



# NORTHEAST WASHINGTON FOREST COALITION

July 10, 2020

Forest Supervisor Rodney Smoldon  
Colville National Forest  
Objection Reviewing Officer  
Attn: Objections  
765 South Main  
Colville, Washington 99114

Submitted via email to: [objections-pnw-colville@fs.fed.us](mailto:objections-pnw-colville@fs.fed.us)

Re: OBJECTION - San Poil Restoration Project

Dear Supervisor Smoldon,

The Northeast Washington Forest Coalition submits the following objection to the U.S. Forest Service's Decision Notice (DN) selecting Alternative 2 for the San Poil Project as analyzed in the Environmental Assessment (EA) with a Decisions Notice (DN) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). We believe the DN and FONSI were reached in error pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Title IV of the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009.

As required by 36 C.F.R. § 218.8(d), the objector's name, address, and telephone number are below.

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## PETITIONER

Northeast Washington Forest Coalition

Objection Reviewing Officer  
Supervisor, Colville National Forest  
765 South Main  
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[objections-prw-colville@fs.fed.us](mailto:objections-prw-colville@fs.fed.us)

## NOTICE OF OBJECTION PURSUANT TO TITLE 36 CFR PART 218.8(d)

Pursuant to 36 CFR §214 and 36 CFR 218.8(d), the above objector, Northeast Washington Forest Coalition (NEWFC) — seek the reversal of the *San Poil* Decision Notice (DN) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)—signed by District Ranger Travis Fletcher, Colville National Forest, for the following reasons:

## STATEMENT OF REASONS

Petitioner Northeast Washington Forest Coalition (Petitioner) fully participated in collaboration and filed comments during project development and during which time we gave detailed reasons for our concerns and asked that our recommendations be followed or deviations from them justified. Despite extensive input and time put into this collaborative process, the DN & FONSI differ significantly from recommendations made by petitioners.

We fully incorporate the following into this objection:

- all comments appellants previously submitted regarding the *San Poil Project public scoping and Environmental Assessment* process since project inception
- all letters submitted to the CNF regarding the San Poil Project proposal
- all documentation contained in project files including notes taken during Forest Service organized collaboration meetings held at the Republic Ranger District, Colville National Forest

The DN and FONSI are not in accordance with the legal requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*, and its implementing regulations, the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) 16 U.S.C. 1600 *et seq.*, and its implementing regulations, the Administrative Procedures Act, (APA) 5 U.S.C. Sec. 706, the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, (CFLRP), Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 16 U.S.C. 7303(d) Sec 4003 (d) as amended, and the current Forest Plan for the Colville National Forest (CNF).

In the subsequent sections of this objection, we address the following aspects of the DN that lead us to the above conclusion:



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1. The project does not trend towards landscape resiliency and does not logically use or follow the landscape evaluation.
2. We object to the proposed shaded fuel breaks in and adjacent to the IRA and recommended wilderness given their lack of proven efficacy, high cost, low social acceptance, lack of a link to the purpose and need, unnecessary environmental impacts, and the deleterious effects on the wilderness qualities in the Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs).
3. The project is not following the purpose and need, specifically to maintain and improve aquatic habitats. A LiDAR analysis identified sixty-seven miles of unauthorized roads, but the impacts of all these roads will not be field verified, and actions will only be taken if issues are discovered during implementation.
4. The project did not provide adequate public information to collaborate effectively. Issues associated with deficit public information include insufficient maps, inadequate response to comments, and unresponsiveness to the collaborative request for draft prescriptions.
5. The project is not maintaining scenic integrity near trails and within IRAs.
6. The project does not effectively analyze wildlife viability as required in the new Forest Plan, and it is thus unknown whether the project is maintaining wildlife viability.

Formed in 2002, the Northeast Washington Forest Coalition works with the Colville National Forest to promote ecological forest restoration, aquatic restoration, recreation, and economic stability. NEWFC strives to collaborate with the CNF to increase efficiencies in planning, produce high-quality ecological forest restoration, compromise social differences, and support local communities. NEWFC's primary mission is to demonstrate the full potential of restoration forestry and conservation actions to enhance forest health, wildlife habitat, public safety, and community economic vitality.

