United States Department of the Interior

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In Reply Refer To:
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NOTICE OF PROPOSED ACTION
LANDS IN WILDERNESS STUDY AREAS

STATE: Nevada

COUNTY: Pershing

FIELD OFFICE: Humboldt River Field Office
5100 East Winnemucca Blvd.
Winnemucca, Nevada 89445

WILDERNESS STUDY AREA: **A**ugusta Mountains Wilderness Study Area (NV-030-108)

PROPOSED ACTION: Excavation and removal of Ichthyosaur remains for study and preservation.

Background

In 2014, the Nevada State Office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) received an application from Dr. Martin Sander, University of Bonn, Germany and the Dinosaur Institute, Los Angeles County Museum (LACM) for a Paleontological Resources Use Permit for excavation and removal of Early and Middle Triassic ichthyosaur remains from three localities in the Augusta Mountains Wilderness Study Area (WSA) in Pershing County. The proposed excavations were in the vicinity of an ichthyosaur excavated in 2008 and analyzed in Environmental Assessment NV-020-08-EA-08. In 2014, BLM completed DNA DOI-BLM-NV-W0-2014-0023 on the newly proposed ichthyosaur excavations and the paleontologists commenced work in August of 2014. Dr. Sander returned in 2015 to continue this work, and he is planning to return in August of 2017 to continue these excavations.

The Augusta Mountains WSA is located in a very remote area of the Winnemucca District, approximately 2 hours from either Winnemucca, NV or Lovelock, NV. This area was nominated as a WSA based on outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation including hiking, camping, sightseeing and photography throughout the WSA. Supplemental values include spectacular views as well as archaeological and paleontological values.

Proper excavation and scientific study of the specimens will allow scientists to further our understanding of Early and Middle Triassic ichthyosaurs. Dr. Sander worked with the BLM Winnemucca District to help interpret ichthyosaur fossils from Northern Nevada to the general public: An exhibit in the Humboldt Museum in Winnemucca opened in August 2015 which included information on recent finds and a website which will be updatable as studies of excavated fossils reveal more information.

In addition to the scientific and educational value of the project, these unique finds will also be better protected. Theft of other significant vertebrate fossils has occurred in this area recent years. While law enforcement and other BLM personnel have continued to monitor the area to the degree possible, the remoteness of the site poses special challenges for protection of these unique values. The recovered specimens would be curated at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

Management guidance for such an activity is found in BLM Manual 6330 Management of Wilderness Study Areas. Under this manual, paleontological resources are considered supplemental values and are an important part of the wilderness characteristics of WSAs. Stabilizing, recovering and recording important information of paleontological finds may be allowed in WSAs.

Description of the Proposed Action

A crew of approximately 4-5 individuals would excavate the fossils using small hand tools only, including hammers, chisels, pry bars, and shovels. No motorized/mechanized/power tools or generators would be used. Small amounts of plaster and/or glue may be used to protect exposed portions of the skeleton.

The proposed 2017 excavation would commence on or after July 15 and would be completed by August 31. A base-camp would be set up outside of the WSA and the crew would hike to and from the excavation sites each day. All equipment would be hand-carried to and from the sites. The hike from base-camp to the sites would be approximately 2 to 2.5 hours and would include an elevation gain of up to 2,400 feet. Any trash would be taken out of the field and properly disposed of.

The ichthyosaur fossils are close to the surface with very little soil covering them. A small trench of a maximum of 10’ long, 4’wide, and 3’ deep would be excavated at each of the 3 localities. The amount of excavated soil is anticipated to be small. The back dirt piles at each locality are anticipated to be no more than 5’ x 5’ in size. The original soil layer would be kept separate from the bedrock material. After the specimen is completely excavated, the trench would be refilled, first with the bedrock material then with the soil on top.

The area contains sagebrush and juniper, as well as a variety of grasses and small shrubs and forbs. However, the habitat at the site consists of a late seral Juniper community with very limited sagebrush/forb understory. One of the 3 excavation sites is in sage-grouse General Habitat; However, since the disturbance would be temporary and the trench would be refilled, minimal-to-no impact to sage-grouse would be expected.

In past excavations, specimens were either carried out of the WSA by paleontologists on foot, without mechanized equipment. For specimens of exceptional weight, the excavated specimens were transported out of the field by helicopter. Either method is anticipated for the proposed 2017 excavation. If a helicopter is used, it would not land in the WSA; paleontologists would place the heavy specimens into a transport sling and the helicopter pilot would hover over the area and the transport sling would be attached to the helicopter by a sling line. Once loaded, the specimen would be ferried in a sling load fashion beneath the aircraft to the nearest road outside of the WSA. This would require approximately 5-10 flying minutes each way. If necessary for the proposed 2017 excavation, it is estimated that a maximum of 10 round-trip flights would be required.

Because hand tools would be used, excavation would not impact opportunities for primitive recreation or solitude except for the very brief time a helicopter would be used to remove the materials, if a helicopter is used. Excavation would minimally impact naturalness during the period of activity, but the sites are

small, the activities are temporary, and reclamation involving re-contouring or re-vegetation would not be required. Natural weathering would return the sites to a natural-appearing condition shortly after the excavations are completed (1-2 years, depending on precipitation). Thus, the proposed excavations would not disqualify the area from wilderness designation.

This is also your opportunity to consult with the BLM under the National Historic Preservation Act.

Please send comments regarding this activity to David Kampwerth, Humboldt River Field Office Field Manager, at the address above within 30 days of the date of this letter.

Michael Toombs
For, Winnemucca District Manager (Acting)

6/22/2017
Date