



File Code: 1950-3

Date: March 6, 2002

Interested Citizen;

This letter is to update you regarding the status of the Garnet Stars & Sands Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The Draft EIS (DEIS) was made available and sent out to the mailing list in October 2001. The comment period ended on November 26, 2001. Approximately 22 comments were received including several letters with multiple signatures representing numerous individuals. There were comments from other government agencies, private citizens, rock clubs, a private company and environmental groups. The primary issue continues to be "how do we respond to public interest in developing the garnet resources and still protect water quality and fish habitat?"

The Interdisciplinary Team and I have reviewed the comments and begun the process of addressing those concerns. Other government agencies including the Environmental Protection Agency, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and Idaho Fish and Game reinforced their concern for water quality and fish habitat protection. Suggested alternatives, specifically those relating to recreational digging on National Forest System Lands, will require additional data collection so I can make a fully informed decision. It is my intent to complete preliminary Forest Service testing of these potential drainages for gemstone garnets and complete additional fish, water, wildlife and plant surveys before going further. The timeline for this project will be extended to accommodate these surveys during this summer field season.

Consequently, the Forest Service preliminary gemstone testing and exploration listed in the DEIS (page 1-4 under "Public Gemstone Digging areas") will be evaluated and a Decision Memo will be prepared to allow testing this summer. The Draft EIS (DEIS) and early project files provide adequate information for this decision. The testing includes a combination of auger holes, hand trenches and limited machine trenches in seven drainages. It will be a non-appealable Decision Memo as it falls into Category 31.2 (8) of the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15: "Short-term (one year or less) mineral, energy, or geophysical investigations and their incidental support activities." This decision is *only* for preliminary Forest Service gemstone testing and exploration. The remaining decisions as to whether or not to allow recreational gemstone digging and where it may be allowed will be made in a Record of Decision after completion of the Final EIS (FEIS). An opportunity to appeal any final decision with regard to the Recreational Digging will be available to you upon publishing of the FEIS and Record of Decision.

In reviewing the comments, I also learned that we were not clear in describing what is being decided with this EIS. This created some confusion among the reviewers. This is a comprehensive planning project for the garnet resource with many potential activities, some of



which will require further NEPA decisions. I have enclosed a flow chart with this letter which I hope better displays the expected decision process.

Results from field surveys and testing will be available to the Interdisciplinary Team by October 2002. The team and I will then review this information and develop alternatives and mitigation measures. At that time we will begin the work of finishing the FEIS and writing a Record of Decision. Everyone on the mailing list will be sent a copy of the Decision Memo for the preliminary gemstone testing. If you have any questions, feel free to call George Bain, District Ranger, at 208-765-7238 or Tracy Gravelle (Team Leader) at 208-245-6207. Thank you all very much for your comments - they have provided valuable input that will result in a better decision.

Sincerely,

/s/ Pat L. Aguilar (for):
RANOTTA K. MCNAIR
Forest Supervisor