



January 18, 2022

Merv George (Reviewing Officer)  
Forest Supervisor  
Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest  
Attn: 1570 Appeals and Objection  
3040 Biddle Road  
Medford, OR 97504

**Re: OBJECTION – Stella Landscape Restoration Project**

To Forest Supervisor Merv George:

WildEarth Guardians submits the following objection to the U.S. Forest Service's decision to select a Modified version of Alternative 2, an adjustment to the alternatives analyzed in the Stella Landscape Project Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). In a draft Record of Decision (draft ROD) to be signed by Forest Supervisors George and Carlton, the Forest Service selected a modified alternative that includes all of the actions of Alternative 2 but with road decommissioning greatly reduced (i.e. from 38 miles to 9 miles)<sup>1</sup>.

Because we support restoration efforts in national forests across the Pacific Northwest particularly related to aquatic restoration, and given the scientifically demonstrated harmful impacts of forest roads to aquatic resources, we are very disappointed and perplexed that one of the actions most beneficial to watersheds was reduced by 76%. We see that there was procedural recognition of our comments related to road decommissioning, temporary roads, and new logging roads in written responses, but it appears the Forest Service largely ignored these concerns in terms of substance of the decision. As such, we submit the following objections to the draft ROD and EIS with the hope of finding a resolution that addresses Guardians' substantive concerns by modifying the decision to make strides towards an economically and environmentally sustainable forest road system.

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

Marlies Wierenga  
Pacific NW Conservation Manager

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the USFS documents refer to 38, 39 and 40 miles of decommissioning. We will refer to 38 miles, which seemed like the more consistent number used.

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**1. Interests and participation of objecting party.**

WildEarth Guardians is a nonprofit conservation organization with offices in Oregon and six other states. WildEarth Guardians has more than 194,000 members and supporters across the United States and the world. Guardians protects and restores wildlife, wild places, wild rivers, and the health of the American West. We submitted timely comments at the scoping stage on July 5, 2018 and on the DEIS on December 21, 2020. WildEarth Guardians has organizational interests in the proper and lawful management of the forest road system and its associated impacts on the Rogue River Siskiyou and Umpqua National Forest’s wildlife, rivers and wild places.

**2. Parts of the project identified for objection with statement of reasons in support of WildEarth Guardians’ objection, and suggested remedies.**

- a. The Forest Service should decommission at least what was initially reviewed – 38 miles – and identify additional road miles for decommissioning.**

Our comments on the DEIS supported the Rogue-River Siskiyou National Forest team that did well in incorporating the forest-wide travel analysis and developing a project-level travel analysis. However, we pointed out then that even a 38-mile reduction of the 5,183 miles of system roads does not “reflect long-term funding expectations” as required by the Travel Management Rule, and urged the Forest Service to identify more roads for decommissioning. *See* WildEarth Guardians DEIS Comments, pages 3-4. Reducing the decommissioning to only 9 miles conflicts with the guidelines set forth in the Travel Management Rule, is inconsistent with the project’s statement of purpose and need, is unreasonable, and unjustified. Our comments outlined the ecological benefits that are derived specifically from road decommissioning. Instead of doing more to meet the project purpose of “maintaining or improving aquatic ecosystems,” here the Forest Service has chosen to allow the degradation to continue, thereby increasing its own liabilities for forest road failures.

The agency knows full well how damaging roads are to the environment and water quality, as demonstrated by best available science and outlined in Guardians’ previous comments on this proposal. The Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest has concluded on page 23 of the Upper Rogue Watershed Analysis that “[t]hroughout the watershed there is a high density of roads, which have altered natural drainage – increased peak flows, transferred runoff from one drainage to another, blocked fish access to sections of streams – and have resulted in a lowering of the quality of aquatic resources in the watershed.” Decommissioning roads is the most beneficial action that can be taken to improve watershed conditions, as demonstrated in 20 years of monitoring watershed conditions in the Northwest Forest planning area: “Growth in vegetation

and decommissioning of roads made considerable positive impact on the upslope/riparian condition scores in these areas.”<sup>2</sup>

The reasoning stated for reducing road decommissioning (“due to concerns surrounding access for fire control and recreation use...”(DROD-14) does not make sense in the context of a National Forest with over 5,000 miles of existing system roads and insufficient financial resources to maintain those miles. It also does not make sense based on the administrative record before the agency. In the FEIS, there is barely no change in the area accessed by the road system between alternatives: “Under the Proposed Action (i.e. 38 miles decommissioned), the area accessed by the road system would be approximately 74.4% while Alternative 3 (i.e. 9 miles decommissioned) would result in approximately 74.3% of the Project Area being accessible.” (FEIS, page III-45). Further, it is stated:

“The proposed road decommissioning under either of the Action Alternatives **does not significantly change the current ability to access areas within the Project Area.** This is due to most roads being proposed for decommissioning have not been maintained for many years and many are not passable by even four-wheel drive vehicles. The difference between the miles of road proposed for decommissioning between the Proposed Action (Alternative 2) and Alternative 3 reflects a 76% reduction in miles of decommissioning but only a one tenth of one percent (0.1%) change in the area able to be accessed within one-quarter of a mile from a system road.” (FEIS, page III-46) (emphasis added).

