July 5, 2016

Colville National Forest
Forest Plan Revision
765 South Main St.
Colville, WA 99114

Dear Forest Plan Revision Team:

The American Forest Resource Council (AFRC) submits the following comments on the proposed revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Plan) for the Colville National Forest and the accompanying Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). 81 Fed. Reg. 8,490 (Feb. 19, 2016); 81 Fed. Reg. 16,176 (Mar. 25, 2016).

AFRC is an Oregon nonprofit corporation that represents the forest products industry throughout Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and California. AFRC represents over 50 forest product businesses and forest landowners. AFRC's mission is to advocate for sustained yield timber harvests on public timberlands throughout the West to enhance forest health and resistance to fire, insects, and disease. We do this by promoting active management to attain productive public forests, protect adjoining private forests, and assure community stability. We work to improve federal and state laws, regulations, policies and decisions regarding access to and management of public forest lands and protection of all forest lands. AFRC members, including Boise Cascade, Columbia Cedar, Idaho Forest Group, Stimson Lumber, and Vaagen Bros. Lumber, rely on wood from the Colville National Forest to keep their mills operating.

I. Introduction and Summary of Comments.

The purpose of the action is to revise the 1988 forest plan for the Colville National Forest (Colville) which encompasses approximately 1.1 million acres in Northeast Washington. AFRC and our members have been participating in the Colville plan revision process dating back to 2003. AFRC appreciates the work that the Forest and its staff put in to the Plan process and the DEIS.

AFRC's comments focus on the following areas where we believe the proposed Plan or DEIS needs changes or additional work. These include:

- Addressing the needs of the forest for increased restoration;
- Providing enough timber volume to support industry infrastructure and ensure community stability;

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- Avoiding improper limits on management due to budget considerations;
- Revisions which Plan language imposes unwarranted restrictions on management, such as a Survey and Manage requirement for plant species;
- Lack of a reasonable range of alternatives; and
- Other key issues, including road density and riparian buffers.

The Plan revision identifies landscape-level needs including fire resiliency and attaining the desired Historic Range of Variability (HRV) in the various timber stands, as well as socio-economic needs that can only be met by increasing timber harvest across the landscape. A substantial increase in timber volume has broad support from diverse stakeholders such as the local collaborative, the forest products industry, and local governments. The Colville's own modeling suggests timber harvests can and should be higher. Consider, for example, that the local collaborative supports a volume target of 80 million board feet (MMBF). Contrast this to the Colville's Long-Term Sustained Yield (LTSY), calculated at 97.4 MMBF under the preferred alternative (Alternative P). DEIS at 86. Modeling data provided by the Forest Service shows that, depending on land allocations, the Colville could support a LTSY of over 110.3 MMBF. Accordingly, AFRC urges the Colville to develop an alternative above the current 67 MMBF Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) ceiling. If necessary, the calculations should be accomplished via departure from non-declining flow, under Section 219.16(a)(3) of the 1982 Planning Rule.

II. The Proposed Plan Does Not Sufficiently Address the Needs of the Landscape for Increased Restoration.

A. By the Forest Service's own data, restoration will fall far short of what is needed.

The adoption of a new Forest Plan is not simply a matter of updating the old plan, but rather it involves looking at all of the conditions and issues that have impacted the Forest during the 28 years since the current plan was adopted. In the case of the Colville, these changes have been significant and unique, demanding special considerations that AFRC believes are not thoroughly addressed in the new Plan.

Only six years after the current Colville Plan was implemented in 1988, Region 6 adopted the Eastside Screens, which greatly impacted land management options on the Colville. Most significantly, a 21-inch maximum diameter size for harvest was implemented. Further, wildlife connective corridors were identified and wider INFISH stream buffers were applied.

When combined, these factors greatly reduced management options on the Forest, leading to reduced harvest. The 1988 Plan called for a sustainable harvest of 123.4 million MMBF annually. However, from 1996-2015 the average volume of timber sold was only 39.1 MMBF, or 68% short of the target. The results of this harvest reduction were devastating, harming local sawmilling infrastructure, the communities that depended on those jobs, and the health and sustainability of the Forest.

AFRC believes the significant deviation and restrictions in forest management policy that took place from 1994 until the present have resulted in the current volatile forest conditions, and that these conditions have not been thoroughly addressed by the current alternatives in the Plan.

AFRC notes that the Plan documents do a good job of describing the current situation and outlining the dire conditions found on the Forest:

> "There is a need to manage forest vegetation conditions to be more resilient to disturbances. The Douglas-fir dry and Northern Rocky Mountain mixed conifer forest types are susceptible to continued severe insect and disease outbreaks. The existing forest plan does not adequately address the factors that have created these unsustainable conditions, nor does it adequately address the varied nature of the landscape. In addition, climate change is predicted to make these conditions even more challenging to sustain."

DEIS at 5.

> "In the revision of the Forest Plan, three broad-scale concerns drove the need to consider how we address old forest management, especially the current reserve system approach at the landscape scale. These are:
>
> - The recent history of uncharacteristic levels of disturbances resulting from fire and insect and disease activity that would likely continue into the future.
> - The interaction between disturbances and climate change that elevates the importance of restoring landscape resiliency.
> - Uncertainty about the recovery and viability of old forest-dependent species given the increased risk of uncharacteristically severe disturbances that is likely to be exacerbated by climate change impacts."

DEIS at 522.

However, the Plan lacks a sense of urgency and fails to present any alternative at the scale that is needed to address the forest conditions and needs expressed above. More perplexing is why none of the Alternatives presented in the Plan are projected to bring the Forest close to the desired conditions within the 10- to 15-year time horizon stated in the Plan.

Alternative P indicates there are 656,628 acres suitable for timber production and an additional 202,122 acres that allow harvest to improve other resource objectives. This is a total of 858,750 acres available for harvest (see Table 2, DEIS at viii). Under Alternative P, the average annual number of acres planned for timber harvest will be 5,000 acres, or one-half of one percent (.0058) of the available acres. DEIS at 73 (Table 13). At this pace, there is no way the forest health and wildfire conditions can be addressed with any effectiveness. The problem is compounded by the fact that the Plan assumes the current fiscal budget will drive the management level for the life of the Plan. This self-imposed restriction severely handicaps management opportunities and will fail to bring resource needs into balance. Also, this is not

consistent with the 1982 Planning Rule as described below in Section IV. Even treating the maximum number of acres per year including harvest, (12,000 acres), it would take 71 years to treat all acres.

