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Subject: Official Correspondence- Mill and Wilson Creeks Agenda Item

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Dear members of the Board,

I have been a citizen of Mono County for more than thirty years, and a citizen of the Mono Basin for more than twenty. I have followed with interest the discussion going on about water management in the North Mono Basin, particularly after I noticed myself that the DeChambeau Ponds began to dry out this past spring.

Mill Creek, Wilson Creek, the DeChambeau Ranch and Ponds, and Conway Ranch are all very close to my home, and as a birdwatcher and photographer I enjoy frequenting all of these locations. I have been alarmed by some of the things I have seen this spring and summer and am happy to see that the Board will be focusing on this issue in the upcoming meeting.

Two years ago, I retired from the Inyo National Forest after spending twenty years working on the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area. Though I was never directly involved with the DeChambeau project, I often shared an office and worked alongside people who were. For instance, I was present in the late 1990's when efforts first began to manage DeChambeau as waterfowl habitat restoration associated with the restoration of Mono Lake. I knew well the people who were involved with the project at that time, including the Scenic Area Director and Scenic Area Assistant, positions that have not been filled in many years. In those days and even not that long ago, the Forest Service put much effort into utilizing Wilson Creek to enhance the wildlife habitat of this corner of the Basin. I know I am not the only member of the community who has spent many hours enjoying these areas and appreciating these efforts.

I would like to point out something that I believe has often been overlooked or forgotten in the course of this discussion. I understand why so much emphasis has been put on Mill Creek, as it represents some of the most in-tact riparian habitat of its kind left in the Great Basin. The desire to try to return Mill Creek to its "natural" state prior to diversions is also understandable.

But what we must all remember is that the Mono Basin was subjected to a trauma over most of the twentieth century that it will never fully recover from. The historic Mono Lake decision in 1994 recognized that its mandated restoration level of 6,392 feet would not bring the lake up to its pre-diversion level, and therefore, though the lake was "saved", it would never be fully restored.

Since the lake will not be brought up to its full pre-diversion level, much of the extensive wetland habitat that had existed around the lake prior to the diversions, particularly on the north-east shore, is never going to return. This is the reason for the DeChambeau restoration project. This managed wetland system serves as at least some replacement for the habitat that was destroyed in this area as the lake began to drop in the 1940's.

It is a case of trying to make the best out of what we have left. The freshwater ponded refuge habitat at DeChambeau is a different type than the creek delta habitat. Both are critical, and in the unfortunate

situation we are in where a full recovery is not possible, careful and informed management can lead to some restoration of both areas.

Conway Ranch provides waterfowl restoration as well. I have noticed swans and many ducks making use of Wilson Creek in that area. It too is replacing some of the habitat that was lost in the Mono Basin, and I suggest we look at this section of Wilson Creek in that sense.

We should be carefully preserving what we have now, and finding ways to better enhance it. Mono Lake still has not ever reached the goal of 6,392 feet. Now is not the time to be enacting changes in which existing habitat starts to disappear, as we witnessed this summer.

I want to add a final observation that might help to understand part of what happened this year. Though the DeChambeau system does not require a great amount of water, there is a certain amount needed to balance between the ranch irrigation, the ponds, and the meadow. This past May, when I first noticed the ponds were dropping and drying out, I stopped by the Forest Service diversion point. There I noticed that though the creek was quite low, the ranch diversion had been opened quite wide. I remember that in the past careful attention had to be paid so the ranch flow would not take water away from the ponds flow, and that this was hard to do when the creek was lower. I am not sure if the Forest Service was aware or not, but I believe this was the initial cause of the dropping of the ponds in May. I recall thinking that this sudden drop at that time of year would not be good for the nesting birds. Later in the summer, the ponds experienced more problems. I do not know what kind of things may have been going on around there at that time, but I did visit the diversion point again in August, and I noticed that the creek was so low that it looked like it could dry out any day.

I hope that the Board will do something that will lead to a more coherent and responsible process to this management moving forward. I believe the County, as a water rights holder, has much valid say in the process. I thank the Board again for their attention to this issue.

Tim Bue, Mono City  
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