NEWFC is committed to working together to find common ground for the best forest management solutions. This solution-based approach has worked well and resulted in unprecedented success when compared to other National Forests. The amount of on-the-ground work done by the CNF is a product of years of dedicated engagement by our members, community leaders, and CNF personnel. This journey is ongoing and always presenting opportunities for continued improvement and engagement.

Since 2015, the San Poil Project has gone through several changes and challenges. In 2015, the North Star fire burned a portion of what was the western side of the project, and subsequently, all areas to the west of Hwy 20 were dropped from the project. Additionally, there has been significant turnover on this project, including the District Ranger, the Environmental Coordinator, the Silviculturist, the Fisheries Biologist/Hydrologist, and the Fuels Specialist, all key personnel in the development of the project. Lastly, the forest plan revision was finalized in 2019, and the project was updated with an attempt to comply. NEWFC has been the only constant through the San Poil project, and this insight can aid in making the project a high-quality ecological restoration project, which incorporates social concerns. We want to



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emphasize that we are in support of many of the activities in the project as a whole and efforts for ecological restoration in the San Poil area.

We have provided seven categories of concerns, along with the desired solutions. We intend to work collaboratively with the CNF to resolve our objection.

## 1. Landscape Resiliency

The project does not adequately trend towards landscape resiliency. The purpose and need in the Environmental Assessment (EA) of the San Poil project states that there is "a need to promote forest health and resiliency within the planning area" (EA p.4). Title IV of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, as amended, the direction under which the Northeast Washington Forest Vision 2020 (Vision 2020) was created and funded, states its purpose "is to encourage the collaborative, science-based ecosystem restoration of priority forest landscapes..."

Restoring forest landscapes requires a multi-scale approach, in keeping with the most rigorous science and technical information, including Landscape Ecology, which is the study of reciprocal effects of spatial pattern on ecological processes (Pickett and Cadenasso 1995). For example, large-scale patterns of vegetation structure and composition drive the major ecological processes that restoration actions focus on (i.e., disturbance, habitat, aquatics, etc.) (Hessburg et al. 2015). Therefore, ensuring resilient forests, capable of accommodating and responding to a disturbance, involves restoring landscape spatial pattern to baseline or reference conditions.

Natural disturbances, such as fire or insects and disease, both create and respond to landscape patterns (Turner et al. 2001). Fire behavior, including the proportion of low, moderate, and high severity, is shaped by the pattern of vegetation structure and composition while simultaneously altering that structure and composition. If the spatial pattern of vegetation structure and composition is characteristic (i.e., within the normal range of variability for the plant association or structure class), the fire will behave characteristically. When fires behave characteristically, landscapes can respond to fire characteristically and ecologically rebound.

Landscapes that differ in structure and composition from baseline or reference conditions will behave uncharacteristically in the event of a disturbance. For example, fire within mesic forest types is generally infrequent with a higher proportion of moderate to high severity patches. In contrast, fire in dry forest types is typically frequent with a higher proportion of low severity patches. If managers do not consider the landscape spatial pattern, management activities risk creating unique or unusual conditions to which fire and other disturbances will respond in novel or unexpected ways that undermine habitat and other values. Simply put, it is not possible to address landscape resiliency from natural disturbances without patterning restoration work at the landscape level.

The silvicultural report describes a set of objectives to reach the purpose and need, but these objectives are all at the stand level (p. 11). We ask that these objectives and associated actions





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within the project area be modified to include landscape-level objectives such as mean patch size, patch density, connectivity, and fragmentation. Adjusting these goals will help restore forests by applying both the historical and future range of variability as the landscape analysis prescription and associated materials recommend.

The spatially explicit landscape evaluation<sup>1</sup> found that the landscape was fragmented, with too small of patch sizes compared to the historical range of variability for most structure classes. Additionally, the Silvicultural report includes increasing patch size as one of its objectives (p. 11). However, the actions and treatments do not appear to demonstrate that the project trends towards large patch sizes. We ask that the project be modified to include larger units and/or show that the treatments create larger patch sizes.

