Inyo/Mono Cattlemen's Association
826 S. Main St.
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To: Bi-State Sage Grouse Local Working Group and Interested Parties

Subject: Elimination of Stock and Irrigation Water on LADWP Ranch Leases in Mono County, CA

In March 2018, the Real Estate Division of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) sent draft ranch lease documents to Mono County lessees. The leases occur in southern Mono County in Long Valley and Little Round Valley. The term of the leases is from January 1, 2018 through December 31, 2022 with the option to extend the term of the lease for three additional 5-year time periods with a maximum period of 20 years.

A major change (item #8) in the new lease document is the elimination of stockwater and water for irrigation on lands that have historically received 5 acre-feet/acre. This elimination of water allocation will impact over 6200 acres of LADWP lands classified as irrigated in Round Valley, Little Round Valley and Long Valley.

There's a long tradition of livestock grazing in Inyo and Mono counties. The ranching tradition has preserved open spaces for aesthetics and several recreational opportunities, as well as providing food and fiber.

The upper end of Long Valley was homesteaded in 1896 by the Alpers family. Other families established homesteads in the area by the 1920s. Before 1940, all the land along the Upper Owens River north of Crowley Lake was in private, family ownership. Pastures were irrigated from the Upper Owens River and Sierra streams. Many ranches in Long Valley also included land in the Bishop area, where cattle would be pastured for the winter. LADWP purchased private ranchland north of what is now Crowley Lake between the 1920's and 30's, leaving four ranches further upstream in private ownership. The number of cattle and sheep pastured in Long Valley was probably greater prior to 1940 than today because grazing controls have been placed on users of LADWP land and adjacent federal land in leases and use permits (Mono Basin EIR 1993).

The current ranches are family owned and operated and they have been in the family for several generations. The long-term sustainability of these ranching operations requires the careful stewardship of the land and the livestock. Cattle and sheep graze lower elevation forage in the spring in Inyo County, and are then moved to higher elevation irrigated pastures and rangelands in Mono County during the summer months. The ranching tradition has preserved the area's open space and the visual, recreational and natural resources.

The ramifications of the elimination of stock and irrigation water are several including:

1) **Direct impacts to the economics of the agriculture industry in Inyo and Mono counties:**
    a. The agriculture industry between Inyo and Mono counties is intricately entwined with ranchers using federal, private and LADWP lands in Inyo and Mono counties to support the sustainable livestock operations. Agricultural operations in Inyo and Mono counties contribute $78.6 million in local economic activity, including $47.9 million in direct value and $28.9 million in associated economic activity (Agriculture in Inyo and Mono Counties, An Economic Profile 2017 report).
    b. Agriculture pays $6.2 million in federal, state and local taxes and maintains 449 local jobs.
    c. Loss of ranching operations.

2) **Reduced vegetation productivity, vigor and plant species diversity** - loss of vegetation from the elimination of irrigation water will result in reduced forage production and grazing capacity. During the drought years from 2013-2015 when irrigation water was reduced and eventually eliminated, forage production on irrigated fields declined from an average of 1500 to 3000 lbs/ac to 100 to 300 lbs/ac. Total die-off of vegetation occurred in some years that did not receive water for 3 consecutive years.
    a. The reduced grazing capacities on LADWP lands will also have a domino effect on adjoining federal grazing permits. Ranches that are dependent on grazing lands in both Inyo and Mono counties will no longer have a sustainable operation. This will result in a loss of economic value of LADWP land and Mono County and a direct loss of ranching operations.
    b. Grazing lands that received supplemental irrigation are more resilient during drought and have quicker recovery after drought.
    c. With the elimination of ranching operations, the benefits of livestock grazing will be lost. Benefits include reduction in fuel loads, reduction in invasive plant species populations, diversification of vegetative communities and habitat structure.