Tables 15 and 17 point out how little the Plan does to address the magnitude of the current problem regarding attaining desired stand conditions, overstocking issues, and reducing fire risk. Table 15 states the approximate current acres in each structure and vegetation class. Table 17 compares current stand structure to the historic range of variability. DEIS at 75-76. Table 15 lays out the stand structures by species and by age found today. The mid-seral closed stage age class of all species shows this class is out of balance compared to the Historic Range of Variability (Table 17); DEIS at 76.

For example, there are 277,046 acres of Douglas-fir dry in the mid-closed structure, which represents 57% of that stand type. Historically, only 4-13% of Douglas-fir dry stands were in the mid-closed category. One could extrapolate that 50% of that vegetation type (138,523 acres) are in need of treatment. If you use this approach to calculate all of the acres that are out of balance compared to the HRV, the number is 238,379 acres. Nearly a quarter-million acres on the Colville are out of balance and in immediate need of thinning.

Further, the Plan addresses factors needed to attain the goals of Old Forest Management and Timber Production. Table 24 shows how long it will take to get various stand types and ages back into the HRV under Alternative P. DEIS at 79. Again focusing on the mid-closed stand structure of all species, it will take 100 years to reach this goal in several cases. These results are not in line with the goals outlining the urgent need to attain Old Forest Management.

B. Other studies outline forest restoration needs for Northeast Washington forests.

A report titled*: "A new approach to evaluate forest structure restoration needs across Oregon and Washington, USA"* by R. Haugo et al., 335 *Forest Ecol. Mgmt*. 37 (2015), was initiated in response to widespread habitat degradation and uncharacteristic fire, insect, and disease outbreaks in forests across the western United States. This degradation led to highly publicized calls to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration. The study found that changes in current structure would be needed on an estimated 4.7 million+ hectare (40% of all coniferous forests) in order to restore forest structure approximating Natural Range of Variability (NRV) at the landscape scale. (Note: 1 hectare=2.47 acres).

This approach would be implemented by disturbance, disturbance then succession, and succession only. The report found that forest structural restoration needs across eastern Washington and eastern and southwestern Oregon were dominated by the need for thinning and/or low severity fire transitions, taking place within forests historically characterized by low and mixed severity fire regimes. Figure 6 in the report identifies over 400,000 hectares (approximately 1,000,000 acres) of Forest Service lands in Northeast Washington that are in need of restoration. 335 *Forest Ecol. Mgmt*. at 47.

The map zones with the highest proportion of overall disturbance needs (Oregon Southwest and Washington Northeast) also had the highest successional restoration needs. In most locations, restoration programs must focus on both the application of mechanical treatments and fire while also conserving and promoting old trees and late development forest structures. The report identified approximately 1.7 million hectares presently in need of disturbance (including disturbance then succession) to restore forest structure NRV on Forest Service lands outside of wilderness and inventoried roadless areas.

Within the analysis area the Forest Service averaged approximately 12,000 hectares per year of hazardous fuels treatments between 2004 and 2013 and had a total of nearly 19,000 hectares of forest vegetation improvements in 2013 (US Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region; unpublished data) for a total of 31,000 acres of treatment annually. Assuming that these treatments are additive and address disturbance restoration needs identified in this study, at these treatment rates it will take over 50 years to meet the identified disturbance restoration needs on these Forest Service lands.

Appendix Table B.2. Restoration need by Map Zone and Ownership-management categories.	Total	Disturbance Only		Disturbance then Succession		Succession Only	
Forest Ownership	ha.	ha.	%	ha.	%	ha.	%
Washington Northeast							
USFS - General	605000	86000	14.24749	139000	22.94314	71000	11.77258
USFS - Light	181000	25000	13.61607	29000	16.07143	25000	13.83929
USFS - Restricted	203000	25000	12.5498	6000	2.988048	30000	14.54183
BLM	19000	3000	15.21739	5000	28.26087	2000	8.695652
State	181000	29000	16.10738	46000	25.27964	17000	9.619687
Other Pub	19000	2000	12.5	5000	25	3000	14.58333
Tribal	303000	33000	10.96257	82000	27.00535	18000	6.016043
Private	560000	66000	11.85828	151000	26.97035	56000	9.978308

Table 3 and Appendix Table B.2 (reproduced in part above) in the report specifically point out the number of acres that need to be mechanically treated in the study area on Forest Service lands. 335 *Forest Ecol. Mgmt* at 43, 49. For disturbance and disturbance then succession, there is a total of 2,034,000 hectares (or 5,957,640 acres) for the entire study area. Forest Service lands in Northeast Washington alone that need disturbance and disturbance then succession on manageable lands total is 279,000 hectares (or 689,130 acres).

Based on this report – and the fact that Forest Service indicates the expected amount of acres treated will remain constant over the life of the Plan – even if the Forest Service treated 9,000 acres per year on average it will still take 77 years to treat those acres.

In summary, the Forest Service oulined in the Plan how far the Forest is out of balance in relation to the HRV. The Haugo study supports this data and shows how far the Forest is out of balance. This imbalance includes overcrowding, insect and disease infestations, and the threat of catastrophic wildfires. Further, the Preferred Alternative P caps management levels near where they are today because of budget limitations. AFRC believes this is not a viable option, and another approach is needed.

With this in mind, AFRC recommends that the Forest Service craft at least one additional Alternative that departs from long term non-declining flow of timber to rapidly address the forest health conditions currently found on the Colville. This Alternative should take into account the calculated LTSY of 97 MMBF, and the collaborative proposal of 80 MMBF, and mirror the LTSY harvest using all of the sustainable land base, which is 110 MMBF. AFRC does not advocate for this depature to be permanent. Rather, it may only be necessary for a 15- to 20-year period to complete necessary work for this Plan.

