



Thompson River Lumber, Inc.

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March 27, 2024

Amanda Milburn
Revision Team Leader, R1 Ecosystem Planning
2880 Skyway Drive
Helena, MT 59602

RE: Proposed Action; Lolo National Forest Land Management Plan

Dear Amanda:

We at Thompson River Lumber want to provide comments on the Proposed Action for the Lolo National Forest Management Plan as we have a vested, long-term interest in how this plan is determined. The Forest Products industry supports over 7,000 jobs in Montana with earnings of over \$300 million annually. We have a strong desire to see a revised Plan that maintains and builds a stronger and more viable timber program. Effective management to reduce hazardous fuels, improve forest health, and mitigate the risk of high-intensity wildfire is critical to this program. The Proposed Action serves as a preliminary draft land management plan that provides the “building blocks” of the types of content that are likely to appear in the final plan. Our comments focus on a subset of those building blocks that we believe are critical to an effective land management plan.

We specifically offer our comments on:

- Suitability of Lands
- Desired Conditions and Natural Range of Variation
- Projected Timber Sale Quantities (PTSQ) and Sustained Yield Limit (SYL)
- Wildland Urban Interface
- Old growth direction
- Grizzly Bear Plan Direction
- Riparian

We urge the planning team to consider our input as a basis for a potential alternative to the Proposed Action as currently written.

Suitability of Lands

The project record whitepaper, dated January 2024, and titled *Identifying Lands Suitable for Timber Production and Harvest: Proposed Action Process Paper* provides details and background information on how each of 2,263,246 acres on the Lolo National Forest were designated in terms of suitability for timber production. Ultimately, 851,201 acres are proposed as suitable for timber production while 1,033,730 acres are proposed as unsuitable for timber production but where timber harvest can occur. Over half of these acres are designated as Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA) along with areas with a recreation emphasis.

A third category that encompasses 378,314 acres is off limits to timber harvest entirely. Among these acres are those river and creek segments determined through the planning process to be “eligible wild & scenic river corridors” under the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act and areas recommended for inclusion in the Wilderness system.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

Our comments in response to the Wild & Scenic River eligibility study in March 2022 noted that to be eligible for inclusion in the Wild & Scenic System, named, free-flowing rivers must have at least one “outstandingly remarkable value” as defined in section 1, subsection (b) of the Act. That section discusses rivers that “possess outstandingly remarkable scenic recreational, geologic fish and wildlife, historic, cultural or other similar values.” We proposed that meeting the plain language definition of “outstandingly remarkable” sets a high bar for inclusion and urged the planning team to clearly describe how each river segment determined to be eligible meets this definition.

We believe that certain stream segments, or components of those segments, are inappropriately designated in the Proposed Action. Firstly, we believe that only waterways classified and named as “rivers” are appropriate candidates for inclusion in the Wild & Scenic Rivers system. Of the 98.5 miles of waterway segments identified as eligible in the 2023 evaluation, 92 are classified as “streams” not rivers. Of these 92 miles, several segments extend to stream initiation points at headwalls closely below prominent ridgelines. The upper stretches of segments such as Cromie Creek, Deer Creek, North Fork Fish Creek, and Middle Fork Monture Creek are likely narrow trickles of water that are barely distinguishable. We urge the planning team to take a harder look at portions of these stream segments to reassess the appropriateness of determining their eligibility for inclusion in the Wild & Scenic River System.

Additionally, we ask that the planning team reconsider the following segments proposed for Wild & Scenic eligibility and subsequent removal from the suitable land base.

West Fork Thompson River

This segment is proposed eligible as “Scenic”. We understand there is a suitable habitat for a species of concern, Brittons Dry Rock Moss, and that this stretch of river has the most observations within the state. Though we recognize the importance of conserving such an area, we have concerns over how the ¼ mile buffer on either side of the stream could hamstring the district’s ability to adapt to an ever-changing landscape in the future. Though the interim

protections on a scenic river do allow for timber harvest should it enhance the river's environment, we wonder how feasible that would be in practice, and if this designation may dissuade the district from pursuing limited timber harvest or additional campsites within a ¼ mile of river in the future. Additionally, we would like to ask how the recent fire that burned through the West Fork impacted the presence of Brittons Dry Rock Moss in the river, and if severe fires in the future on unmanaged land would effect this habitat as well.