3) **Loss of wetland/riparian vegetation:**
    a. Wetland losses have been substantial in Mono County since settlement times. In Long Valley, the lower part of the valley contained several thousand acres of wetlands before Crowley Lake reservoir was created in 1941. Other losses of wetlands have been due to urban development, new roads, and loss of irrigation water to Mono Lake. The LADWP irrigated lands currently support wetland and riparian habitats that are enhanced by supplemental irrigation water from May to October.

b. Wetlands have several functions including sustaining favorable water flows, recharging of the groundwater, providing habitat and biological diversity, and nutrient filtering as well as aesthetic and heritage value. The addition of irrigation water increases vegetative growth and organic matter – thereby increasing the resistance to invasion by non-native species and the resilience to disturbance, drought and fire.
c. In the early 1990's, the LADWP was a leader in riparian restoration, implementing several riparian grazing systems on several creeks and the Upper Owens River in Long Valley. The irrigation water from adjoining fields has aided in the recovery of the riparian vegetation.

4) Potential declines in wildlife populations dependent on the wetland/riparian habitats:

a. The Audubon Society has designated the Crowley Lake area as an Important Bird Area. Long Valley supports what is now one of the largest populations of Greater Sage-Grouse in the state, a species that depends on the area's low level of development for unobstructed seasonal elevational migrations. The Crowley Lake area also supports an abundance of seasonal waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, including peregrine falcon, and several species of songbirds.
b. In the Mono Basin, over 4100 acres of irrigated lands were dried up when all water was directed to Mono Lake. Habitats and wildlife populations that were dependent on these irrigated lands were significantly impacted. Additional cumulative impacts will occur with the drying up of LADWP lands in Long Valley, Little Round Valley and Round Valley.

5) Potential declines in the Bi-state population of the Greater Sage Grouse:

a. The most limiting habitat for the Greater Sage Grouse is mesic habitats (wet meadows, irrigated pastures, irrigated alfalfa, riparian areas). These habitats are essential for brood rearing – chicks depend on meadow vegetation and insects for survival. Some of the most important brood rearing locations in Long Valley are near Convict Creek and the Laurel Meadows. Irrigation from May to September promotes high chick survival and recruitment.
b. Long Valley supports one of only two core sage-grouse subpopulations within the Bi-State area and currently comprises approximately 30 percent of all grouse within the California portion of the Bi-State area.
c. In 2015, the US Fish and Wildlife Service reviewed the potential listing of the Bi-State population of the Greater Sage Grouse and determined that the population should not be listed as "threatened" because of the unified conservation efforts of agencies, non-profit organizations and private landowners. The substantial loss of

the essential mesic habitats, such as irrigated pastures, may jeopardize the population and result in reconsideration for federal listing.

d. Bi-State Regional Conservation Partnership Program (NRCS): Through the "Livestock in Harmony with Sage Grouse" project (awarded $8 million), 11 collaborating partners will implement recommended water quality, rangeland and soil health conservation practices and monitoring on rangelands in Nevada and California.

6) **Increased soil erosion** – with the dewatering of the irrigated pastures, vegetative cover will be reduced exposing the soil to increased wind erosion and increased susceptibility to invasion by non-native plant species.
    a. Increases in bare ground provide opportunities for non-native species such as cheatgrass (a highly flammable annual grass).

7) Increased wildfire risk
    a. Due to changing climatic conditions, the eastern Sierra's have had an increase in intensity and frequency of large-scale wildfires. Non-native species and flammable shrubs that will invade previously irrigated areas provide fuel for additional wildfires – resulting in loss of grazing resources and essential wildlife habitats.

The elimination of irrigation water in Mono County will have permanent effects on the aesthetics, economics, plant communities, wildlife habitats and populations. The Cattlemen's Association will discuss their concerns at the board meeting of the Mono County Board of Supervisors on April 10, 2018, 1:00 pm at the Mono County Courthouse, Bridgeport, CA. If you are unable to attend the upcoming meeting please direct your comments and concerns to:

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Sincerely,

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