C. The Forest should analyze the unconstrained harvest calculation.

To further support a higher-volume alternative departure option, AFRC found the following statement in the supporting document "*Vegetation Modeling Assumptions for the Colville Forest Planning Effort"* prepared by Maximillan Walberg, Regional Analyst:

> "The original model runs produced in November of 2014 included unconstrained model runs. These model runs allowed for much higher amounts of treatment acres in an attempt to see what an unlimited management budget could achieve under the management prescriptions for each alternative. However, these model runs were not consistent with the concept of non-declining flow for timber volume, and did not meet the Long Term Sustained Yield (LTSY) objectives. Therefore they are not currently included in the modeling package. Instead the LTSY and Allowable Sale Quantity runs now approximate the maximum harvest levels of an unlimited budget and associated resource impacts."

Since AFRC is suggesting a departure from non-declining flow for timber volume, we believe that these model runs should now be included and be the basis for the development of a new alternative that will more quickly return the Forest to the HRV.

There is other support in the community for a departure of this magnitude. The Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition (Coalition) has been working with the Forest since 2002. Their website states their mission is "to find common ground and move our region forward with new solutions to forest management problems. Today, the fighting in our forests is behind us, and work is getting done in the woods once again, proving that we can protect special places and protect timber jobs at the same time." Since 2002 the Coalition has lobbied for a long-term sustainable harvest of 80 MMBF on the 400,000 acres of forest land that they classify as manageable, and additional volume should be added on the acres they have classifed as restoration.

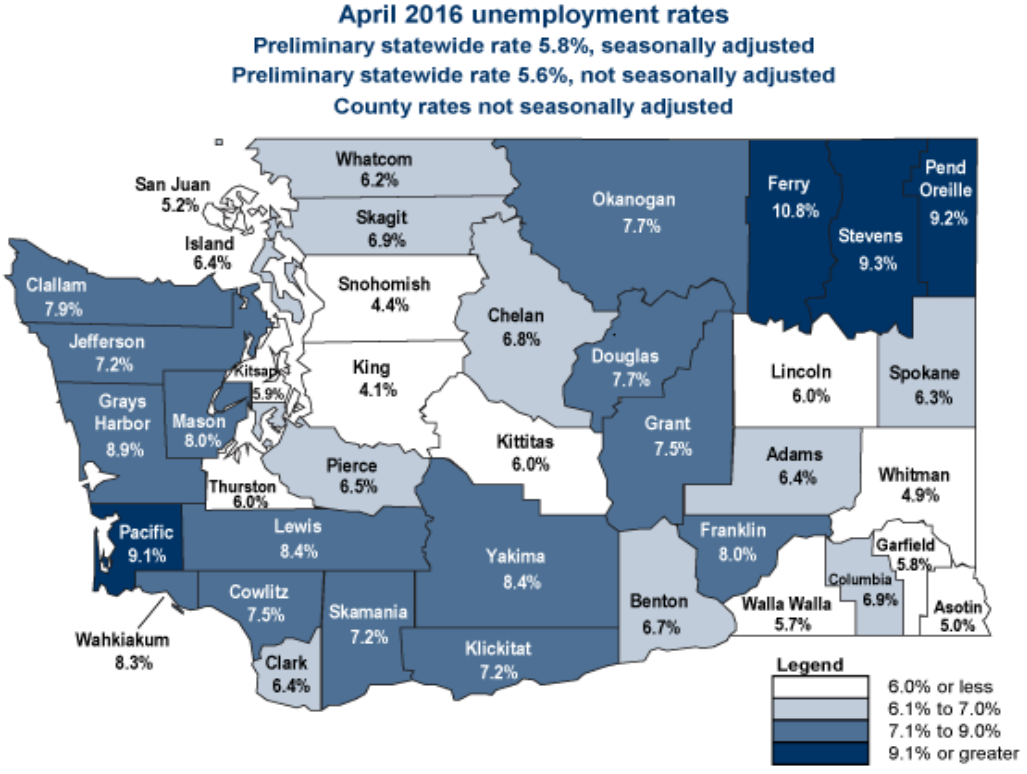
The forest, the community, the industry, and the counties need increased forest treatments for the health of all resources. None of the alternatives presented in this Plan match what is needed and supported by local, collaborative groups. For these reasons, AFRC strongly supports the creation of one or more alternatives to address these conditons.

III. The Proposed Plan Does Not Provide an Adequate Timber Volume to Support the Local Timber Industry Infrastructure and Ensure Community Stability.

AFRC members depend on timber harvests from the Colville to keep their operations running. An adequate and predictable supply of timber is critical to supporting and creating jobs, making investments in equipment, and upgrading facilities – to say nothing of the economic spillover in local communities and businesses adjacent to the national forest.

AFRC members who buy and depend on timber sales from the Colville to sustain their infrastructure employ more than 1,200 people. Unfortunately, under the current Colville Forest Plan, AFRC members are running at reduced capacity levels because of the lack of an adequate supply of sawlogs and raw materials. In fact, during this past winter, one facility – which has re-equipped to process small logs – was completely shut down for five months due to a lack of supply.

While disappointing, it is not surprising that the counties that encompass the Colville (Ferry, Stevens, Pend Oreille) have the three highest unemployment rates in the state: 10.8%, 9.3%, and 9.2% respectively. This is twice the unemployment rate of urban counties like King and Snohomish. Ferry, Stevens, and Pend Oreille Counties, where federal land ownership is high and economic opportunities limited, desperately need private sector jobs.



According to a 2012 report published by the Oregon Forest Resources Institute, every one million board feet of timber harvested supports 11 direct and indirect jobs. A more recent report published by the Idaho Department of Lands in 2016 shows that every one million board feet of timber harvested supports 18 direct and indirect jobs.

Increasing timber harvests on the Colville would not only help maintain the existing infrastructure but also generate hundreds of additional private sector jobs in three economically depressed Washington counties and beyond. For example, increasing timber harvests on the Colville to reflect the consensus of the local collaborative (80 MMBF) would create a minimum of 176 additional jobs more than the Preferred Alternative using the Oregon Forest Resources Institute study, and as many as 288 additional jobs using the Idaho Department of Lands report.

