Environmental Checklist to simply state that the area has been reviewed and no findings arose. Each of the findings listed above confirm the importance of the original closure in Stray Gulch not only for its stream adjacency, but for the terrestrial values of this habitat. All values that your agency has been a leader in developing and interpreting high quality science to guide the conservation and management of.

⁵ Washington Connected Landscapes Project: Statewide Analysis. 2010. <http://waconnected.org/statewide-analysis/>

Consistency with Legislative Direction

We understand that this proposal is a direct implementation of Washington State legislative proviso language from 2013 that directed the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife that “\$25,000 of the appropriation is provided solely for the department to construct a primitive road, of a minimum of one mile, with no adverse impacts on streams or riparian areas, in the Naneum road planning area within Kittitas county. This is to replace the lost general public access as a result of the Stray-Tekison road abandonment. The department shall collaborate in the placement of the road with the Kittitas county field and stream club.” (emphasis added).

The Naneum to Columbia River Recreation Plan, which we assume is the road planning area referenced in the legislation, is over 230,000 acres of state land in Kittitas and Chelan Counties. Analyses already discussed in this document show where in that planning area road construction would be of moderate or high suitability, and where numerous options to construct a road from an existing non-Green Dot system road exist.

The landscape that the road construction proposal proposes to enter is the largest roadless area on the Colockum Wildlife Area (and adjacent state ownerships in arid lands) that we find. Additionally all of the information presented to the public on this location show it is of low suitability for road construction, and the original closures garnered public support (on record by NOAA Fisheries, citizen, and Trout Unlimited). It seems a mis-use of public dollars to construct a road within 50-250 feet of a previously closed road segment (closed with public state dollars) when many of the risks from this new road repeat the reasons the previous segments were closed and restored. We believe that is likely why the legislative proviso language was written wisely enough to be interpreted broadly across a much wider acreage to offer access into this important wildlife area for the public, but in a way that uses our public funds wisely to protect and manage our natural resources.

Additionally, for this specific road proposal the legislation is clear that there are to be “no adverse impacts on streams or riparian areas”. The Environmental Checklist states that the proposed road will not disturb “riparian areas” and will remain a “safe distance” from live water, there is no detailed explanation of the proposal and the rationale and models to support its lack of impact with riparian areas, streams, and water. The Environmental Checklist states that the road will be within 200ft of a stream in its construction (sometimes as close as 50 feet), and if will cross 2 seasonal streams that only have water when the road is not anticipated to be used. Within this comment period I have not been able to walk the road segment yet (although I intend to), but upon examining a map the topography in the Stray Gulch appears steep and narrow raising the question as to whether any road segment in this gulch could avoid potential impacts to the stream downslope. Additionally although the road itself has been located upslope and is not removing any actual riparian vegetation, that does not mean there are no adverse impacts to streams and riparian areas. The new road in this location is likely to still increase the rate of run-off from any snowmelt and precipitation through its compacted surface interrupting the natural vegetated slope, which impacts late season flow in the stream. The road is still located within a sediment delivery zone, often discussed as 300 feet from the stream on the adjacent Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest where your agency coordinates on projects.

Engaging Relevant Stakeholders

We understand that the DNS and Environmental Checklist are public documents that were shared through the SEPA mailing lists and online for a 14-day public comment, which was extended in response to multiple

requests an additional 7 days. It would seem that with a project that has such clear additional stakeholders, an extra effort of review and engagement is warranted.

In addition to being a partner in the Arid Lands Initiative, the US Fish and Wildlife Service owns Section 32 which this project proposal bi-sects. The state manages this section in coordination with US Fish and Wildlife Service per a Memorandum of Understanding (Attachment D). This MOU states that the area is to be managed as a wildlife refuge, public shooting area, or game management unit and that only uses consistent and compatible with this purpose are allowed. The State is also to report to the use or non-use of these lands within the MOU annually on August 1st. Since the USFWS has a current priority for arid lands, habitat connectivity, and sage grouse – all mentioned previously as relevant to Section 32 and Stray Gulch – we request confirmation of consultation and approval from them on the construction of this road segment as well as the relevant annual reports discussing the Stray Gulch Road (i.e. 2012 after its closure and 2014 prior to its opening).

Less formally, we were surprised to learn that individuals and organizations that had commented on the original road closures in this area were unaware of the proposal for a road within 50-250 feet to be reconstructed. In addition to the robust discussions with Kittitas Field and Stream and other interests in their opposition to the road closure, there are public comments to WDFW on record supporting the road closure and others who followed the state funding process for restoration projects including the Stray-Tekison roads. Included in these stakeholders is the Colockum Wildlife Area Advisory Committee and the Advisory Committee pulled together for the Naneum to Columbia River Recreation Planning processes. Reaching specifically out to these stakeholders that have shown a vested interest in the habitat values of this area through public comments and engagement, and in looking at alternatives for spending the \$25,000 for road construction produces a more diverse conversation on the benefits and risks to providing additional access in the “Naneum road planning area” that produces a more informed final decision. This kind of engagement of stakeholders goes beyond seeking public comment, but in extending the same collaboration that was legislatively directed to include one organization to all those interested. We recognize the political sensitivity around issues of access on our public lands and believe that this sensitivity highlights the need for diverse stakeholder engagement, transparency, and decisions based on good information. If we are simply unaware of an outreach effort that was conducted, we seek information to better understand the process to engage diverse stakeholders in this effort.

Conclusion

According to your website⁶, “The Colockum Wildlife Area was established in the mid 1950’s to provide and protect critical summer and winter range for deer and elk as well as to perpetuate and improve upland game bird habitat... The primary management concerns and public issues identified in the Colockum Wildlife Area Plan are:

- Protecting and enhancing shrub-steppe, riparian and forest habitats.
- Maintaining fish and wildlife populations through habitat protection and enhancements.
- Monitoring and managing the impacts of public use on wintering elk.
- Providing public access compatible with fish, wildlife and habitat protection.
- Controlling noxious weeds such as knapweeds and thistles.
- Controlling trespass livestock grazing and damage to riparian areas.”

⁶ Colockum Wildlife Area webpage, <http://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/00114/>

We believe the same significant issues that were present several years ago that warranted the closure of the Stray-Tekison roads are not only present today, but underscored with additional analyses such as those mentioned in this letter. These include concerns that make the current proposal as presented run contrary to the primary management objectives for the Colockum Wildlife Area including providing public access that is compatible with fish, wildlife, and habitat protection.

The DNS and Environmental Checklist do not adequately recognize nor address the natural resource risks posed by this proposal that would allow for an informed final decision by your agency, and we therefore request withdrawal of the DNS and initiation of a more thorough environmental review.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jen Watkins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jen Watkins
Conservation Northwest
206.940.7914
www.conservationnw.org

CC:

Pete Lopushinsky, Colockum Wildlife Area Manager
Michael Livingston, Region Director