CALIFORNIA
NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY
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Deputy Regional Forester and Objection Reviewing Officer
Pacific Southwest Region
USDA Forest Service
1323 Club Drive
Vallejo, CA 94592

Submitted via: https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?project=3375

Re: CNPS Objections to the Final Plans for the Sequoia and Sierra National Forests

Dear Ms. Berger,

Pursuant to 36 CFR Part 219 Subpart B, the California Native Plant Society (CNPS) is objecting to portions of the Final Forest Plans for the Sequoia and Sierra National Forests, in addition to the issues raised in the joint objection letter that CNPS signed onto and that has been concurrently submitted. The responsible official for the Sequoia plan is Forest Supervisor Theresa Benson and for the Sierra plan is Forest Supervisor Dean Gould. CNPS submitted prior substantive formal comments regarding at-risk plant species for the Sierra and Sequoia draft plans in 2019.

We appreciate the opportunity to discuss our concerns with you and possible resolution of issues contained in this objection prior to the approval of the final plan.

At-Risk Plant Species

At the outset, we would like to thank the Forest Service for incorporating at-risk plant species components into the Sierra and Sequoia plans. We object to certain aspects of the Sierra and Sequoia plans' at-risk plant species components as they are currently written, and suggest they be revised to emulate the at-risk plant components in the 2019 Land Management Plan for the Inyo National Forest ("Inyo Forest Plan"). The at-risk plant components do not provide sufficient direction to ensure that threats to at-risk plants in the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests will be adequately mitigated or that population trends of at-risk plants will be monitored to confirm that the ecological conditions necessary for their survival are in fact being promoted. The at-risk plant components in the Inyo Forest Plan were the result of close collaboration between the Forest Service and interested parties, including CNPS. Revising the Sierra and Sequoia plans to be consistent with the Inyo Forest Plan would rectify the current deficiencies in the plans' at-risk plant sections. We suggest the following specific changes.

1. **Omitted Plan Components**

First, important language that was included in the Inyo Forest Plan has been omitted entirely from the Sierra and Sequoia Plan Revisions. We are concerned about the omission of the following five plan components from the Sierra Sequoia plans.

> **Desired Condition (SPEC-FW-DC) 03 from the Inyo Forest Plan:**
> Land management activities are designed to maintain or enhance self-sustaining populations of at-risk species within the inherent capabilities of the plan area by considering the relationship of threats (including site-specific threats) and activities to species survival and reproduction.

(Inyo Forest Plan 2019, p. 34). We object to the absence of equivalent language in the Sierra and Sequoia Plans. The desired conditions guide the planning and development of projects and management activities. Including the maintenance and enhancement of at-risk species as a desired condition is critical for ensuring that forest managers adequately consider at-risk species when implementing projects or making management decisions.

Suggested resolution: Add Desired Condition (SPEC-FW-DC) 03 from the Inyo Forest Plan to the Sierra and Sequoia plans.

> **Standard (SPEC-FW-STD) 02 from the Inyo Forest Plan:**
> Avoid or mitigate impacts on known and unknown occurrences of at-risk plants and lichens that would limit their persistence or recovery in the plan area.

(Inyo Forest Plan 2019, p. 35). We object to the absence of equivalent language in the Sierra and Sequoia Plans. Avoiding and/or mitigating impacts to both known and unknown at-risk plant populations is necessary for achieving the desired conditions for animal and plant species.

Suggested resolution: Add Standard (SPEC-FW-STD) 02 from the Inyo Forest Plan to the Sierra and Sequoia plans.

Potential Management Approaches from the Inyo Forest Plan:

- Develop and implement a consistent, systematic, biologically sound program for plant species of conservation concern and their habitat so that Federal listing does not occur.
- Do not construct new facilities in suitable habitat.
- Do not construct new roads, landings, parking and equipment staging areas in suitable habitat.

(USDA Forest Service 2019, pp. 36-37). We object to the absence of equivalent language in the Sierra and Sequoia Plans. Though potential management approaches are not formal plan

components, they nonetheless provide important guidance to responsible officials about the focus and priorities of management direction. Each of the above potential management approaches are important for maintaining at-risk plant populations within the forest plan area, and equivalent potential management approaches should be included in the Sierra and Sequoia plans.