These numbers are consistent with communications AFRC has had with its members, who confirmed that an additional 200 or more jobs would be added at existing facilities if the raw material was available. In order to support the local timber infrastructure and to ensure local community stability that depend on the Colville, the Plan should attempt to maximize its sustained yield timber output.

IV. The Plan Improperly Limits Management Due to Budget Considerations.

The Forest's treatment of budget in the Plan and DEIS is inconsistent with the 1982 Planning Rule and results in artificial restrictions on timber production. As a result, the Plan's own direction is compromised from inception. The objectives are limited by budget, leading to artificial and unlawful constraints on standards, guidelines, and desired condition. The Forest should produce a Plan alternative and set of desired conditions reflecting both how much the land can produce and what the landscape needs.

A. The Plan artificially limits timber volume due to "fiscal capability."

The Plan artificially limits timber volume due to "fiscal capability of the Forest," a concept distinct from land needs, suitability or capacity. DEIS at 66. In response to concerns from the public about budget, the DEIS claimed it is "not realistic or reasonable" to ignore expected funding levels during forest plan revision. DEIS at 26.

The Plan's reliance on budget is not explicit in any of the Forestwide or Management Area Standards or Guidelines. Instead, the Plan states its objectives are "strongly influenced by recent trends, past experiences, anticipated staffing levels, and short-term budgets." Plan at 34. As such, accomplishing the objectives depends on availability of budget, and the amounts shown in the Plan reflect current budget trends and available resources on the Colville. Plan at 23.

Although the evaluation process is not explained in the Plan, the DEIS states that the Forest Service is evaluating Plan alternatives based on a fiscal capability assumption of the Forest, using that assumption to calculate the level of management activities over the life of each Plan alternative (10 to 15 years). DEIS at 66. Although fiscal capability is subject to variation over the life of the Plan, the assumption is based on the current situation and recent trends in

Forest budget. DEIS at 66. Management activities on the ground may increase or decrease as fiscal capability changes in the future. DEIS at 66. The current budget trend is determined by the total budget averaged over the past five years. DEIS at 66. The DEIS states that based on the budget trend, it is assumed that 6-12 thousand acres per year will be treated and that amount of acres will remain constant over the life of the Plan. DEIS at 66. The 6-12 thousand acres figure, which means the landscape will not be sufficiently treated for over 70 years, is a direct result of budget considerations.

The fiscal capability assumption results in limits to objectives and desired conditions. One relevant desired condition for vegetation is forest structure, FW-DC-VEG-04, which states that "the historical range of variability for forest structure is the desired condition." Plan at 30. The related objective is restoration, FW-OBJ-VEG-01, which calls for active management on only 6-12 thousand acres per year to move structure toward desired conditions. Plan at 34.

Another relevant desired condition for renewable forest products is commercial products, FW-DC-RFP-01, which calls for a sustainable level of timber products for current and future generations. Plan at 73. Products available is also a desired condition for renewable forest products, FW-DC-RFP-02, which calls for merchantable timber products to be reasonably available to the public. Plan at 74. There is an objective, FW-OBJ-RFP-01, that is related to both of these desired conditions which is planned sale quantity, stating that active management on 6-12 thousand acres per year would result in an estimated volume of 62 MMBF per year. Plan at 74.

The DEIS explains that the planned sale quantity of 62 MMBF per year is the "projected wood sale quantity" (PWSQ) which is the estimated quantity of timber and all other wood products (non-saw) that are expected to be sold annually. The calculation is based on the planning unit's fiscal capability and organizational capacity and is neither a target nor a limitation on harvest and neither will be an objective unless the responsible official chooses to do so. DEIS at 86. Here, the Colville proposes to make the PWSQ, a budget-derived figure, an objective as evidenced under the renewable forest products category, FW-OBJ-RFP-01, and the desired condition for commercial products has a corresponding objective that states that active management on 6-12 thousand acres per year would result in an estimated volume of 62 MMBF per year. Plan at 74.

B. The 1982 Planning Rule does not allow timber volume to be limited by "fiscal capability."

The Forest elected to proceed under the transition provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule, which allow the use of the 1982 planning procedures (1982 Rule). Plan at 16; 36 C.F.R. § 219.17(b)(3). The transition provisions are "either-or;" as a general rule, the Forest may not mix and match parts of both rules, but must use all of one or the other.

The 1982 Planning Rule contains no language providing for any determination of "fiscal capability" or "reasonably foreseeable budgets" for resulting forest plans. "The *1982 Rule* requires the calculation of long-term sustained yield capacity (LTSY) based on *productivity* and

the calculation of allowable sale quantity (ASQ) that is tied to *lands* that are suitable for timber production." DEIS at 85 (emphasis added). And NFMA in turn allows a forest's ASQ to deviate from LTSY only to the extent consistent with a Forest Plan's "multiple-use management objectives." 16 U.S.C. § 1611(a). NFMA does not permit a deviation for non-management reasons such as budget. The planned sale quantities (PWSQ and PTSQ) established by the Forest, both constrained by budget, are not consistent with the 1982 Planning Rule.

The 1982 Rule requires that the resulting plans shall provide for multiple uses and sustained yield of goods and services in a way that maximizes long-term net public benefits in an environmentally sound matter. 1982 Rule, Sec. 219.1(a). Net public benefits is an expression used to signify the overall long-term value to the nation of all outputs and positive effects (benefits) less all associated inputs and negative effects (costs). 1982 Rule, Sec. 219.3. The maximization of net public benefits to be derived from management of units of the National Forest System is consistent with the principles of multiple use and sustained yield. *Id.*

It appears the Plan may be incorporating budget guidance from the 2012 Planning Rule. The new Rule requires the responsible official to ensure that plan content is within the "fiscal capability" of the unit. 36 C.F.R. § 219.1(g). "Fiscal capability" is not defined in the Rule or elsewhere. The 2012 Rule also states that "objectives should be based on reasonably foreseeable budgets." 36 C.F.R. § 219.7(e)(1)(ii). But the Forest has elected to proceed under the 1982 rule, so these provisions are not relevant.