Clark Fork Sloway to Paradise segment

This segment is proposed eligible as "Recreation". Recreational fishing and floating on this stretch of river is routine. From May to September it's common to see rafts, drift boats and kayaks floating down this stretch. It's also common to see these same uses with the same intensity on the stretches from Bonner to Missoula, Missoula to Frenchtown, Ninemile to Alberton, and Superior to Dry Creek. This segment of the Clark Fork River isn't outstanding or remarkable; its recreational usage is ordinary in the context of other rivers in the region.

Deer Creek bottom 6-mile segment

This segment is considered eligible as "Recreation". The 236 Deer Creek Road parallels this segment and approximately 2/3rds of the bottom 5 ½ miles is practically on top of the creek. Most of the recreation is local county residence hunting, and fishing. There are minor amounts of visitors that share in these same activities. Most users of the bottom portion of Deer Creek generally use the bottom ¼ mile to continue around the loop to Ward Creek via the 1101 road.

There is a Forest Service campground located at about the 2 mile which gets very little occupancy in comparison to other campgrounds on the Lolo due to the lack of recreational activities in this area. Most of the campers who do stay at this campground drive back down to the St Regis River for better fishing. There is only one trailhead in this segment that accesses the 249 trail which is rarely used or maintained.

Deer Creek upper 3-mile segment above the 5 ½ mile bridge

This segment is considered eligible as "Wild". The 16170 road that parallels the creek for about 1 ½ miles above the bridge. This is a gated road that has been used for logging and mining access over the last few decades. This creek has substantial evidence of human activity, adjacent logging units are obvious and can be seen from the banks of the creek. Along this road and creek segment there is clear evidence of logging and mining camps.

Idaho giant salamander is found along stretches of this creek. This species is also found in many of the drainages along this stretch of the Bitterroot Mountains on both the Montana and Idaho sides of the range. With the presence of this species found in all the surrounding drainages it should not be recognized as outstanding or remarkable.

Up Up Creek

This segment is considered eligible as “Recreation”. Access to this creek is extremely limited due in part to how heavily overgrown with brush it is. Our knowledge of Mineral County residents valuing this creek for recreational opportunities is nonexistent.

Cromie Creek

This creek is considered eligible as “Wild” and “Scenic”. Similar to Up Up Creek, this segment is generally overgrown with brush, creating limited access opportunities and questionable scenic qualities. This creek has substantial evidence of human activity, adjacent logging units are noticeable and can be seen from the banks of the creek where it is not overgrown with brush.

Ultimately, we believe that the planning team is applying the outstanding and remarkable values from the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act far too broadly. The intent of this Act was to recognize iconic rivers such as the Snake and Missouri. Categorizing many of the tributary creeks identified in the Proposed Action similarly is a misuse of this law. We urge the planning team to reconsider the appropriateness of Wild & Scenic eligibility on several of the newly identified creeks and tributaries.

Active management in these eligible corridors is equally important for forest health and fire resiliency as management in the adjacent uplands and eligibility in the revised plan will complicate the implementation of such management. Although limitations on active management within Wild & Scenic River corridors are less restrictive than those in wilderness areas, such management is typically avoided due the cumbersome nature of analyzing such treatments and the strong pushback by special interest groups against such management. Our monitoring of Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management projects in the west validates that these designations discourage federal forest managers from conducting active forest management, and we urge the planning team to consider WSR corridors as off limits to active management for the purpose of the revision analysis and to consider the repercussions of active management limitations of such designations. We urge the planning team to fully analyze the elevated fire risk caused by the lack of active forest management, including hazardous fuels reduction treatments, associated with Wild & Scenic designation.

Wilderness

We provided written comments on May 16, 2023, in response to the Draft Wilderness Inventory. In those comments we cited the Wildfire Crisis Strategy. This strategy outlined the current wildfire threat to our national forests and began building a framework for confronting that threat. We highlighted one of that Strategy’s conclusions that “about half the land area of the National Forest System in the West is in wilderness areas, roadless areas, and other areas where forest thinning is restricted by law, regulation, or terrain.”

