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State of Washington
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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Main Office Location: Natural Resources Building • 1111 Washington Street SE • Olympia, WA

April 5, 1996

Mr. John Wagoner, Manager
U.S. Department of Energy
Mail Stop A7-50
Post Office Box 550
Richland, Washington 99352

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Dear Mr. Wagoner:

Re: Protection and Preservation of the McGee Ranch

The McGee Ranch (U.S. Department of Energy's property north and west of Highway 24 and south of the Columbia River) is an integral portion of a corridor between the Hanford Site and the Yakima Training Center (YTC). As such, the McGee Ranch is a linchpin for sustaining biodiversity on the Hanford Site by maintaining connectivity to other shrub steppe ecosystems.

Shrub Steppe History

Shrub steppe habitat is rapidly declining throughout the Columbia Basin. Less than 40 percent of the original shrub steppe remains, much of this of poor quality. The decline can be attributed to destruction, conversion to other land uses, and to significant degradation of ecological structure, function, or composition since European settlement. Because of this decline, the National Biological Service has listed native shrub and grassland steppe in Washington and Oregon as an endangered ecosystem, and the State of Washington has designated shrub steppe as a priority habitat. Any existing, large, contiguous blocks of shrub steppe are extremely important in a regional context for landscape planning, biological diversity, and function.

Ecological Importance of Hanford Site

The Hanford Site has the largest contiguous tract of shrub steppe (560 square miles) in Washington State which is of significance to flora and fauna, and in landscape planning, to preserve biological diversity. The Hanford Site is six linear miles east of the YTC, which is under the stewardship of the U.S. Department of Defense and is the second largest tract (500 square miles) of shrub steppe in the state. These two facilities have the highest density of ecological resources in Eastern Washington (Jerry Stokes, United States Department of Energy and the State of Washington: Facilitated Meeting on the Future of the Fitzner-Eberhardt Arid Lands Ecology Reserve, May 10, 1995, p.2.) and are considered national assets.

Connectivity

Over time, human development, primarily agriculture with some residential areas, has surrounded the Hanford Site shrub steppe communities, isolating them and severely diminishing important ecological processes. Where shrub steppe does adjoin the Hanford Site, it does not stretch very far. Only the McGee Ranch has shrub steppe which abuts private, state, and other federal lands with shrub steppe, connecting the YTC, which, in turn, connects to similar habitat and finally reaches timberline.

This narrow corridor between the Hanford Site and the YTC, including the McGee Ranch, consists of a mosaic of Conservation Reserve Program habitat and shrub steppe and is extremely important to natural resource management. The McGee Ranch is the location of one plant species new to science and is adjacent to the Arid Lands Ecology (ALE) Reserve where 18 new insect species have been recently discovered.

Functions of a Corridor

In general, wildlife corridors serve as routes for species emigration and immigration, which allow genetic exchange to occur between populations and assist in sustaining natural ecosystems. Corridors also serve as dispersal routes allowing species to expand their existing range. An example would be sage grouse from the YTC recolonizing the ALE Reserve. Currently, sage grouse number approximately 500 individuals within the state and continue to decline in population. From a management perspective, every effort should be made to maintain or improve habitat viability throughout the species' range. The Hanford Site and the corridor will play a vital role in the recovery of sage grouse and will help maintain a recovered population in the future.

CERCLA Response Action Injuries

Any destructive uses, such as proposed "borrow sites" for basalt, gravel, and soil jeopardize the value of the McGee Ranch to serve as a functional corridor for flora and fauna between the Hanford Site and the YTC. Sufficient destruction of habitat would cause complete isolation of the Hanford Site's floral and faunal communities; the Site would essentially become an island. When populations become isolated and remain isolated for long periods of time, the frequency of mutant (lethal) gene expression in the population increases over time. This can lead to a decline or demise of the population as a whole.

The 200 Area of the Hanford Site is included on the National Priorities list under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA). Inclusion of this area initiates the Remedial Investigation and Feasibility Study process of characterizing the nature and extent of contamination and selecting remedial actions. One alternative being recommended is the use of surface barriers requiring a large volume of silt loam soils, which can be found on the McGee Ranch. Several CERCLA documents cite the McGee Ranch as a borrow site. Cumulative volumes for barriers in the 200 Area will exceed the approximately 40 million yards of soils found on the McGee Ranch. If one refers to a soils map and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's (WDFW) Priority Habitat map, one concludes that all the shrub steppe designated as priority habitat on the McGee Ranch would be destroyed and its value as a corridor would be lost. WDFW is concerned that natural resource injuries would be exacerbated across the entire site by destroying McGee Ranch habitat to access the soils beneath.

Proposed Solution

WDFW believes the McGee Ranch shrub steppe to be a nonmitigable resource because of the parcel's importance for connecting the Hanford Site with other ecosystems. Therefore, we request that USDOE-Richland Operations protect and preserve the McGee Ranch. Possible means of protection include: annexing the parcel to the ALE Reserve through administrative order (note: this action would be similar to the one enacted by the Atomic Energy Commission which established the ALE Reserve in 1967); designating the McGee Ranch as a mitigation bank site with deed restrictions; or developing a

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conservation easement. By ensuring the protection and preservation of the McGee Ranch, USDOE would strengthen its commitment as steward for the valuable natural resources on the Hanford Site. We believe this would be the course of action most consistent with Secretary Hazel O'Leary's land and facility use policy.

If you have any questions regarding this subject, please contact Ted Clausing, Regional Ecosystem Director, at (509) 457-9317, or Jay McConnaughey, Habitat Biologist for the Hanford Site, at (509) 736-3095.

Sincerely,

Martin Baker
Assistant Director
Habitat Management Program

MB:JC:pd

cc:
Hanford Advisory Board
Merilyn Reeves
Hanford Natural Resource Trustees
Michael Farrow, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
Ann Aldrich, U.S. Bureau of Land Management
Preston Sleeger, U.S. Department of Interior
Philip Laumeyer, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Carroll Palmer, Yakama Indian Nation
Donna Powaukee, Nez Perce Tribe
John Savage, Oregon Department of Energy
Mary Riveland, Washington Department of Ecology
Mike Wilson, Washington Department of Ecology
Robert Turner, WDFW
Ted Clausing, WDFW
Brent Renfrow, WDFW
U.S. Department of Energy
Hazel O'Leary
Tom Grumbly
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Jackson Kincer
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U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
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