C. This plan should include timber volume in its desired conditions.

The Plan's desired condition for Renewable Forest Products includes providing "a sustainable level of timber products for current and future generations." FW-DC-RFP-01. An additional desired condition should be added, which is volume meeting or exceeding the ASQ.

As an example, the 2015 Idaho Panhandle LRMP desired conditions/objectives for the "Production of Natural Resources" category includes the following:

> ***Objectives***
> **FW-DC-TBR-04.** The Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) is 1,200 MMBF over the first decade the Plan is implemented. Timber harvest will not exceed this amount over the first decade of implementation. The long-term sustained yield capacity (LTSYC) for the Forest is approximately 22.1 MMCF (approximately 120 MMBF).
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> ***Objectives***
> **FW-OBJ-TBR-01.** Annually offer timber for sale at the estimated predicted volume sold of 45 MMBF.

Idaho Panhandle Forest Plan, 2014, at 39-40.

The Colville should also include the ASQ as a desired condition under the Renewable Forest Products category in addition to the existing desired conditions. The PTSQ should be an objective to meet the desired condition.

The Colville has not met the ASQ, which is commonly referred to as a ceiling for timber output from suitable lands, in several years. The Colville should strive to reach the ASQ because, as the proposed plan states, the health of the forest and the community depend on managing the land at levels well beyond the PTSQ.

D. The Proposed Plan inadequately explains the ASQ's failure to meet LTSY.

The 1982 Rule requires the calculation of LTSY based on productivity and the calculation of ASQ that is tied to lands that are suitable for timber production. DEIS at 85. LTSY is the highest uniform wood yield that may be sustained for timber production and assumes that all suitable land for timber production is in the desired condition. DEIS at 85. LTSY was calculated assuming that the HRV midpoint for each structure class was the desired condition; the LTSY for preferred alternative P is 97.4 MMBF per year. DEIS at 85.

ASQ reflects the quantity of timber that may be sold from lands suitable for timber production (within utilization standards) for the first decade of the Plan given an unlimited budget. DEIS at 85. Unlike the LTSY calculation, the ASQ calculation takes into account harvest from lands that are not in the desired condition. DEIS at 85. Because the desired condition requires stands within a late structure condition, time is required for the trees to grow resulting in a lower ASQ of 67 MMBF for the Preferred Alternative P. DEIS at 85-86.

The difference between the annual LTSY and the ASQ in the Preferred Alternative is a staggering 30 MMBF. The ASQ is a ceiling for timber output from suitable lands and will limit the amount that can be offered for the first decade of the final plan. The National Forest Management Act allows a forest's ASQ to deviate from LTSY only to the extent consistent with a Forest Plan's "multiple-use management objectives." 16 U.S.C. § 1611(a). The DEIS does not adequately explain, or justify using management objectives, how the existing conditions can only provide 67 MMBF/year while the desired conditions can provide for 97 MMBF/year. This gap should be filled with a new alternative close to the LTSY.

V. The Proposed Plan Imposes Unwarranted Restrictions on Timber Harvest.

A. The proposed road density changes would negatively affect many stakeholders.

AFRC is concerned about the proposed desired future condition for road densities. As described in the General Restoration Management Area (GR) it is proposed that the average future road density is "no more than two miles per square mile within each 5th field watershed." Additionally, in the Focused Restoration Management Area the Forest proposes "no more than one mile per square mile within each 5th field watershed." Plan at 87. (MA-DC-FR-05). In the Focused Restoration area that density would not even cross one section of land diagonally.

AFRC's concern is based on the fact that the Colville is an important place for a variety of stakeholders and users. Many of the uses, both current and proposed, will rely heavily on an effective transportation system to provide reliable access to the Forest.

Many aspects of the Plan seem to be in conflict with the desired condition for road densities. This would include not only the need for vegetation management projects to benefit both the ecosystem and the economy but also recreation and wildfire suppression needs. The Plan states:

> "With an estimated 336,000 visits per year, the Colville National Forest is a popular retreat for activities including camping, winter sports, forest product gathering, off-highway vehicle use, four-season trail use, driving for pleasure, snowmobiling, backcountry travel, hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing. Combined, day-use and overnight recreation opportunities contribute an estimated $7.5 million (in 2003 dollars) in annual revenues to communities located within 50 miles of the national forest. (2009 NVUM Master Report)"
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> Plan at 3.

This level of use on a much smaller transportation system footprint will increase the traffic levels of the per user/mile impacts to the forest road system, thus increasing, through higher density use and wear, the need for maintenance and the cost associated with that maintenance. Additionally, recreation and vegetation management opportunities may be reduced through a significant reduction in transportation system miles, thus reducing the positive economic impact to the local communities served by the Colville. How many of the "recreation areas and places to collect renewable forest products such as firewood, berries, mushrooms, and Christmas trees," or the "32 campgrounds, 2 eligible wild and scenic rivers, the Salmo-Priest Wilderness, 197 miles of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail, 49 Degrees North Mountain Resort, and 15 recreation residences" may be impacted and reduced by efforts to reach the desired condition road density? Plan at 3. The potential economic loss through reduced recreational opportunities will conflict with the goal of the Forest to provide positive economic contribution to the local economy.

As stated on Plan page 5: "Maintaining recreation infrastructure and providing opportunities for a broad cross-section of the public will strengthen the national forest's relevancy and contribute to future generations' appreciation and support of the National Forest System." Significant reductions in road density will likely negatively impact the ability to maintain access to some of the Forest's infrastructure. If the goal is to continue offering recreation and other uses to a broad cross-section of the public, then dispersing that use across a broad transportation system will be needed. Increased density of users on a smaller road system will only serve to drive those wishing to "get away into the woods" to other landscapes off of the Colville which have less density of users.

"Wildland fire is an essential disturbance process in dynamic and resilient ecosystems. However, the potential for uncharacteristic wildfire that is more severe, dangerous, and difficult

and costly to suppress, concerns forest managers." Plan at 5. Reduction in road densities can serve to increase expense and risks of loss during suppression activities due to lack of access. Also, as prescribed fire is possibly implemented across a broader range of the forest, adequate road systems can serve to minimize implementation costs and also serve as back up control points should a burn not proceed as anticipated.

