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Dear Interested Public:

The ***Final Report for the Mesa Fertilization Data Collection Project*** is now available on the PAPO website. The report was prepared at the direction of the PAPO Board to determine if fertilization efforts on the Pinedale Anticline (PA) enhanced the quantity and quality of 1,468 acres of PA rangeland for the purpose to improve forage for wintering mule deer. The assumption was the application of nitrogen on the PA's deer winter range would enhance the nutritional value of sagebrush, grasses and forbs utilized by wintering mule deer. Results of the posted report show this assumption was not correct. The following provides background information leading up to the PAPO Board decision made on May 21, 2015 that eliminates further funding for any PA fertilization efforts.

Background

In 2009, the BLM received a request from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) to conduct a fertilization pilot treatment on a small portion of PA rangeland for the purpose to potentially mitigate the effects of oil & gas development on mule deer habitat within the PA. The BLM prepared an environmental assessment (EA) on the fertilization proposal and issued a decision during FY 2010. The EA, Decision Record and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) can be found on the BLM Wyoming website.

During the Fall of 2010, the initial pilot treatment area of 468 acres on the PA was fertilized with nitrogen. Also during the Fall of 2010, the BLM determined mitigation for mule deer was formally required per the requirements of the Record of Decision for the *Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the PA Oil and Gas Exploration and Development Project* (Appendix B – Wildlife Monitoring and Mitigation Matrix). In summary, mule deer mitigation was required per the Mitigation Matrix as a result of mule deer monitoring during two winters (2009-2010 and 2010-2011). Monitoring data analysis from those two winters showed there was more than a 15% decline in mule deer numbers compared to a baseline number (from monitoring during the 2005-2006 winter) compared to the reference area which is the Sublette mule deer herd unit. For specifics on actual winter range monitoring data, please refer to the annual PA mule deer reports that are posted on the PAPO website.

Because lower mule deer numbers on the PA required a mitigation response, BLM began discussions with the public, coordinating agencies and PA operators regarding mitigation response options. These communications resulted in more specific response options that were described in a FY 2011 EA, Decision Record and FONSI. The decision summary was additional PA acreage to be fertilized.

On May 2, 2011, the PAPO Board approved funding to apply nitrogen on an additional 1,000 acres. If the fertilization was determined to be successful on both the initial 468 acres and the additional 1,000 acres, fertilization funding would be approved on even greater acreages within the PA.

Because continued fertilization within the PA was dependent on whether there was a favorable vegetative response that would benefit wintering mule deer, the PAPO Board approved funding for a comprehensive data collection project at its May 3, 2012 meeting. The data collection project would be managed by a qualified contractor who would also prepare a final report summarizing methods and findings.

Wyoming Wildlife Consultants, LLC was selected as the contractor to collect the vegetative and range utilization data and prepare the final report. Vegetative data was collected from the 2012 and 2013 growing seasons and utilization data was collected during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 winters.

A draft report was developed in mid-2014 with a final report sent to the BLM/PAPO in Pinedale on April 1, 2015 (dated February 15, 2015). The report had the following key result information:

> *"the results suggest that fertilization of sagebrush-dominated habitats on the Mesa (PA) may result in increased biomass for wintering mule deer, but that winter range quality in terms of the nutritive value of the vegetation is not enhanced – and may actually be diminished – through fertilization."*

BLM Funding Recommendation and PAPO Board Meeting decision on May 21, 2015

At a meeting at the Pinedale Field Office on January 21, 2015, representatives from the BLM, PAPO, WGFD and Wyoming Department of Agriculture discussed the initial results of the draft report.

There was consensus at that meeting it was no longer justifiable, as a recommendation to the PAPO Board, to spend any additional funds on fertilization efforts for the purpose to potentially enhance winter range forage for wintering mule deer on the PA.

At the May 21, 2015 PAPO Board meeting, the PAPO Board agreed with the recommendation and formally decided no further fertilization funding would occur and any unspent appropriated funds for fertilization would go back to the general PAPO fund.

Thank you for your interest in the report and PAPO Board decisions. Please contact Eric Decker (JIO/PAPO Project Coordinator) by phone at (307) 367-5386 or by email: egdecker@blm.gov, if you have any questions on the fertilization project, report, or decisions made by the Board.