



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

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Ranger
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File Code: 5420

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Perry Norris
Executive Director
Truckee Donner Land Trust
P.O. Box 8816
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Letter of Support and Interest

Dear Perry;

Thank you for all of your hard work, vision and leadership in conserving the Van Norden Meadow. I understand you have continued to get pressure to sell the meadow to the USFS with the dam "as is" or with some sort of secondary dam or weir. Let me state unequivocally, if we purchase this parcel, we will NOT acquire it with the current dam configuration nor with a secondary dam/weir.

Public safety must be paramount in my decision making process regarding acquisition of the dam. Based on the results of Balance Hydrologics, Inc. hydraulic evaluation of Van Norden Dam, our engineers have concluded that the maximum impoundment that the USFS could accept is 5 ac. ft. According to the report, this configuration is the maximum pool size that can be maintained that would not result in increased risk to life and property downstream in the event of a failure.

There appear to be conflicting desires for the future condition of this area. I recognize that some in the local community are more focused on flat-water recreation opportunities and some are focused on watershed and/or wildlife values and some are focused on both. We believe the highest and best use for the area, to best serve the public and natural resource values, is restoration of the meadow to a more natural state. We have heard that some local residents have a similar vision as the Forest Service for the future of Van Norden Meadow.

Among the Forest Service's key goals is retention and restoration of ecological resilience of National Forest System (NFS) lands. Ecologically healthy and resilient landscapes, rich in biodiversity, have greater capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of natural disturbances and large scale threats to sustainability. We know this is especially true under uncertain and changing environmental conditions such as those driven by climate variability and increasing human use. Although protection of life and property are my first consideration, the opportunity to conduct effective ecological restoration of the land is also a key consideration in my decision making process.



The Royal Gorge purchase rated #2 nationally in the USFS's request for land purchase funding this fiscal year. This is largely due to the opportunity to provide effective conservation management and restoration on this significant meadow system. To accept the land with a secondary dam would handcuff us in terms of future options for restoration. The secondary dam would have to be limited to a storage capacity that in concert with the existing dam would not increase risk to life and property in the event of a failure. The exact size of the pool and optimal dam configuration would need to be evaluated through additional hydraulic and, possibly, structural analysis. During an analysis, such configurations are typically failed in series, with the first upstream dam contributing to the lower dam's peak dam break flow. The analysis will likely demonstrate that only a pool smaller than 5 acre feet would insure there is no increase in risk downstream as a result of a dam failure. Small pools of warm shallow water are subject to high evaporation rates and provide limited resource, scenic or recreation value, when compared to those of a well-functioning meadow.

Montane meadows are considered, by many, to be the single most important habitat in the Sierra Nevada for birds. Approximately two thirds of California's bird and amphibian species depend on meadows (NFWF, 2013). However, many montane meadows in the Sierra Nevada are degraded. Consequently, one of the goals of the Forest Service in California is to restore at least 50% of the accessible, degraded meadows to improve their ecological function.

The meadow restoration work is yet to be planned and fully analyzed. However, the type of restoration that appears likely would be to raise the base level of the stream to reconnect the stream with its natural floodplain and restore the hydrologic function and natural wetness of the meadow system. This should restore wetland areas that have dried out due to stream incision, make the rest of the meadow moister in general, reduce active erosion, and increase riparian and aquatic habitat. This work would occur upstream of whatever the final pool elevation is.

I understand there are public concerns that, if the spillway is lowered, leaving only a small pool, the white pelicans will no longer use the area. We understand from discussions with your staff that the California Department of Fish and Wildlife has concluded that this would not lead to endangerment of the species. However, if the meadow is restored, habitat for a variety of bird and animal species will be enhanced, including the rare willow flycatcher (Forest Service sensitive species and California endangered species), yellow warbler (Management Indicator Species), Wilson's warbler, MacGillvray's warbler, Lincoln's sparrow, mountain white-crowned sparrow, meadow voles, sensitive bat species, western toads, pacific chorus frog (Management Indicator Species), as well as many other meadow dependent species.

As I have mentioned to you, even if the Tahoe National Forest wished to acquire the property with the dam "as is" (which we do not) I would be prohibited from doing so by policy. We are, also, unwilling to accept on behalf of the taxpayers, the additional liability associated with anything less than a low hazard dam. Some people might find this to be contradictory, since we *are* willing to accept the additional costs associated with meadow restoration when we acquire this property. The key distinction is that ecological restoration is what we, as an agency, do.

In conclusion, if you decide to pursue a second dam or not to lower the spillway of the existing dam to maximize flat water recreation, the Tahoe National Forest will no longer pursue the purchase of the parcel from TDLT.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact Fran Herbst or myself.

Sincerely,



JOANNE B. ROUBIQUE
District Ranger

cc: Fran Herbst