As the Plan states, Northeast Washington contains an important, diverse, and inter-reliant milling infrastructure. Specifically, the Plan says the Forest: "Supports the most concentrated milling area in the state. The Colville timber processing area (composed of three Washington counties and three northern Idaho counties) includes 22 milling facilities, 11 of which are sawmills. Some of these facilities specialize in using small-diameter timber that is abundant on National Forest System lands in northeastern Washington. This concentration of industrial activity contributes to local economies and to the character of communities." Plan at 19. The Colville is an important part of the regional "wood basket." A key aspect of continuing to support this infrastructure with adequate and predictable timber volume is the offering of economically viable sales to the market both now and into the future. Projects with high road-related costs, especially decommissioning, can negatively impact the viability of the project to be completed. Future projects will also be negatively impacted by a reduced road system. This minimal road density will increase vegetation management costs in the future. The result will be a negative outcome for the management of the Forest, and the fewer ecological and economic benefits to the users and surrounding communities. It will also significantly challenge the Forest in reaching its goals to "Contribute to and support local jobs and labor income within the counties surrounding the forest through anticipated outputs associated with management activities." Plan App. B at 154.

An additional concern over stated road density future conditions is related to future project planning efforts. The need to maintain or make progress towards these desired conditions may have negative impacts to the viability of projects through increased costs either in analysis or implementation, or both. To avoid potential objections or litigation over projects, the Forest may need to include reductions in road density as part of each project. This associated work could create economic challenges to bringing economically viable projects to market, thus reducing financial benefit to local communities. A prescriptive outcome-based desired condition which does not explicitly identify road density goals, but rather ecological outcomes, would seem be a more preferable and defendable process.

For the reasons identified above, AFRC believes the Forest should reconsider its proposed road density desired conditions. The Forest should consider the various goals and benefits the Colville provides to the local communities in the form of recreation, jobs, and wildfire protection and assure significant reductions in the transportation system do not conflict with these goals.

B. Key watersheds and riparian widths should not be expanded.

The Aquatic and Riparian Conservation Strategy (ARCS) found in the Plan is a refinement of previous forest plan strategies (including the Northwest Forest Plan, PACFISH,

and INFISH) incorporating key concepts from the Aquatic Restoration Strategy and watershed condition framework, and is intended to provide the core set of desired conditions, suitability, objectives, standards and guidelines for aquatic and riparian management.

Under Alternative P, the Riparian Management Area (RMA) widths for seasonally flowing, intermittent streams and wetlands etc. are increased from the previous INFISH buffers of 50 feet to 100 feet. (*See* Table 74, DEIS at 226).

The Plan also designates an expanded network of key watersheds compared to the no-action alternative by identifying 22 hydrological unit code 12 subwatersheds as key watersheds covering 371,943 acres, or almost 34 percent of the Forest; compared to the 13 priority watersheds in the no-action alternative that include 214,283 acres (about 19 percent of the Forest). Alternative P includes six objectives for key watersheds, emphasizing that management within key watersheds is to focus on: the restoration or protection of watershed, aquatic and riparian function; reducing the impacts of roads on watershed function; improving aquatic organism passage at road/stream crossings, range management actions; enhancing late forest structure in upland plant communities within RMAs and improving stream channel; and floodplain function.

AFRC questions how both increasing the riparian widths on intermittent streams and adding nine additional key watersheds will impact active forest management. New information is available indicating that forest health is improved with appropriate active management within riparian areas. Specifically, the catastrophic wildfires of 2015 were particularly devastating in the riparian areas in northeast Washington. AFRC suggests that the final Plan address the need for management in the riparian zones and the long-term benefits for aquatic and wildlife resources.

Pictured on the following pages is a riparian area burnt heavily in the 2015 Northstar Fire.

Pictured below are two managed stands that were burned in the Northstar Fire. Both pictures point out the benefits of active management.

C. The Plan should not designate potential wilderness areas.

AFRC appreciates and supports the proposed Kettle Creek Special Interest Area. This area is an innovative approach to multiple-use that does not impose undue restrictions on management. Plan at 107-11. Unfortunately, the preferred alternative proposes to designate nearly 70,000 acres of the Forest as recommended wilderness. DEIS at viii. This designation has consequences, as areas recommended for inclusion in the national wilderness system are generally precluded from being designated as suitable for timber production. 1982 Planning Rule § 219.14(c)(1). However, there is no requirement in the planning rule to designate areas as recommended wilderness. Designation of potential wilderness areas can have negative effects on the landscape. If an area cannot be managed, the risk of severe fire increases. All the proposed wilderness areas are adjacent to Focused or General Restoration Management Areas. Thus these areas could become new fire sources with no tools for the Forest to address them.

The proposal to designate so many acres as recommended wilderness is particularly troubling in light of the significant area (13%) proposed for Backcountry, where recreation is emphasized over production. The EIS acknowledges there is little, if any, demand for additional wilderness recreation in the Colville. Survey data estimates "less than 1 percent of visits to the forest are to a designated wilderness area. None of the survey respondents reported overcrowding in designated wilderness areas during their visit. These findings suggest that current designated wilderness is adequate to satisfy recreational demand for wilderness." DEIS at 663. Instead, the proposal to set aside nearly 10 percent of the Forest appears to be based on "non-use" values, the knowledge that wilderness exists by people who have never visited the Colville and likely never will. *Id.*

The acres proposed for wilderness should instead be designated as Backcountry or as Focused Restoration, to ensure the availability of active forest management as a tool to continue the Colville's legacy as a working forest.

D. Proposed Plan language should be substantially revised.

As a general comment, we are concerned that the direction in the Plan uses language that is extremely restrictive. This creates a series of litigation traps for the Forest Service that could hamstring projects for years. It is common for Forest Plan consistency under NFMA, 16 U.S.C. § 1604(i), to be a focal point in litigation. However, if the Forest Plan is written to give the Forest Service some discretion in implementing, the Forest Service will usually get deference from the courts on interpreting a Plan. *Friends of the Wild Swan v. Weber*, 767 F.3d 936, 947 (9th Cir. 2014). Rigid language prevents the Plan from achieving the "adaptive" component of its purpose, Plan at 7, and prevents the Forest from applying science-based adaptive management to respond to changing climate and forest conditions.