At the patch or stand-level in fire-frequent forests, spatial patterns were complex mosaics of individual trees, clumps, and openings. This intra-stand (or intra-patch) variability influences "key aspects of resilience and ecosystem function such as disturbance behavior, regeneration, snow retention, and habitat quality in frequent-fire pine and mixed-conifer forests. There is a broad scientific consensus that restoration treatments should seek to restore this mosaic pattern to restore resilience and maintain ecosystem function." (Churchill et al. 2013). Indeed, the San Poil Silvicultural report's objectives include maintaining or creating these stand-level spatial patterns (p. 11). However, neither the EA nor the Silvicultural report identifies the process to achieve intra-stand variability. With the proven difficulties in other projects with effectively creating individuals, clumps, and openings (ICO or ICO methodology), we believe that the EA should contain specifics and assurances to achieve intra-stand variability. Given the lack of any CNF direction on how to implement intra-stand variability effectively, this project would provide an excellent basis for the CNF to collaborate with NEWFC and other experts to create such a methodology.

## Requested Resolution

- Modify objectives, and associated actions within the project area to include landscape-level objectives such as mean patch size, patch density, connectivity, and fragmentation in collaboration with NEWFC
- Modify project actions by increasing unit size and/or show that the treatments create larger patch sizes of structure classes by assessing and/or connecting nearby patches.
- Develop a collaborative agreement with NEWFC defining how to implement intra-stand variability during implementation

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<sup>1</sup> See Attachment A: San Poil Landscape Prescription. All data from the spatially explicit landscape evaluation are available at the request, but our understanding is that the CNF already has these data



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## 2. Shaded Fuel breaks adjacent to Inventoried Roadless Areas and Recommended Wilderness Areas

The Bald-Snow Wilderness Management Area (WMA), Thirteenmile and Cougar IRAs are some of the most remote on the CNF and have outstanding wilderness characteristics. We have concerns that this project may not adequately maintain wilderness qualities within the IRA. The recreation report stated that “Fuel reduction and pile burning adjacent to forest roads and within the IRAs would likely result in five of the eight primary roadless area characteristics being altered in a negative manner on approximately 630 acres of IRA” (p.10) and that “proposed fuel reduction and pile burning activities may reduce the number of IRA acres that may be considered as recommended wilderness by the Forest Service during its next forest plan revision process which is expected to begin in approximately 15 years” (p.12). However, the EA concludes, “The project would maintain or improve the roadless character...” (p.5). This contradiction is troubling since “maintenance or improvement” of these important lands is the opposite of what’s stated in the specialists’ effects analysis. And, as discussed previously, not all unauthorized roads are being evaluated or proposed for restoration. This proposed treatment fundamentally clashes with our long-standing collaborative agreements, and we cannot support the reduction of wilderness areas without significant collaborative discussion.

In January of 2016, NEWFC expressed concerns regarding the use of shaded fuel breaks on Hall Creek Road between Bald Snow Recommended Wilderness Area and Thirteenmile Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA) and Road 2054 between Cougar Mountain IRA and Thirteenmile IRA. In July 2019, we attended a field trip with Forest Service personnel to discuss the shaded fuel breaks in further detail. In October 2019, several of our members also expressed concerns about their use. Moreover, in January 2020, we sent a letter stating that their inclusion in the project would result in a low level of support.<sup>2</sup> We do not see where our repeated concerns have been incorporated or even addressed. We object to these particular shaded fuel breaks in the project given their lack of proven efficacy, high cost, social acceptance, lack of a link to the purpose and need, their environmental impacts, and potential adverse effects to wilderness qualities in the IRAs.

### Requested Resolution

- Demonstrate that the project maintains wilderness qualities or modify the project as necessary to maintain wilderness qualities.
- Remove the shaded fuel breaks along Hall Creek Rd between Bald Snow WMA and Thirteenmile IRA and along FR 2054 between Cougar and Thirteenmile IRAs from this project.
- Make the shaded fuel break portion of the project a separate decision with more specifics regarding exactly how all stakeholder participation, comments and concerns will be addressed.

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<sup>2</sup> See Attachment B: NEWFC Level of Support Table



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## 3. Aquatic Habitats

We are concerned that the project does not follow the Purpose and Need to maintain and improve aquatic habitats. The EA identifies approximately 67 miles of non-systems roads using LiDAR, but these roads' condition and effects have not been validated by field surveys (EA p. 27). It is unclear to us how an effects analysis can be conducted adequately without knowing the actual and full effects of these roads. We ask that these roads be field reviewed, effects documented, and appropriate action is taken to mitigate hydrological issues and impacts on wilderness characteristics.