A consistent, systematic, biologically sound program for minimizing impacts to plant species of conservation concern is especially important in light of the plans' heavy reliance on maintaining ecological conditions as the means of managing at-risk plant species. Maintaining ecological conditions will only be an effective means of maintaining the at-risk species if we have enough data and information about each species' ecological needs and responses to management actions. For many rare plant species within the plan areas, we do not have enough knowledge about the effects of ecological conditions-based management. A program for surveying for at-risk species prior to management actions and monitoring post-action to make sure special plants have the ecological conditions necessary for long-term survival needs to be integrated into the Sierra and Sequoia plans.

Suggested resolution: Add the above three Potential Management Approaches from the Inyo Forest Plan to the Sierra and Sequoia plans.

2. Revisions to At-Risk Plant Components

Second, portions of the at-risk plant components have been weakened either because they are categorized as a guideline, which is less binding than a standard, or they include language that makes the component too flexible. We suggest the following changes to four plan components.

> **Guideline (SPEC-FW-GLD) 01:** Design features, mitigation, and project timing considerations should be incorporated into projects that may affect habitat for at-risk species where they occur to minimize impacts to ecological conditions that provide for the persistence of at-risk species.

(Sierra plan, p. 49; Sequoia plan, p. 50).

Suggested resolution: Reclassify the component as a Standard and change the phrase "should be" to "are".

Rationale: Standards are mandatory constraints on project and activity decision making, whereas guidelines are more flexible and decision making can depart from the terms of the guideline so long as its purpose is being met. The requirement that design features, mitigation, and project timing be incorporated into projects to minimize impacts to ecological conditions for at-risk plant species should be a mandatory constraint. These prescriptions should not be optional and designating this component as a Standard, similar to the way it is designated in the Inyo Forest Plan, will help ensure that responsible officials adhere to it.

Standard (SPEC-PLANT-STD) 01:
Use information that is current, accurate, and precise enough to avoid or mitigate impacts on at-risk plant species when designing projects. . . .

(Sierra plan, p. 74; Sequoia plan, p. 71).

Suggested resolution: "Use information that is current, accurate, and precise enough to avoid or mitigate impacts on at-risk plant *and lichens* when designing projects."

Rationale: In the event the Species of Conservation Concern lists are modified to include lichens, the plans will not need a formal amendment to become consistent with the Species of Conservation Concern list. This revision is also consistent with the Inyo Forest Plan.

Potential Management Approach
As feasible, gather necessary information early in the planning process to locate unknown occurrences and confirm known occurrences of at-risk plant species to avoid or mitigate project impacts on these species.

(Sierra Plan p. 74, Sequoia Plan p. 71).

Suggested resolution: "Gather necessary information early in the planning process to locate unknown occurrences and confirm known occurrences of at-risk plant species *and lichens* to avoid or mitigate project impacts on these species."

Rationale: PMAs already are the least stringent level of plan components, so the phrase "as feasible" is unnecessary and may suggest to plan readers that gathering information is optional or need only be done if convenient. On the contrary, gathering information early in the planning process is critical to ensuring that project activities to not impact at-risk species. Deleting "as feasible" will more directly encourage early information gathering. Including lichens will avoid the need for a formal plan amendment if lichens are added to SCC lists in the future. These revisions will make the PMA consistent with the Inyo Forest Plan.

Potential Management Approach
Consider potential mitigation measures, including timing of activities, for road and trail maintenance during active growth and reproduction for at-risk plant species that occur along existing roads and trails.

(Sierra Plan p. 74, Sequoia Plan p. 72).

Suggested resolution: "Avoid road and trail maintenance during active growth and reproduction for at-risk species that occur along existing roads and trails."

Rationale: Strict avoidance of at-risk plants during active growth or reproduction is critical for ensuring that those populations will not be harmed by project activities. Merely allowing responsible officials to "consider potential mitigation measures" such as timing of activities is insufficient. The suggested revision was adopted in the Inyo Forest Plan, and we suggest the Sierra and Sequoia Plans incorporate it as well.

Thank you for your attention to these objections and we look forward to the opportunity to meet with you to discuss them.

Sincerely,

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