Specifically, the consistency standards in Appendix A, Plan at 141-43, are far too strict, and do not follow nationwide direction. Regarding desired conditions, these standards state that a project with mixed effects may only have "negligible" effects on progress toward

some desired conditions. App. A. at 142. This is more restrictive than the current consistency regulation, which requires only that a project "*does not foreclose* the opportunity to maintain or achieve any goals, desired conditions, or objectives, over the long term." 36 C.F.R. § 219.15(d)(1) (emphasis added). The Appendix should be revised to use the language from the regulation.

On both standards and guidelines, the Plan would require a project to be designed "exactly" in accord with the applicable standard or guideline, or is equivalent to such an "exact" project. App. A at 142. These standards are unlikely to be met by any project that could be designed or implemented at reasonable cost or timeline. Instead, the Plan should use the regulatory language, which requires only that a project be "consistent" with applicable standards and guidelines. 36 C.F.R. §§ 219.15(d)(2), (3).

Throughout the Plan, AFRC recommends replacing words such as "shall" and "must" with "should." This would make the Plan a true guidance document rather than an attempt to pre-plan projects for the next 10 to 15 years. If a standard uses "should," the Forest Supervisor has the flexibility to adjust compliance with the standard if the project or the landscape requires it, while not having to do a Plan amendment.

Additionally, AFRC recommends adding a standard or guideline establishing the Forest Supervisor's authority to decide between conflicting goals. Guideline VEGU01 from the Payette Forest Plan is a good example:

VEGU01	During site/project-scale analysis, tradeoffs in the achievement of one or more of the vegetative components described in Appendix A may need to be considered. Current conditions of the vegetation may necessitate the need to move one component away from the desired condition in order to move another one toward the desired condition. In these situations, decisions should be based not only on which vegetative component is important to emphasize at any point in time to meet resource objectives, but also how to effectively move all components toward their desired condition over the long term.

Payette National Forest, Land and Resources Management Plan, 2003, at III-31.

AFRC has the following specific comments on Plan components.

1. Chapter 1: Roles and Contributions should reflect the impact a working Colville Forest has on all levels.

Chapter 1 of the Plan identifies roles and contributions for the Colville at the state, local, regional, national, and international levels. Plan at 19-21. At only one of those levels – Regional – does the Forest identify its significant role in contributing to the forest products industry. Statements should be added to each of the other levels. At the *State and Local* level, the Colville is a key component of an industry that directly employs 40,000 Washingtonians. Many of these are found in rural communities, such as those adjacent to the Colville. Wages paid, income taxes, and other monetary transactions generated by these businesses and family-

wage jobs substantially contribute to the infrastructure and well-being of the local communities. The EIS reports that forestry contributes around 5% of the jobs, and 10% of the wages, in Stevens and Pend Oreille Counties, and 2-3% in Ferry County. DEIS at 654. These figures reflect that forestry provides a modern rarity: rural family-wage jobs. Thus the numbers, while significant, still understate the impact of forestry employment on local communities. Foresters and mill workers are key threads in the social fabric of the area. Moreover, as noted above, each million board foot of harvest results in 18 direct and indirect jobs.

At the National level, the forest contributes to a sector that employs over 900,000 people—more than the automotive industry. The forest products sector—including paper, pulp, and wood products manufacturers—contributes over $200 billion to the national economy every year. A recent report identifies maintaining middle-skilled and middle-paying employment as a key component of labor force participation, and thus of the strength of the entire economy. Executive Office of the President, Council of Economic Advisers, *The Long-Term Decline in Prime-Age Male Labor Force Participation*, June 2016, at 27-28, *available at* https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/page/files/20160620_cea_primeage_male_lfp.pdf. And at the *International* level, the Colville contributes to international trade by supporting an industry which is a significant component of import and export flows. A Colville National Forest that is a working forest helps make the economy work for everyone.

2. Chapter 2: Forestwide Direction needs substantial revision.

The following elements of the Forestwide Direction should be revised.

FW-OBJ-VEG-01. Restoration.

This Objective only treats 6 to 12 thousand acres as the ultimate objective, essentially capping restoration at the amount artificially limited by budget. We recommend revising this to a landscape-oriented objective such as restoring as many acres as possible, restoring a substantial portion of the Forest to its historic function, or other similar language.

FW-STD-VEG-02. Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Plant Species – Surveys.

AFRC opposes inclusion of this standard in the strongest terms and cannot support a Plan that includes this standard. Frankly, AFRC is shocked that the Forest Service would propose expansion of the "Survey and Manage" program imposed on lands subject to the Northwest Forest Plan. Such surveys are not required by any law or regulation—not the Endangered Species Act, NFMA, or the National Environmental Policy Act. In the Northwest Forest Plan area, such surveys cost an estimated $21 million annually, and for some species two years of surveys are required. Unnecessarily large buffers are established around identified species sites. Forest Service unit costs are 5-11% higher for forest management activities where Survey and Manage is required. The required surveys also add significant delays to forest management and fuels reduction projects. The Forest lists 39 separate covered plants, none of which are ESA-listed and only one is a candidate. App. C, Plan at 155-56. The surveys would add substantial costs that provide no real benefits, so they should be deleted.

FW-STD-VEG-04. Timber Production.

This standard restricts "[r]egulated timber harvest activities" but should refer to "scheduled timber harvest activities" for consistency with the Plan and NFMA. *See* DEIS at 43, 47 (stating that under the proposed action, "Scheduled timber production would be suitable on 59 percent of the forest.").

FW-STD-VEG-09. Harvest Systems.

This standard proposes to select harvest systems based on "ability to meet desired conditions and not strictly on their ability to provide the greatest dollar return." Dollar return is usually not the issue with selection of harvest systems. The issue is economic viability of a project. A purchaser is more likely to implement a project where it will not incur losses. This standard should be revised to state that selection will "take into account the system's ability to meet desired conditions and the economic viability of the project."

FW-GDL-VEG-01. Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Plant Species – Disturbance in Occupied Habitat.