And in the response to comments:

“Many of the roads included in the proposed 40 miles of decommissioning are currently not in a usable condition. They are however still listed on the roads database and as such may not require any additional work and just can be removed from the database.” (FEIS, page A-17)

By ignoring the qualitative (non) value of these roads, the Forest Service ignores a key relevant factor to this decision. The Forest Service is essentially rejecting the concept of decommissioning, divorced from the agency’s own record for this project. This narrow view for decision making is inconsistent with Forest Service policy to prioritize unneeded roads for decommissioning or other uses and with the agency’s long-standing policy to “manag[e] access within the capability of the land.”<sup>3</sup>

As forest road users and conservationists, we understand that a strategic reduction in road miles does not necessarily equate to a loss of access. This is especially true based on this record. Some roads are already functionally closed, either due to washouts, lack of use, or natural vegetation growth. This was noted in the FEIS saying that most roads are not passable that were being

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, Stephanie A.; Gordon, Sean N.; Eldred, Peter; Beloin, Ronald M.; Wilcox, Steve; Raggon, Mark; Andersen, Heidi; Muldoon, Ariel. 2017. Northwest Forest Plan—the first 20 years (1994–2013): watershed condition status and trends. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-932. Portland, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station. 74 p.

<sup>3</sup> 66 Fed. Reg. 3206, 3208 (Jan. 12, 2001) (highlighting in 2001 that the Forest Service was “shifting from developing new roads to managing access within the capability of the land.”).

proposed for decommissioning. Other roads receive limited use and are costly to maintain. Resources can and should be better spent on roads providing significant access than to spread resources thinly to all roads. As a steward of public lands the Forest Service owes a duty of fiscal responsibility in its financial decision-making, and ignoring the true costs of this over-sized, under-funded, and under-maintained road system abdicates that responsibility. Indeed, simply storing or closing roads still leaves an economic liability on the landscape. We strongly disagree with this significant and unjustified change in road decommissioning in the draft ROD that reflect the analysis in the FEIS.

Remedy: Revise the draft ROD and FEIS to decommission 38 miles of unneeded forest roads, as originally proposed, and identify additional miles for decommissioning.

**b. The Forest Service should not construct temporary roads.**

As we commented in subsequent earlier rounds, we urge against the construction and reconstruction of “temporary” logging roads in the project area. *See, e.g.*, WildEarth Guardians DEIS Comments at 4. We understand that Forest Service policy directs that road beds be restored to natural condition after the project, but this may be a decade or more, and often there is still an impact when temporary roads are developed. In addition to their hydrologic impact, roads – no matter how “temporary” they may be - fragment habitat, disturb wildlife, increase sedimentation to neighboring waterways, facilitate increased human intrusion into sensitive areas—resulting in poaching of rare plants and animals, human-ignited wildfires<sup>4</sup>, introduction and spread of noxious weeds, and damage to archaeological resources—and increase fire danger. Additionally, if they are not properly rehabilitated post-project, they can invite illegal incursions and more damage to natural resources. And it’s particularly problematic to develop roads in unroaded forest blocks.

Even the FEIS recognized the non-temporary impacts. Page III-33 of the FEIS states:

“Temporary roads (use of existing templates and new templates) are expected to have a long-term, and sometimes irretrievable, reduction in soil productivity since they are bladed (soil is mixed and displaced) and compacted and increase the potential for soil erosion. Even once rehabilitated, the soil profile is modified to a degree that may take many decades to return to the productive state of the undisturbed forest soils adjacent to it.” (FEIS, page III-33.)

This problem and ecological imprint is now greater due to the change in miles of roads being decommissioned.

Remedy: Revise the draft ROD and FEIS to eliminate the construction of temporary roads.

**c. Failure to identify the minimum road system.**

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<sup>4</sup> Human-ignited wildfires account for more than 90% of fires on national lands, and are four times more likely in areas with roads. *See* Nagy, R.C., E. Fusco, B. Bradley, J.T. Abatzoglou, and J. Balch, Human-related ignitions increase the number of large wildfires across U.S. ecoregions (2018) *Fire* 1(4): 1-14

WildEarth Guardians urged the Forest Service to identify the minimum road system, given the context of this 60,000-acre project on a forest with over 5,000 miles of existing system roads. *See* WildEarth Guardians DEIS Comment at 2-3. Under Subpart A of the Travel Management Rule, the Forest Service has a legal obligation to identify the minimum road system needed for safe and efficient travel and for the protection, management, and use of National Forest system lands. 36 C.F.R. § 212.5(b)(1).

Remedy: Revise the draft ROD and FEIS to identify the minimum road system (including consideration of the relevant factors under Subpart A and decommissioning 38 miles of unneeded roads). In the very least, the Forest Service must explain its decision to forgo identification of the road system in this decision despite more than two decades since the agency finalized this duty under Subpart A, and explain how continued deferral does not constitute unreasonable delay.

### Conclusion

WildEarth Guardians appreciates your consideration of the information and concerns addressed in this objection. Pursuant to 36 C.F.R. § 218.11, we respectfully request to meet with the reviewing officer to discuss these concerns and suggested resolutions. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



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