We reiterate what we stated in those comments: that it is crucial that the planning team recognize that any acres designated as wilderness through the plan revision process will compromise and/or prohibit the Forest’s ability to conduct mechanical thinning that would mitigate the risk of

catastrophic wildfire. The notion that these designations would “protect” the areas they encompass is an outdated concept that is out of step with the current threats and the current response strategies emphasized by the Forest Service to address the wildfire crisis. Forest protection in 2023 requires active management—we would like the planning team to acknowledge and highlight this reality.

The Proposed Action identifies 223,914 acres as Recommended Wilderness. We appreciate that no Wilderness is recommended in areas identified as “elevated fire risk” in the Montana Forest Action Plan or areas designated under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA). However, we still urge the planning team to fully analyze the elevated fire risk caused by the lack of active forest management, including hazardous fuels reduction treatments, associated with wilderness designation. We believe that our National Forests need more vegetation management and fuels reduction, not less.

An alternative that reduces Recommended Wilderness and eligible Wild & Scenic River acreage should be analyzed to determine if desired vegetation conditions would be improved with a larger footprint available for active management.

Desired Conditions and Natural Range of Variation

The Proposed Action notes that desired conditions are based on an analysis of the natural range of variation (NRV). To attain this condition, the Proposed Action identifies an objective for the treatment of at least 20,000 acres of forest vegetation annually.

The desired conditions in the plan for vegetation components describe what is desired for maintaining ecosystem integrity, while contributing to social and economic sustainability (as required by the 2012 Planning Rule). Analysis of natural range of variation is the underpinning for the desired conditions, with integration of additional factors, such as habitat needs for at-risk wildlife species; existing or anticipated human use patterns; consideration of changing climate; and ecosystem services that may be desired or expected of the forest (such as reduction of fire hazard or production of forest products.)

We believe, based on our project monitoring and interaction with Lolo staff, that existing conditions for cover type are out of balance and not aligned with the desired ranges identified in the Proposed Action. Existing condition data is needed to illustrate this imbalance and to help guide plan objectives and guidelines. We believe that this data would show that the treatment of 20,000 acres per year will not result in the attainment of desired conditions based on NRV.

In addition to the need for accurate existing condition data, our Coalition believes that a Departure Alternative needs to be developed to address how the Forest is going to move the vegetation towards the desired conditions and NRV. As currently written, the quantity of timber that may be sold per decade from lands both suitable and not suitable for timber production shall not exceed the sustained yield limit (SYL). A departure alternative could facilitate higher timber harvest levels needed to attain desired conditions.

To meet overall multiple-use objectives and achieve the plan's desired conditions and objectives, the Responsible Official may decide to increase the expected sale of timber above the SYL for the first decade of the plan, and for a second decade if necessary. In a departure, the SYL is replaced by a departure limit that represents the maximum amount of timber meeting utilization standards that can be sold for the first or second decade of the plan. The departure limit can be different for each of these two decades. The departure limit is only applicable to a departure alternative considered in the appropriate environmental document. In all other respects, the assumptions for its calculation are the same as for the SYL. The departure increment may exceed the sustained yield limit for one or more decades and subsequently lead to the projected timber sale quantity dropping below the sustained yield limit. The Responsible Official may review the accomplishment and effects of the departure schedule and adjust as appropriate in the adaptive management framework.

Please consider incorporating a departure alternative into the Proposed Action to permit an appropriate level of timber harvest to attain desired conditions.

Projected Timber Sale Quantities (PTSQ) and Sustained Yield Limit

We have concerns with the wide gap between the calculated SYL and the declared PTSQ, which are 44 million board feet (Mmbf) and 144 Mmbf respectively. The Proposed Action documents imply that this 100 Mmbf gap is largely a function of plan components and on the planning unit's fiscal capability and organizational capacity. Although the PTSQ represents neither a target or a limitation on timber outputs, it will likely be a factor that impacts the annual timber program throughout the life of the plan.

It does not appear that the determination of the PTSQ was accomplished by any statistical or scientific process, but rather a function of the Forest Service's estimations and predictions. One prediction that we urge the planning team to reconsider is the impact that future funding and staffing will have on the timber program. Funding and staffing (which are closely related) fluctuate based on politics and workforce availability. The uncertainty surrounding these two factors has compelled the Forest Service to emphasize the use of partnerships to accomplish its goals and objectives. The trajectory of outside partnerships comes with a level of uncertainty as well, but what is certain is the potential for the private sector and non-profit organizations to significantly augment the Forest Service's ability to actively treat its land. Most National Forests who have seen recent spikes in their timber and fuels programs are those that have leveraged these partnerships.

