



January 6, 2023

Kristin Bail, Forest Supervisor
Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest
215 Melody Lane
Wenatchee, WA 98801
via email: Kristin.bail@usda.gov

Dear Supervisor Bail:

The North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative (NCWFHC) wishes to express our continued support for the Upper Wenatchee Pilot Project (UWPP). After years of analysis and consultation, we are pleased that the Forest Service recently released the Final Environmental Assessment and Draft Decision Notice for the project, including a detailed Response to Public Comments appendix, and initiated the administrative objection process. We have no objections to the UWPP, but we would appreciate the opportunity to have NCWFHC representation in any objection resolution meetings that may occur.

As you know, the NCWFHC has a long history of deep involvement in developing the UWPP since its inception six years ago, when we helped to secure funding from the Chief's office to increase the scale of the project. The UWPP has always been one of the NCWFHC's top priorities, recognizing the need to reduce severe wildfire risk to residents of the Lake Wenatchee community and to improve habitat for endangered fish. This community has been identified as the most exposed to wildfire risk in Washington State. We have worked collaboratively with the Wenatchee River Ranger District staff to align the UWPP with the Okanogan-Wenatchee Forest Restoration Strategy and take an integrated approach to terrestrial and aquatic restoration within the project landscape. We appreciate the time and energy that your staff have invested to develop community-driven project goals and objectives in partnership with the NCWFHC.

We are excited about the opportunity to utilize new resources and capacity to expeditiously implement all aspects of the UWPP. The UWPP should become a showcase for the Forest Service's Central Washington Initiative and Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, as well as the Washington DNR's eastside 20-year forest health strategy. In addition, the DNR and Chelan County Natural Resources Department have been working with Blue Forest Conservation to study the feasibility for using innovative conservation finance tools to increase the pace of UWPP implementation. Blue Forest has found that the UWPP contains all the fundamental elements necessary for successful deployment of a forest resilience bond.

UWPP Final EA Comments
January 6, 2023

In response to Draft EA public comments calling for a robust monitoring plan, the NCWFHC worked with a wide range of stakeholders to develop the UWPP Collaborative Monitoring Strategy. The NCWFHC reiterates our commitment to work with the Forest Service to implement the UWPP multi-party monitoring plan and engage all interested parties in the annual revision of this living document. We are committed to exploring resources and partnerships that we can offer to complement the Forest Service's monitoring efforts and capacity. The multi-party monitoring strategy is well-described in the Final EA (p. 2-40):

[T]he Forest Service worked with its partners in developing a broad monitoring strategy for implementation of the UWPP, effectiveness of the treatments and restoration actions, and validation of the Project's underlying assumptions. While this program is a living strategy, it is expected to result in a monitoring partnership with collaborators and regular reporting of monitoring results. Early monitoring results can be used to modify future treatments to better achieve the desired conditions.

Finally, the NCWFHC urges the Forest Service to finish updating the Okanogan-Wenatchee Late Successional Reserve Assessment (LSRA) as soon as possible. Last winter we were disappointed to learn that regional agency officials had disapproved the preliminary Preferred Alternative—Alternative 1—for the UWPP because Alternative 1 was inconsistent with the requirements of the LSRA. Our Steering Committee reluctantly and conditionally agreed to support changing the Preferred Alternative to Alternative 2—an alternative that treated fewer acres and would be less effective than Alternative 1 in restoring ecological resiliency and reducing wildfire risk to the community—because that alternative was consistent with the LSRA and therefore could proceed quickly through the remaining decision-making process. We remain committed to completing the LSRA update and collaboratively planning, implementing, and monitoring additional restoration work in the Upper Wenatchee project area consistent with the LSRA update.

Thank you for working with the NCWFHC on the UWPP and other collaborative landscape restoration projects in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

Sincerely,



Mike Anderson, The Wilderness Society
NCWFHC Co-Chair



Chris Branch, Okanogan County Commission
NCWFHC Co-Chair