The transportation analysis process for the project identifies several miles of system roads that are a low benefit to the forest.<sup>3</sup> However, the San Poil project only decommissions 2.6 miles (EA p.26) of system roads and none of the 67 miles of non-system roads. For example, the 2050180 road is rated as high risk and low benefit. The 2050180 is mentioned as being used as the proposed Nick's Loop Trail, but there is no proposal to address the risks.

While the Fisheries and Hydrology Report's list of Best Management Practices includes "Road-6 Road Storage and Decommissioning – Avoid, minimize, or mitigate adverse effects to soil, water quality, and riparian resources by storing closed roads not needed for at least 1 year (Intermittent Stored Service) and decommissioning unneeded roads in a hydrologically stable manner to eliminate hydrologic connectivity, restore natural flow patterns, and minimize erosion. (pp 115-117)" The proposal does not list any actions for the several other roads rated medium risk/low benefit and low risk/low benefit (p. 29).

### Requested Resolution

- Field verify and assess all non-system roads and subsequently take action to repair/hydrologically stabilize the roads that need them.
- Modify the proposal to decommission or mitigate low benefit roads as addressed in the San Poil Transportation Analysis Process.

## 4. Adequate Public Information

We do not believe the project provided adequate public information to collaborate effectively. To instill trust and get meaningful collaborative input, the CNF needs to provide accurate and detailed public information. Title IV of the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 requires that projects within the CFLR area "be developed and implemented through a[n effective] collaborative process...". NEWFC has identified several inadequacies in the public information that has precluded them from effectively collaborating, such as unreadable maps, no specific prescriptions of proposed commercial harvests, and no description of the application of the landscape prescriptions in the final EA. These details are especially important to give

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<sup>3</sup> See Attachment C: San Poil Travel Analysis Preliminary Recommendations V3, provided to NEWFC at request.



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collaborative members the assurance that what happens on the ground will not only be supported but provides a clear picture of the treatments.

We have been extremely disappointed in the quality of the maps provided by this project. The small scale of the maps was inappropriate for the large project area and rendered them unreadable. Between the small scale and the lack of enough supporting information (i.e., roads), the commercial harvest map was especially impossible to read accurately. This type of geospatial information is essential for collaborators to provide input effectively.

In our January 2020 letter, we asked “that before the final Record of Decision for the San Poil project, we are provided with the necessary information to assess where and if the project deviates from our guidelines. This information can come in the form of silvicultural prescriptions, an implementation plan, or similar documents.” NEWFC had verbally requested example prescriptions before sending the letter, and NEWFC members had requested prescriptions in a letter from their individual organizations in October 2019. NEWFC received a small set of draft prescriptions only three business days before the final EA was released. We subsequently attended a field tour in late June 2020 to discuss the prescriptions. The tour highlighted the need for sample prescriptions, and in some units, it is still unclear what the forest treatments will be. In contrast, NEWFC has received draft prescriptions for projects on other CNF districts before the release of the draft EA.

When the San Poil draft EA was released, the materials provided included an explanation about the landscape assessment and how it was applied to the project proposal, but the final EA did not include these materials (Silviculture Report Appendix A). NEWFC would like to see the updated Silviculture Report Appendix A with the final EA, and collaboration on the application of the landscape prescriptions to the stand prescriptions.

## Requested Resolution

- Pause the project and allow for adequate collaboration with the requested materials.
  - Provide readable georeferenced maps for the public as a standard
  - Provide draft prescriptions and allow for collaboration on the prescriptions
  - Provide the updated Silviculture Report Appendix A and enable collaboration on applying the spatially explicit landscape evaluation to the stand-level prescriptions

## 5. Scenic Integrity

We are concerned that the project is not maintaining scenic integrity near trails within and near IRAs. There is no value whatsoever in negatively impacting the viewshed from some of the most valuable scenic trails and high peaks in the Kettle Range by prescribing shelterwood, shaded fuel breaks, and large openings created by logging in the upper San Poil watershed. Edds Mt Trail, Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail and Kettle Crest National Recreation Trail will degrade recreation users’ view that is today pristine and natural-looking scenery.