The two highest producing Forests (in terms of timber and acres treated) in Region 6 over the past five years are the Colville and the Fremont-Winema. Both Forests have successfully leveraged the private sector to conduct NEPA analysis and prepare timber sales and other service work. There is no reason to assume that the Lolo cannot proceed along a similar path regardless of fiscal capability and organizational capacity. We urge the planning team to reconsider the determination of the PTSQ in light of the potential for timber program growth through effective partnerships.

We are also concerned that the Proposed Action underestimates the bdf/ac/yr calculation. The

Lolo is a productive forest that is capable of producing high volumes that may approach a range of 250-300 bd. ft per acre in the western and central part of the Forest. The table below summarizes the current volume projections from the SYL Calculation Methods document.

Table 6: SYL calculation for the Lolo National Forest. The final line shows the disturbance-adjusted annual cubic and board foot SYL expressed in millions of units

SYL Ecosystem	acres	cuft/ac/yr	Total cuft/yr	bdf/ac/yr	Total bdf/yr
COLD	48,087	25	1,186,170	126	6,066,054
COOL	333,146	38	12,651,575	199	66,158,820
HODR	400		0		0
WMMW	364,238	30	11,081,776	161	58,561,713
WAMO	229,524	39	8,839,592	216	49,555,969
Total (millions)			33.76		180.34
Disturb Adj.			27.01		144.27

We believe that these calculations are not based on the true growth potential of the forest. Information from the 1986 Forest Plan on timber harvest volume for the Lolo National Forest indicates that “young, thrifty stands at an age of approximately 75 years have an average annual growth capacity of 250 – 400 board feet of growth per acre per year. Therefore, the Lolo has an annual wood flow capacity of approximately 400,000,000 board feet if managed as a healthy forest.” A 2017 assessment by the Forest Biometrics Research Institute indicated that forests in Mineral County were growing 254 million board feet per year in 2020.

Based on these supplemental studies and assessments, we believe the SYL in the Proposed Action is underrepresented and is a function of several flawed assumptions. There is no doubt that forest health conditions have deteriorated since 1986 and that current forests may not be as “thrifty” or vigorous as those growing on the Lolo 35 years ago. Overly dense forest conditions as a result of lack of management and fire suppression have created forests that are likely growing slower and producing less annual volume growth. However, we do not believe that the current-day sustained-yield-limit should be based on poor forest health conditions in 2024, but rather based on *potential* growth under improved forest health conditions. That potential is well described in the 1986 Plan and Mineral County assessment referenced above. We urge the planning team to consider an adjusted SYL based on the growth potential of a healthy and vigorous forest in an alternative.

Wildland Urban Interface

The Lolo National Forest currently has the largest number of wildland-urban interface (WUI) acres on National Forest System lands in western Montana. The Assessment identifies 1,314,494 acres of WUI, which is continually expanding. Although active management is warranted on all Forest Service lands to mitigate wildfire intensity, we think that this management should be emphasized in the WUI through Land Management Plan goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines.

This section includes four Goals. Included is the goal that “the role of wildland fire is recognized as an important component of fire-adapted ecosystems of the LNF and is increasingly accepted and understood by the public, partners, and within the agency.” In addition to the role of

wildland fire, we think the planning team should add a Goal that recognizes the role of active forest management as an important component of fire-adapted ecosystems. Many acres on the Lolo would not respond well to wildland fire with current vegetation conditions. Hazardous fuels reduction and density management are critical to establishing forest conditions resilient to wildland fire. We urge the planning team to supplement the Goals in the section to reflect this reality.

The objectives for the Fire, Fuel, and the Wildland-Urban Interface section are pasted below:

Objectives (FW-FFW-OBJ)

01 Forest wide, modify or maintain natural fire regimes on up to 220,000 acres in the first 10 years of the plan through vegetation management activities such as fuel breaks, thinning, prescribed fire, and weed treatment.

