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March 1, 2024

Doug Nishek
Bonners Ferry Ranger District
Idaho Panhandle National Forest
6286 Main Street
Bonners Ferry, ID 83895

Subject: Katkee Fuels Project

Dear Mr. Nishek:

On behalf of the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL), thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Katkee Fuels Project.

The Idaho Department of Lands manages approximately 2.5 million acres of State endowment trust lands. These lands were granted to the State by the federal government upon statehood for the express purpose of maximizing returns to the trust beneficiaries—the largest trust beneficiary being K-12 public schools. Healthy, resilient forests are essential to accomplishing this mandate. Insect and disease infestations and wildfire outbreaks on federal lands do not recognize jurisdictional boundaries and pose a threat to state and private forestlands. IDL is also responsible for fire management of over 9 million acres of federal, state, and private forest and range lands throughout Idaho. IDL has become increasingly concerned about the risk of wildfire to private property and livelihoods as rapidly increasing populations in many rural communities are near federal forestlands.

Idaho has developed effective partnerships and collaborative teams to accomplish mutual goals and effectively respond to forest threats. Idaho's Shared Stewardship initiative emerged as a result of increased collaboration between the State and the USFS, and on December 18, 2018, the State of Idaho, USDA, and the USFS Northern and Intermountain Regions executed the first Agreement for Shared Stewardship in the nation. This effort has resulted in robust programs, utilizing all available resources such as state and county Good Neighbor Authority agreements, Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership projects, and increased wildfire mitigation grant funds to expedite desperately needed forest health treatment activities across the landscape in Idaho.

IDL has reviewed the Draft Environmental Assessment of the Katkee Fuels Project and would like to express its full support for the purpose and need of this project. Rationale supporting full implementation of this project includes these results:

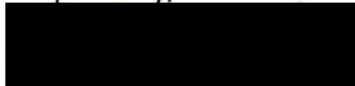
- Reduction of damaging wildfire impacts on resource values and private land through hazardous fuels-reduction activities on adjacent federal forestlands.
- Improvement of forest resiliency by managing the composition and structure of the stands to closely mimic historic landscapes
- Reduction of sediment delivery to stream channels, improving water quality and aquatic habitat.
- Enhancement of habitat for grizzly bears.
- Boost for the local economy with the increased contracted work needed for forest restoration treatments.

IDL notes that the Katkee Fuels project area is completely within the Kootenai Complex Wildfire Crisis Strategy Landscape—and also within the Boundary County Focal Area of the North Idaho Shared Stewardship Priority Landscape. Through the Idaho Shared Stewardship cross-boundary projects scheduled in this part of north Idaho, multiple partners and agencies are working together to complete complementary fuels-reduction treatments on nearby state and private lands to reduce the threat of wildfire to thousands of existing structures in this landscape.

IDL agrees with the assessment that long term fire suppression has resulted in a build-up of fuels across the project area, increasing the risk of high intensity wildfire. IDL also recognizes that wildfire suppression efforts, combined with a lack of disturbance or forest management activities, have resulted in a shift from fire-adapted early seral species to fire-intolerant late seral species which are less tolerant of drought and more susceptible to a wide range of forest insect and disease issues. Further uncharacteristic disturbances in the area threaten aquatic resources, wildlife habitat, and the social and economic wellbeing of nearby communities.

IDL appreciates its ongoing partnership with the Idaho Panhandle National Forests and welcomes the opportunity to assist with implementation of activities included in the project through our Shared Stewardship and Good Neighbor Authority programs.

Respectfully,



Craig Foss
State Forester

cc: Jace Hogg, Federal Lands Coordinator, Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation,
jace.hogg@osc.idaho.gov