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February 2, 2024

Regional Forester  
U.S. Forest Service  
1220 SW 3rd Avenue  
Portland, OR 97204

**Re: Forest Plan Amendment for Planning and Management of Northwest Forests Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl**

Dear Regional Forester:

WildEarth Guardians (“Guardians”) files these comments<sup>1</sup> to the U.S. Forest Service’s notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) to amend the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP). Guardians is a nonprofit conservation organization with offices in Washington, Oregon, and five other states. Guardians has approximately 200,000 members and supporters across the United States and works to protect and restore wildlife, wild places, wild rivers, and the health of the American West. Guardians and its members have specific interests in the health and resilience of public lands and waterways.

**The Forest Service Should Incorporate Travel Management and Legacy Road and Trail Remediation into the NWFP Amendment**

In amending the NWFP, the Forest Service must take into account its oversized and unsustainable road system and incorporate specific standards and guidelines aimed at reducing the size of its road network to restore watersheds and fish habitat and achieve greater habitat connectivity. There are approximately 90,000 miles of national forest system roads in the Pacific Northwest Region, by far the largest road system of any Forest Service region.<sup>2</sup> The NWFP recognized “[t]his extensive network has the potential to significantly affect the hydrology of many streams” within the planning area.<sup>3</sup> Reducing that potential should be a key component of this amendment process.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to this comment letter, Guardians joined comments submitted by the Environmental Protection Information Center and Center for Biological Diversity.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Smith, *Mile By Mile: Ten Years of Legacy Roads and Trails Success*, App. D (2017) (Ex. 1).

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Forest Serv., *Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on Management of Habitat for Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forest Related Species Within the Range of the Northern Spotted Owl*, Ch. 3&4-55 (Feb. 1994).

Such an objective aligns with existing Forest Service regulations and programs. For example, a primary objective of the agency's Travel Management Rule is for each forest to identify a "minimum road system" that "minimizes adverse environmental impacts."<sup>4</sup> Relatedly, that rule also sought to "aggressively decommission" roads that are "damaging to the environment" or "no longer necessary for achieving resource management objectives."<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Legacy Road and Trail Remediation Program (LRT) requires the Forest Service to prioritize funding for projects that, among other things, "protect or improve water quality in public drinking water source areas" and "restore habitat for threatened, endangered, or sensitive fish or wildlife species."<sup>6</sup>

The Forest Service should incorporate these principles into the amendment process, ideally through its Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS). The ACS set forth four components: riparian reserves, key watersheds, watershed analysis, and watershed restoration. The last component, watershed restoration, overlaps significantly with the goals of both the Travel Management Rule and the LRT program. The Forest Service should set goals within the planning area to (1) identify a minimum road system for each forest within the planning area that has not done so, (2) "aggressively decommission" unneeded roads, and (3) ensure that LRT funding is directed toward projects that prioritize protecting and improving drinking water and restoring habitat for threatened and endangered species.

### **The Forest Service Must Reject Plans to Increase Timber Volume in the Planning Area.**

In 2022, the Forest Service issued a report outlining so-called "barriers" that are preventing it from increasing timber volume output in our national forests by at least 25 percent above current levels, to 4 billion board feet (BBF) annually.<sup>7</sup> The last time the Forest Service sold that much timber volume from our national forests was 1993, the year the agency started developing the NWFP.<sup>8</sup> As the agency sets out to amend that plan, it must reject calls for increased timber volume and not allow such calls to artificially inflate any probable sale quantity (PSQ), which was too high to begin with and, if anything, should be lowered.

For purposes of these comments, three of the so-called "barriers" identified in the Timber Targets Report are quite concerning: (1) timber sale litigation; (2) old-growth protection policies; and (3) deferred road maintenance.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the first "barrier," the Forest Service calls on Congress to enact "legislative fixes to address the challenges created by litigation on timber

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<sup>4</sup> 36 C.F.R. § 212.5(b)(1).

<sup>5</sup> 66 Fed.Reg. 3206, 3207 (Jan. 12, 2001); *see also* 36 C.F.R. § 212.5(b)(2).

<sup>6</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 538a(c)(2)(C).

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Forest Serv., *Timber Program Performance Within Current Resources Levels*, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fy2022-agency-timber-target-report.pdf> ("Timber Targets Report") (Ex. 2).

<sup>8</sup> *See* U.S. Forest Serv., *FY 1905-2021 National Summary Cut and Sold Data and Graphs*, [https://www.fs.usda.gov/forestmanagement/documents/sold-harvest/documents/1905-2021\\_Natl\\_Summary\\_Graph\\_wHarvestAcres.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/forestmanagement/documents/sold-harvest/documents/1905-2021_Natl_Summary_Graph_wHarvestAcres.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Timber Targets Report, 2.

sales,” which “will help increase timber volume sold.”<sup>10</sup> Regarding the second “barrier,” the Forest Service bemoans its own Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy, in which “all large old-growth timber sale planning efforts . . . were shifted to focus management resources on forest restoration, recreation, and sustainable young-growth management.”<sup>11</sup> Regarding the third “barrier,” the Forest Service acknowledges that many of its roads are not up to standard, which impacts the technical feasibility and economic viability of timber sales.<sup>12</sup>

Each of these purported “barriers” raises significant concerns, particularly in the context of amending the NWFP. In essence, the Timber Targets Report is a roadmap for Congress and the agency to further weaken public participation requirements in national forest timber sales and to prioritize reconstructing roads for those timber sales rather than “aggressively decommissioning” them in accordance with the Travel Management Rule. In addition, the idea that the Forest Service frames protecting remaining old-growth forests in Alaska from large-scale timber sales as a “barrier” to achieving higher timber volumes calls into question the agency’s commitment to old-growth protection policies across the board, including the NWFP Amendment.

Perhaps the most concerning part of the Timber Targets Report for purposes of these comments is that the Forest Service identifies the Pacific Northwest as one of the regions that “should have the greatest increase in total timber volume sold.”<sup>13</sup> It is hard to reconcile the scoping notice’s call to “maintain and expand mature and old growth forest conditions” in this region with the Timber Targets Report’s statement that this is one of the regions that “should have the greatest increase in total timber volume sold.” Going forward, the Forest Service must reject calls to increase timber volume output in the planning area, which would undermine the goals and objectives of maintaining and expanding mature and old-growth forests in this region through the NWFP Amendment (as well as the National Old Growth Amendment).

Sincerely,



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Enclosures (2)

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*; see also U.S. Forest Serv., *Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy*, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r10/landmanagement/resourcemanagement/?cid=FSEPRD950023>

<sup>12</sup> Timber Targets Report, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Timber Targets Report, 2.