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State of Washington
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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c/o Department of Ecology
1315 W 4th Ave., Kennewick, WA 99336

31 October, 1996

Mr. John Wagoner, Manager
Richland Operations Office
U.S. Department of Energy
P.O. Box 550
Richland, WA 99352



Re: August 16th Range Fire on the Hanford Site

Dear Mr. Wagoner:

As you are aware, the range fire that originated on the Yakima Training Center burned a portion of the McGee Ranch (U.S. Department of Energy's [USDOE] property north and west of Highway 24 and south of the Columbia River) and jumped highway 24 and burned a portion of the Arid Lands Ecology [ALE] Reserve on 16 August, 1996. Approximately 10,000 acres burned on the Hanford Site.

The fire crews involved with fighting the fire on the Hanford Site should be commended for their efforts to contain and prevent the blaze from becoming a much bigger one.

Fire Impacts

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) staff assessed the McGee Ranch and the ALE Reserve shortly after the fire. The intensity of the fire varied due to the amount of fuel available. In areas designated as state Priority Shrub Steppe Habitat, the fire either burned with low to moderate intensity burning only the herbaceous layer and charring the trunks of the sagebrush or skirted around areas all together. Areas not designated, such as abandoned cheatgrass fields, burned extremely hot with the fire consuming all fuel. We expect the native vegetation to recover in the areas where quality native plant communities existed prior to the fire.

Priority Habitat Status

WDFW designated a significant portion of the McGee Ranch as Priority Shrub Steppe Habitat in 1995. The abandoned fields with cheatgrass did not meet the criteria for designation. Given the fire effects that were observed in the areas designated as Priority

Mr. Wagoner
31 October, 1996
Page 2 of 3

START

Habitat, we expect to observe recovery to previous conditions over time. Therefore, those areas of McGee Ranch affected by the fire and designated as Priority Shrub Steppe Habitat in 1995 retain this designation. This determination is consistent with other Priority Shrub Steppe Habitat areas of the Hanford Site which experienced fires in the past.

Firebreaks

Firebreaks are linear disturbances which act as corridors for noxious weeds and cheatgrass to expand their range. These plant species have little value to wildlife and are highly invasive. Firebreaks established during the fire could be invaded by these undesirable plants, if efforts are not made to restore them. Ultimately, the establishment of noxious weeds and cheatgrass along the firebreaks would allow further encroachment into surrounding habitat diminishing its functions and services to wildlife.

Existing Policies

USDOE is steward of the natural resources at the Hanford Site. The Secretary of Energy's Land and Facility Use Policy states that "USDOE will sustain the natural resources for which we are stewards". In addition, USDOE-RL has a ALE Facility Management Plan which contains a policy for restoration of disturbed areas that states "To return disturbed lands to as near as their original or native condition...".

Conclusions

We have been in contact with your staff regarding restoration of the firebreaks and were informed that no action is being taken to restore these areas. As steward of natural resources at the Hanford Site, USDOE should be planning and budgeting for restoration of natural resources from events such as this fire.

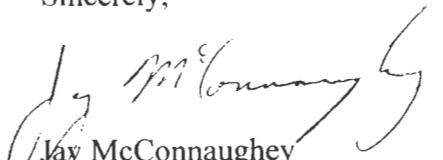
Recommendation for Restoration of Firebreaks

We would like to see USDOE become a more responsible steward in sustaining the natural resources at the Hanford Site. Part of this responsibility should include seeking funds internally or externally to restore the firebreaks "to as near as their original or native condition". An appropriate external source would be the U.S. Department of the Army since the fire started on the Yakima Training Center from military training exercises. By restoring the firebreaks, it would prevent further degradation of Priority Shrub Steppe Habitat and be consistent with the Secretary of Energy's Land and Facility Use Policy. It is extremely important to maintain the high quality shrub steppe habitat on the McGee Ranch area of the Hanford Site since this parcel is a portion of an existing wildlife corridor between the Hanford Site and the Yakima Training Center.

Mr. Wagoner
31 October, 1996
page 3 of 3

WDFW would appreciate being kept informed on this restoration effort. If you would like to discuss any of these topics, please contact me at 509/736-3095.

Sincerely,



Jay McConnaughey
Habitat Biologist, Hanford Site

jlm

cc:

Hanford Natural Resource Trustee Council
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