AFRC believes this standard is unnecessarily broad. There is no accepted definition of "occupied" plant habitat. For listed plant species, the ESA requires consultation when a project "may affect" such species, but does not prohibit activity that complies with the restrictions under ESA Section 7. Section 7 prohibits actions that would "jeopardize the continued existence of" or "adversely modify" or destroy critical habitat. 16 U.S.C. § 1536(a)(2). Yet an action may "take" individuals so long as it complies with Section 7. *Id.* § 1536(o). Accordingly, AFRC recommends substantially revising this standard to state that the Forest should avoid impacts on such plant species where practicable, and will comply with the requirements of the ESA for listed species.

FW-STD-WR-03. Road Construction and Decommissioning in Key Watersheds.

AFRC opposes the use of an absolute bar on increases in road mileage. This is unnecessary for watershed and fisheries health and would frustrate the Forest's ability to meet restoration needs. AFRC recommends changing this standard to state that road mileage increases in key watersheds shall be kept to the minimum necessary to meet management goals.

Wildlife: General Comment.

The DEIS cites to existing management direction for grizzly bear and lynx, DEIS at 378, 406-08. Plan direction should adopt the same standards as in the Access Amendments for grizzly bear and in the Lynx Amendments, and the resulting Biological Opinions.

FW-STD-WL-11. Large Snag Habitat.

A blanket bar on removal of non-hazard snags >20″ dbh is extremely restrictive and risks buildup of fuels in a post-fire environment. Recent research indicates that post-fire salvage is very effective in reducing fuels over the long term and reducing reburn. David Peterson, et al., "Post-fire logging reduces surface woody fuels up to four decades following wildfire," 338 *Forest Ecol. & Mgmt.* 84 (2015), *available at* http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw_2015_peterson.pdf. If meaningful salvage does not occur, areas are at high risk of reburn. J.A. Fites, et al., "The 2012 Chips Fire, California: A Case Study of Fire Behavior." U.S. Forest Service, 2012. This standard should be revised to establish acre-based or qualitative standards for snag retention.

FW-GDL-WL-15. Fire-dependent Surrogate Wildlife Species.

Fire continues to be a major threat to forest ecosystems. The Forest proposes here to limit salvage harvest in order to provide habitat for species such as the black-backed woodpecker. This standard should be deleted, as changing fire conditions no longer support it. Research confirms that stand-replacing fires are increasing throughout the western United States. J.D. Miller, et al., "Quantitative Evidence for Increasing Forest Fire Severity in the Sierra Nevada and Southern Cascade Mountains," 12 *Ecosystems* 16, 28 (2009). Such fires, including the fires of 2015 in central and eastern Washington, do not provide habitat for fire-dependent species. Restrictions on salvage caused increased fuel loads, further reburns, and further destruction of habitat.

FW-DC-RFP-01. Commercial Products.

As discussed above, this desired condition should include attainment of the ASQ for the Forest.

FW-OBJ-RFP-01. Planned Sale Quantity.

The objective should be revised to increase treatment and volume, as described above.

Wild and Scenic Rivers.

These standards should clarify that they apply only within the designated corridor for the Wild and Scenic River, not outside of or adjacent to that corridor. The Wild & Scenic Rivers Act is becoming an increasing source of litigation, so its reach should be clarified. The Forest should also consider potentially authorizing timber harvest as a tool in the Wild corridor. Sanitation or safety harvest can be important tools to ensure ecosystem functionality and to protect river values. A blanket ban should not be imposed nor is it justified.

3. Revisions to Chapter 3: Management Area Direction.

AFRC recommends the following revisions to Management Area Direction.

MA-STD-BC-01. Motorized Vehicle Use.

Since timber harvest "as a tool" is authorized in Backcountry, the motor vehicle use prohibition should be amended to explicitly allow vehicles engaged in timber harvest pursuant to a forest management decision.

MA-STD-RMA-04. Timber harvest and Thinning.

This standard is too restrictive regarding harvest in riparian areas, particularly in concert with the wide stream buffers established by the Plan. The wording of the standard does not appear to allow harvests which would move conditions toward historic range of variability over the long term. The standard should be revised accordingly.

VI. The DEIS Does Not Consider an Adequate Range of Alternatives.

The DEIS does not have a reasonable range of alternatives so additional alternatives are legally required. NEPA requires an agency developing an EIS to "evaluate 'all reasonable alternatives" … *Theodore Roosevelt Conservation P'ship v. Salazar*, 661 F.3d 66, 72 (D.C. Cir. 2011). "An alternative is 'reasonable' if it is objectively feasible as well as 'reasonable in light of [the agency's] objectives."' *Id*. (quoting *City of Alexandria v. Slater,* 198 F.3d 862, 866 (D.C. Cir. 1999)). "The existence of a viable but unexamined alternative renders an environmental impact statement inadequate." *Westlands Water Dist. v. U.S. Dep't of Interior*, 376 F.3d 853, 868 (9th Cir. 2004).

The range of alternatives is inadequate in two significant ways. First, the DEIS does not consider any alternative with higher timber sale harvest than the proposed action. Nor does it explain why such an alternative was not considered in detail. DEIS at 58-59. "An agency must . . . explain its reasoning for eliminating an alternative." *N. Alaska Envtl. Ctr. v. Kempthorne*, 457 F.3d 969, 978 (9th Cir. 2006). Second, the DEIS reveals that three of the four action alternatives are limited by the1982 Planning Rule's even-flow requirement to extremely low harvest levels. DEIS at 86. Accordingly, alternatives R, B, and O are not objectively feasible alternatives. They do not purport to meet NFMA's multiple-use mandate. The remaining alternatives—no action, proposed action, and Alternative P—do not give a sufficient range to allow the agency to make a reasoned determination.

NEPA requires the agency to prepare a higher-harvest alternative. The existence of viable higher-volume alternatives renders the DEIS inadequate.

VII. Conclusion.

Thank you for your efforts on this plan revision and your consideration of these comments. If you have questions, please contact AFRC's Washington Manager, Matt Comisky at (360) 352-3910 or our Washington consultant, Tom Partin at (503) 704-4644.

Sincerely,

Travis Joseph
President