

Superintendent Angela Richman
Theodore Roosevelt National Park
Medora, North Dakota
cc: Senator John Hoeven and North Dakota Senator Jay Elkin

January 29, 2023

Dear Superintendent Richman

I have been following Theodore Roosevelt National Park's (THRO) plans for developing a Livestock Management Plan (LMP) since March of 2022, participated in the two "virtual public meetings," and submitted comments during the first public scoping period. My comments are primarily related to the horses, which have been in the Medora area since before the park was established. While working as a seasonal interpretive ranger for the NPS, I conducted a three-year study of the horses for THRO between 1987-1989 and submitted a final report titled "The History and Status of the Wild Horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park." The report included a management history based on internal documents and a survey of NPS personnel, most of whom had worked at THRO.

In March of 2022, the park issued a newsletter announcing the development of a Livestock Management Plan to guide management of horses and longhorn cattle and inviting the public to participate in that process. Wild horses were accidentally fenced into the park when it was created circa 1947, and longhorns were intentionally introduced by the NPS. Both populations have been managed as "historic demonstration herds" that contribute to the interpretation of the open-range ranching era when Theodore Roosevelt was a resident. Roosevelt himself wrote about the wild horses in the Little Missouri badlands, as did other residents.

The horses have always been very popular with the visiting public and valued by many in the local ranching community, who view them as part of their heritage. Native people have also been interested in the horses, which almost certainly descend in part from horses that the Marquis de Mores purchased at Fort Buford in 1881 and brought to Medora, which he founded. Those horses had been confiscated from Lakota people who surrendered after spending several years in Canada following the Little Big Horn battle. Both the Marquis de Mores and the nearby HT ranch raised the Lakota horses on the open range surrounding Medora and statements in the historic record by early ranchers and historians indicate that some of them joined existing bands of wild horses after de Mores returned to Europe. I summarized the cultural and historic significance of the horses in a 1990 article published in *North Dakota History*, titled "Badlands Broomtails: The Cultural History of Wild Horses in Western North Dakota."

However, the NPS has always been ambivalent about the horses. On several occasions in the past, the park considered eliminating the horses, but refrained because of public opposition. Reluctant to commit resources towards their management, the park has conducted virtually no

scientific studies to understand their environmental impacts, relationship with other species, or genetic health. Instead, successive superintendents have pursued diverse management goals. Because of this long neglect, the announcement of a management plan was considered a welcome development by many advocates and fans of the horses.

In brief, the March 2022 newsletter issued by THRO stated that the purposes of the proposed plan were to:

Provide a long-range plan that considers the role of longhorn cattle and horses as *historic exhibits*;

Define best management practices *in the context of maintaining a historic scene* (36 CFR 2.6) while reducing potential impacts on natural resources;

Balance livestock management with Park responsibilities to manage natural and cultural resources; and to

Address public interest related to livestock management in the Park.

The newsletter outlined seven goals for the Livestock Management plan. Again summarizing, the first three goals were stated to be:

Determining appropriate management of the horses and longhorns based on updated scientific information, ecosystem management, and best management practices regarding herd health and animal well-being;

Determining the desired visitor experience concerning livestock herds; and

Defining a path for stakeholder interaction to respond to public concerns related to horse and cattle management.

The other listed goals spoke to *minimizing* the impact of livestock on other Park natural resources and *balancing* the commitment to livestock management with other park priorities.

Further, the NPS outlined seven potential alternatives (A-F) for public consideration and comment, ranging from “No Action” to the retention of “Non reproductive” herds to “Reduction over time” until both herds were eliminated.

Two of the original alternatives, “No Action” and maintenance of “Reproductive Herds” described retaining the horses (since the longhorns are steers, they do not reproduce) and engaging in management actions such as culling and selling but did not tie such management actions to any pre-existing documents or policy. It was clearly implied that future management would be based on the cited goals of “updated scientific

information, ecosystem management, and best management practices regarding herd health and animal well-being.”

The public was advised of a “Virtual Public Meeting” to be held on March 30th and were invited to comment on the alternatives by April 15th, 2022. The park stressed that comments must be justified with supporting data and evidence, and that all such sources must be physically provided to the park. Many people followed this injunction in good faith, even though the park provided no mechanism for people to submit their supporting documents on the online NPS platform, making it unnecessarily onerous for people to do so.

Many people welcomed the park’s proposal for a Livestock Management Plan and the opportunity to participate in the process. The park proposed a series of wide-ranging alternatives and presented them by emphasizing the need for scientific management and “best practices,” balancing priorities and inviting “public engagement.” The original newsletter issued by the park to announce their plans was even addressed to “Friends.”

However, it soon became clear that this entire process was disingenuous and undertaken only to satisfy a bureaucratic “public engagement” mandate.