02 Hazardous fuel treatments within the WUI and around high-value resources represent a minimum of 45 percent of the total acres treated to achieve FW-FFW-OBJ-01, measured as an annual average on a decadal basis.

We believe both objectives are warranted in their intent. However, we are confused why Objective 01 sets a limit on vegetation management activities to modify or maintain natural fire regimes. We think that establishing a minimum level of treatment acres would be more appropriate, or simply setting a target without the constraint of a cap. We are also concerned with how treatment in the WUI is measured. Objective 02 characterizes WUI treatments as a percentage of forest wide treatments rather than a percentage of the total WUI acres. We urge the planning team to consider setting measurable objectives for hazardous fuels treatments in the WUI rather than setting a percentage of an unknown value.

Ultimately, we believe that the Planning Team should consider development of an alternative with a stronger emphasis on mechanical and non-mechanical treatment of the WUI acres. If the current objective is fully implemented the Forest Service would be treating a minimum of 148,500 acres of WUI over the 15-year life of the plan (45% of 330,000 acres in 15 years). This represents only 11% of the total acreage classified as WUI. We would like the Forest Service to develop an alternative that sets objectives, goals, and standards to treat at least 25% of the WUI in the first 15-years of implementation.

Finally, we urge the planning team to consider adopting objectives and guidelines that encourage targeted fuels reduction activities adjacent to designated and recommended wilderness areas. Fires often originate and grow within wilderness areas due to Forest Service wildfire response policies and direction within these areas. FW-FFW-GDL-05 in the Proposed Action illustrates this type of direction.

Instances where natural ignitions originating on Forest Service land in backcountry or wilderness grow and spread into the WUI have become more common. The Cedar Creek fire on the Willamette National Forest, for example, was ignited by a lightning strike on August 1, 2022, in the Waldo Lake Wilderness area. According to the Central Oregon Daily News, that fire “meandered for nearly a month” in the wilderness until it “exploded” in September and

“scorched nearly 200 miles of forest.”

This is not a unique story. Many catastrophic wildfires that affect WUIs originate outside of those WUIs. While we will address the plan directives related to managing naturally ignited fires below, we also would like to urge the planning team to adopt objectives and guidelines designed to safeguard the WUI in the event of unmanaged fires in wilderness areas.

One clear tactic for such safeguarding is to establish an objective of creating fuel breaks adjacent to wilderness areas. Conducting routine fuels reduction activities in areas strategically placed next to wilderness areas could provide firefighters with safe and effective locations to suppress a fire that escapes from the wilderness. Guidelines could be created that encourage the placement of these fuel breaks and outline their vegetation desired conditions.

We understand and appreciate the value that fire can provide to the attainment of desired conditions. However, we caution the Forest Service on its use of “managed natural ignitions.” Guideline FW-FFW-GDL-06 directs the Forest Service to manage natural ignitions outside of the WUI with a full range of suppression responses. We previously outlined the frequency for fires to originate outside of the WUI in areas such as backcountry and wilderness and then expand into the WUI. The planning team should acknowledge this reality and be cautious with plan direction regarding the “management” of naturally ignited fires outside of the WUI since those fires have the potential to affect the WUIs.

Old growth direction

We are very discouraged to see that the desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines for Old Growth were copied verbatim from the December 2023 Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement that would amend all 128 land management plans across the nation.

Since the Lolo plan revision initiated, we have been pleased with the planning team’s commitment to local public engagement. We also support the use of local Forest Service staff expertise to guide and develop plan components. It is unfortunate to see such a notable shift in this approach for this particular resource. We support design features in the Lolo land management plan that address old growth forest; however, we believe those design features should be developed by local Forest staff who have the site-specific knowledge and expertise to appropriately address the resource. Instead, the verbiage that is copied & pasted in the Proposed Action is a product of unknown origin at the Washington D.C. level.

The scoping notice attached to the Proposed Action stated the following in regard to the Old Growth issue: “to ensure that we are aligned with the best information available to us, the proposed action includes the plan components provided in the December Notice.” We disagree with the notion that this Notice of Intent included “the best information available.” In fact, we believe that this Notice of Intent included flawed information informed by a politically motivated exercise rather than by local knowledge.

