

NMCGA ON THE TRAIL...

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Gila National Forest opens comment period on issue of lethal removal of estray cattle

By: Taylor Riggins, New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association

The Wilderness Ranger District of the Gila National Forest is seeking public input regarding their recent proposal to lethally or non-lethally remove estray cattle from the Gila Wilderness for protection of resources. Comments will be accepted through January 9, 2023.

In July 2022, the United States Forest Service (USFS), New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association (NMCGA) and others settled a lawsuit filed to prevent the USFS from shooting cattle from a helicopter in the Gila Wilderness. Under the terms of the settlement, USFS agreed it will give 75 days' notice before commencing any future helicopter sniper operations.

Following the settlement, NMCGA and stakeholders along with the regulatory agency for New Mexico health and livestock identification, the New Mexico Livestock Board (NMLB), engaged in monthly conversations to come to a long term solution. All parties agree that estray cattle do not belong in the wilderness and need to be removed. During numerous discussions, groups looked at options that not only uphold the mission of the USFS but also recognize and uphold New Mexico's Livestock Code. Despite best efforts, the USFS has chosen to forgo stakeholder input refusing to construct critical infrastructure, improve upon existing fencing or employ individuals capable of humanely gathering and transporting livestock.

According to the Gila National Forest proposal, if lethal removal methods are selected all lethally removed or euthanized cattle would be left onsite to naturally decompose. Cattle would not be shot within or adjacent to any waterbody or spring, designated hiking trail, or known culturally sensitive area. If a carcass is within or adjacent to one of these areas,

Forest staff would remove the carcass. A wilderness minimum requirements decision guide would be completed and approved before using any methods otherwise prohibited under the Wilderness Act. Aerial shooting would occur over two 7-day periods in winter when visitor activity within the Gila Wilderness at its lowest. A follow-up effort may be needed at a later time.

NMCGA argues the act of leaving carcasses to rot is a heinous misuse of beef; a highly desirable source of protein going to waste in a poor and hungry state at the discretion of government officials. It is thoughtless and unrealistic to require a gun for hire to Hoover over moving targets in thick overgrowth and rough topography to be skillfully adept enough to recognize ear tags, brands, waterbodies, springs, hiking trail or culturally sensitive areas before swiftly aiming and producing an ethical kill shot. It should also be noted that in the aftermath of the aerial operation in February 2022, Forest staff only removed carcasses of decomposing cattle lying in the Gila River at the insistence of NMLB agents, winching their remains from the water to the banks just days after their deaths.

The Gila National Forest proposal further claims that over the course of nine contracts for their eradication, a total of 756 cattle has been removed (alive or euthanized) from the Gila Wilderness. Forest Service records indicate that of these, only one cow was branded (captured in 1998), the remaining 755 cattle did not have a brand, ear tag, or other ownership identification.

In truth, the USFS has not conducted any aerial surveys to determine the number of cattle in the region, have not physically been to the area to assess the impacts they claim and are not qualified to identify or help identify livestock brands, markings or signs of ownership.

In terms of actual estray herd numbers, NMCGA questions if the same categorical exclusion the Service prepared in 2020 could not also be applied to assess the number of head the USFS claims are inhabiting the forest land of the Gila Wilderness?

The open comment period, proposal and instantaneous commitment of the Gila Forest Supervisor's office to once again remove estray cattle is not due to endangered species

habitat, over grazing or environmental impacts, but because of social and political pressures. In the year 2024 the Gila Wilderness will celebrate its 100th anniversary as the nation's first designated wilderness, an event that will draw international attention not only to the Gila Wilderness but also to southwestern New Mexico.

“NMCGA has worked with the Forest Service, area producers and the New Mexico Livestock Board in a good faith effort to devise several solutions to this issue,” said Loren Patterson, President. “Aerial gunning is inhumane and should not be an option available to the Forest Service as a bypass to years of mismanagement.”

NMCGA extends these questions to stakeholders and fellow New Mexicans: How can a government agency continue to move forward with a plan that lacks public support, does not accept viable or more humane methods and does not guarantee the protection of branded livestock? Can we as residents expect more unfettered dominion from an agency that is tasked with stewardship of natural resources that impact communities across the state?

Comments may be submitted through January 9, 2023 in person, by mail or via email. All comments should include: 1) name, address, phone number, and organization represented, if any; 2) title of the project “Gila Wilderness Livestock Removal” on which the comment is being submitted; and 3) specific facts and supporting information for the responsible official to consider.

Written comments may be delivered in person or by mail to: Gila National Forest, Attn: Planning Program, 3005 E. Camino del Bosque, Silver City, NM 88061. Office hours are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday – Friday. Comments may also be submitted by email to: comments-southwestern-gila@usda.gov.