In July of 2022, the NPS posted an analysis of more than 1200 discrete comments submitted regarding the seven original proposals. Most people expressed a desire for the park to maintain the horses, and they supported their comments with references to scientific studies of wild horses and management practices at other sites, including the several other NPS sites who have decided to manage wild horses as part of an historic scene. Many of those who commented went to great lengths to reference NPS and Interior policies and to provide peer-reviewed articles and published government and scientific documents. Again, most such documentation had to be physically mailed to THRO, because they refused to accept unsupported citations or allow people to download pdfs on their online platform.

But what about average North Dakota citizens, or park visitors from other states, who care about the park but lack familiarity with and access to government and scientific data? They were told firmly not to bother commenting. The NPS stated repeatedly that they would disregard any comments not supported by evidence and data that would facilitate productive consideration of the proposed alternatives. They emphasized that they would **not** consider any comments that simply “agreed or disagreed with park policy.” Form letters were also verboten.

This prohibition directly contradicts the stated concern to learn and “address public interest in livestock management in the park” and the need for “determining the desired visitor experience concerning livestock herds” as stated in the original March, 2022 newsletter, cited above.

The other “path” taken to facilitate “stakeholder interaction” consisted of two “Virtual Public Meetings,” held in March and December of 2022. Instead of promoting “engagement,” these

virtual “meetings” were expressly designed and conducted to deliver NPS mandates, while preventing any substantive discussion or dialogue. Most of the brief, one-hour sessions were devoted to presentations by NPS personnel, who then responded to pre-selected questions submitted by participants with brief and curt responses, some as short as several sentences. These top-down and one-sided sessions were extremely unpleasant and frustrating for public participants.

Moreover, when the Park released a second newsletter in December of 2022, the language, tone and alternatives were drastically different from the initial announcement and did not reflect any of the concerns and comments expressed by the public. Suddenly there were only two effective alternatives, either the total elimination of the horse herd, or “No action,” which proposes maintaining and managing the horses under an obsolete regime:

Alternative A: No action; Alternative B: Expedited Reduction of the Herds to No Livestock; Alternative C: Phased Reduction of Herds to No Livestock

The park’s preferred alternative is “C: Phased Reduction to No Livestock.”

Instead of managing the horses according to the previously suggested “updated scientific information, ecosystem management, and best management practices regarding herd health and animal well-being,” Alternative A, “No Action” would be based on a rudimentary 1978 Environmental Assessment (EA) which has virtually no scientific basis and which mandates keeping the herd to 30-60 animals, culling through helicopter round-ups, and engaging in other outdated and abandoned management practices.

Suddenly past references to “wild horses” and “feral horses” have been replaced by a firm injunction that the horses are “livestock.” Suddenly after 75 years the park has discovered that “livestock” are not permitted in any National Park-although in recent years at least two other NPS units have intentionally incorporated wild horses into their missions because they are viewed as contributing to an historic scene. All references to “history” have disappeared, and the park has subtly revised several key documents, adding language stating that only native wildlife are allowed in the park.

At the December 2022 “Virtual Public Meeting” Superintendent Richman declared that the park is now interested in Roosevelt only as a conservationist, not as a rancher. Participants were bluntly told that the horses must go because the park needs to add more bison to the current herd of approximately 600 head. Questions asking for evidence of the competition between horses and bison and raising the popularity of the horses with visitors or the economic impact to Medora if the herd is removed were dismissively side-stepped.

Clearly Theodore Roosevelt National Park is moving away from interpretation of local and regional history and is doing so in a very heavy-handed and arbitrary fashion. They denied a request from the North Dakota legislature to extend the comment period to provide time for the preparation of a resolution and official response to the park’s planned elimination of the

herd. They have refused to provide for or even allow genuine public input. Moreover, while they required members of the public to provide physical copies of scientific and government documents in support of their comments and suggestions for management of the horses, THRO has provided no meaningful substantiated justification for their actions, either in verbal or written form.

I cannot support any of the three final alternatives, and I am deeply concerned about the process that has landed us here. It is abundantly clear that the NPS and THRO initiated the ostensible process of developing a Livestock Management Plan having pre-determined their desired outcome, which is the elimination of the herd. They have been deliberately deceptive, while offering no justifications for their own decision. Contrary to the March 2022 newsletter, they never intended to consider the historic significance of the horses, or their role “in the context of an historic scene,” or the perspectives of scientists or the people of North Dakota. The actual public was denied the opportunity to comment, and the virtual “public engagement” meetings they conducted were farcical. Despite demanding excessive documentation, they considered none of the informed and thoughtful comments they received, and none are reflected in the final alternatives. In short, the NPS anticipated public opposition, and deliberately structured the process to block objections from concerned citizens, visitors, and the state of North Dakota.

Shut out by the NPS, thousands of people, most residents of North Dakota, have expressed their objection to eliminating the herd in published letters to newspapers, newspaper polls, and editorials.

The entire LM “planning” process has been a bureaucratic sham. There is something very wrong with this, and I think it should be investigated. All related documents can be found on the NPS website, parkplanning.nps.gov (Theodore Roosevelt National Park/Livestock Plan).

Sincerely

Irene Castle McLaughlin, Ph.D.
Belmont, MA