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Our previous comments reflected an interest in local trails that could at some point be a building block for the PNT. We are concerned that there was no mid- and background scenic integrity discussed in the assessment on these trails.

The Scenic Integrity Objectives (SIO) for this area is Very High to High and as defined in the Forest Plan, Very High means "Unaltered. Landscape is intact with only minor changes from the valued landscape character associated with significant scenic landscapes." This SIO is typically (but not exclusively) associated with specially designated areas such as Wilderness or other designations that imply the landscape is natural-appearing, and only ecological changes occur. A High SIO is defined as "Appears Unaltered. Management activities are unnoticed, and the landscape character appears unaltered." The proposed actions meet neither of those objectives.

This project violates the Colville Forest Plan, specifically a) FW-GDL-SCE-01, (p. 89, LRMP) "Treatment should not diminish the scenic quality more than the anticipated disturbance would have." and b) MA-GDL-RW-01, (p151, LRMP) The wilderness characteristics (... undeveloped, natural....) of reach recommended wilderness should remain intact until a congressional decision on wilderness designation is made."

The CNF Forest Plan, Chapter 3, Management Area Direction – lacks sufficient management direction IF the DN and FONSI authorize actions that negatively impact sights and sounds of the natural world embodied in Wilderness.

NEWFC participated in a field tour in late June 2020 and looked at Unit 1, among others. The provided prescription proposed removing all Lodgepole pine under 16" DBH in a majority Lodgepole stand. This prescription would change the stand drastically and be visually unacceptable. The silviculturist was helpful and open to changes to the prescriptions, but we still are unclear on the specifics and how these units will affect scenic integrity. NEWFC is concerned about scenic integrity specifically near the roadless area abutting the 600 Road near commercial thin units 1, 116, 117, 118, 119, 123, 224.

## Requested Resolution

- Supply the mid- and background scenic assessment materials for review in the collaborative process.
- Collaborate during implementation and help design prescriptions that are more visually appealing

## 6. Wildlife Viability

The 2019 CNF Forest Plan states that "FW-DC-WL-03. Habitat Conditions for all Surrogate Species: Habitat conditions (amount, distribution, and connectivity of habitat) are consistent with the historical range of variability (per FW-DC-VEG-03 and 04) and contribute to the viability of surrogate species and associated species" (Forest Plan p. 60). However, the EA and specialist reports do not contain any analysis of the landscape pattern or connectivity when addressing



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wildlife viability, a key consideration. How can you address wildlife viability without assessing how wildlife can move through a mosaic landscape?

Additionally, the spatially explicit landscape evaluation conducted to aid the forestry treatments includes an assessment of specific wildlife habitat, including northern goshawk, white-headed woodpecker, and American marten. However, these results are not part of the wildlife specialist reports. The analysis of available habitat for both white-headed woodpeckers and northern goshawks appears drastically different between the landscape assessment and the specialist's effects analysis.

The differences are particularly stark for northern goshawks. The biological evaluation notes approximately 29,818 acres of potential habitat within the project area (p. 29). However, the spatially explicit landscape evaluation calculated approximately 800 acres (but does not include acres in the O'Brien Creek subwatershed) and notes that the habitat quantity is on the low end of the historical range of variability.

## Requested Resolution

- Conduct a wildlife viability analysis in concurrence with the 2019 Forest Plan.
- Resolve or explain the differences in the habitat quantity and quality before and after proposed treatments.

## Conclusion

We appreciate your consideration of the information and concerns addressed in this objection. We are supportive of the Colville National Forest and thank you for the opportunity to collaborate on the San Poil project. We ask for open communication, collaboration, and involvement and look forward to working towards resolution. Pursuant to 36 C.F.R. § 218.11, we respectfully request to meet in person with the reviewing officer to discuss these concerns and suggested remedies. Finally, in respect of limited agency resources and to allow parties to prepare thoroughly for any resolution meeting, we request that only objectors and officially registered interested parties be invited to participate in the meetings.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Matthew Scott  
President  
Northeast Washington Forest Coalition