We believe that incorporation of these standards, guidelines, and objectives inhibits the ability

for the public to fully understand their implications since the Lolo planning team did not develop them and may not be able to fully explain them to interested stakeholders. Additionally, we also question whether the lack of insight and understanding of this direction complicates the planning team's ability to adequately analyze its impacts in the ensuing EIS.

We urge the planning team to omit the exiting language on old growth in the Proposed Action and to develop desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines for old growth forest resources based on local Forest Service knowledge and expertise that is vetted through local stakeholders and members of the public.

Grizzly Bear Plan Direction

In recent years several Forest Service vegetation management projects in Region 1 have been successfully challenged regarding the impact that unauthorized road use has on open road density calculations required in Forest Plan Standards. This Proposed Action includes similar standards outlined in Appendix 9 for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. Specifically, standard NCDE-AR-STD-02 includes the requirement for no net increase to the baseline for open motorized route density. This standard also lists several conditions that are not considered a net change from baseline, including temporary roads.

We propose that the planning team consider another condition that addresses unauthorized road use. We understand that that it has been extremely difficult for the Forest Service to effectively monitor and quantify unauthorized road use across such a large landscape. Based on our project monitoring, the Forest Service makes every reasonable effort to limit motorized use of closed roads. Despite these efforts, determined users continue to breach certain closures to varying degrees of frequency. These breaches should not be a cause for delays and failures to implement vegetation management projects on procedural grounds. Because most unauthorized motorized road use is sporadic/temporary, not chronic, it's unlikely that it is having a detrimental impact on bears in the action area. We urge the planning team to consider adding a condition to Standard NCDE-AR-STD-02 that exempts "closed roads regardless of unauthorized use" from contributing to net increases to baselines for open motorized route density.

Riparian

We appreciate the wide range of forest conditions outlined in the Desired Conditions (FW-RMZ-DC) for riparian reserves. These conditions are described as "a mosaic vegetation pattern, including forest patches of different shapes, successional stages, and tree densities that are within natural ranges of variability of all formative disturbance mechanisms." Early successional forest openings are specifically noted. We are pleased to see the planning team acknowledge that riparian management zones, which typically extend into the uplands, should be managed for a variety of forest conditions and not solely late-seral conditions, which is often the default setting for such zones.

On the other hand, we are concerned with guideline FW-RMZ-GDL-02 that discourages temporary road construction in RMZs. While road construction across water channels may not be ideal, it is often necessary and can be accomplished while minimizing impacts to riparian

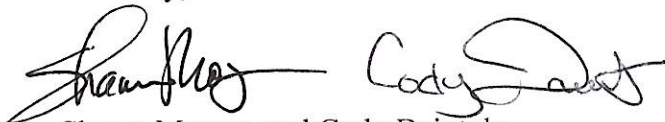
resources. The large RMZ widths coupled with the fact that every channel, regardless of its size, receives a buffer creates a network of RMZs that blankets the entire National Forest including the uplands. Building temporary road crossings over creeks that may only be a few inches wide and only run water during the wet season should not be discouraged.

We also have concerns with FW-RMZ-GDL-03 that reads “to maintain wood recruitment processes, trees felled inside inner RMZs should be left onsite unless they will be more than what is needed to achieve aquatic and riparian desired conditions.” We would like the planning team to recognize that fire risk is not an issue limited to forested uplands. Riparian areas are often equally prone to damaging wildfire if the riparian vegetation is not treated appropriately. Felled trees left on site, as this guideline emphasizes, have the potential to create a fuels condition on the ground that is undesirable in the context of fire resiliency. Managers should be encouraged to remove felled trees in the inner RMZs if doing so would mitigate fire risk. We urge the planning team to modify the language in this guideline to include “fuels density desired conditions” in addition to aquatic and riparian desired conditions.

Conclusion

We hope that our comments will help formulate alternatives and inform the analysis in the ensuing EIS. We specifically urge the Planning Team to develop an action alternative that incorporates much of our input. This action alternative would reflect a need to expand active forest management to meet desired forest conditions, reduce hazardous fuels, increase the provision of timber products, and protect communities and adjacent landowners.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signatures of Shawn Morgan and Cody Daiutolo. The signature for Shawn Morgan is on the left, and the signature for Cody Daiutolo is on the right.

Shawn Morgan and Cody Daiutolo
Thompson River Lumber Foresters