



September 20, 2024

US Forest Service
Att: Director Ecosystem Management
201 14th Street SW- mailstop 1108
Washington DC 20250-1124
Submitted via portal only.

RE: LRMP Direction for Old Growth Forest conditions across the National Forest System

Dear Sirs:

Please accept this correspondence as the comments of the above recreational interests in support of Alternative 2 of the Proposal. The Organizations are opposed to Alternative 3 of the Proposal due to the more restrictive standards that are applied and the large amount of additional analysis that would be required to implement these standards. The Organizations are also opposed to any expansion of the scope of the Proposal to include areas that have been identified as mature forest or any identification of areas to be designated as old growth management areas in planning. This would be in direct conflict with the EO. This would result in significant barriers to the management of other multiple uses in a timely manner.

The Organizations welcome the concept of Alternative 4 of the Proposal and its desire to allow a larger scope of management of old growth areas but the Organizations are concerned that Alternative 4 of the Proposal removes several standards, such as NOGA-FW-STD-02b, that provide significant additional clarity around activities in old growth areas that are not related to commercial timber harvest. It has been the Organizations experience that clearly stating the desire to avoid an impact or clearly identifying that an activity, such as the maintenance of recreational infrastructure, is allowed in an area is critical to avoiding unintended impacts from any Proposal. The removal of the various provisions in Alternative 4 would limit these protections

for multiple uses. The idea that we would now need to undertake inventories for old growth timber concerns when undertaking basic management efforts simply is not appealing to us and would be a significant barrier to those management actions. These management actions unrelated to commercial timber harvest are critical in protecting all forest resources from their primary threats, which the Proposal accurately addresses as wildfires and poor forest health. The Organizations also welcome the clarity in the Proposal that the mere presence of an isolated old tree is not sufficient to trigger the requirements of old growth timber management analysis or create a new step in review and analysis. Again, this type of implementation would be an immense barrier to the management of other multiple uses such as recreation.

1. Who we are.

Prior to addressing the specific concerns, the Organizations have regarding the Proposal, we believe a brief summary of each Organization is needed. The Off-Road Business Association ("ORBA") is a national not-for-profit trade association of motorized off-road related businesses formed to promote and preserve off-road recreation in an environmentally responsible manner. The United Snowmobile Alliance("USA") is a nationally recognized 501 (c)(3) dedicated to the preservation and promotion of environmentally responsible organized snowmobiling and the creation of safe and sustainable snowmobiling in the United States. One Voice is a 501(c)(3) non-profit national association committed to promoting the rights of motorized enthusiasts and improving advocacy in keeping public and private lands open for responsible recreation through strong leadership, advocacy, and collaboration. One Voice provides a unified voice for motorized recreation through a national platform that represents the diverse off-highway vehicle (OHV) community. United Four-Wheel Drive Association ("U4WD") is an international organization whose mission is to protect, promote, and provide 4x4 opportunities world-wide. For purposes of these comments, ORBA, U4wd, One Voice and USA will be referred to as "the Organizations."

The Proposal starts from a very reasonable position on the old growth timber issue as it: 1. appears to have granted a high level of flexibility to local managers to address issues; 2. recognizes that many RMP in place have already addressed old growth timber issues and forest

health more generally; 3. Seeks to avoid new management analysis requirements; and 4. Recognizes the need to manage the forest to prevent catastrophic wildfire. Prevention of catastrophic wildfire must be the major planning concern for any land management agency given the horribly unhealthy nature of most forests on public lands. When public lands are impacted by wildfire the ramifications of wildfires will last decades and these impacts are often far more extensive in both the scale of impacts and scope of geographic area impacted. We support active management for this issue as when an area is impacted by fires or floods recreational access to these areas can be lost for decades. This is very concerning for the trails community and as a result we support the general theory of an ounce of prevention instead of a pound of cure for any management issue. This basic theory of management is not furthered when additional steps for analysis are required to confirm a resource is not present in the area and the Proposal appears to start from this management position.

2. The Organizations vigorously support new management standards to allow maintenance of trails and other recreational infrastructure.

The Organizations are highly supportive of the additional standards added to the draft from the scoping version to address removal of old growth timber as part of maintenance of recreational opportunities with the Proposal. The new provisions in standards NOGA – FW-STD-02 B&C will add significant clarity to the management process around recreational maintenance and avoid any unintended impacts from the effort to existing recreational infrastructure. These provisions will also expand the ability of managers to provide safe recreational opportunities on public lands as old growth trees that present a safety issue for infrastructure can be removed in a timely manner. Our basis for these amendments was outlined in our scoping comments and will not be reproduced in these comments to avoid repetition of information being submitted.

The Organizations are also aware that management of public lands is often a long-term multifaceted effort based on many highly localized issues and concerns. We support any and all flexibility in management standards that would allow localized efforts and plan components to

move forward, such as the Proposal identifying and reviewing the effectiveness of existing protections of various values in existing plans. We would be vigorously opposed to the imposition of national standards for the management of old growth as the concept is hugely variable across the country and would prohibit local flexibility. This type of standard would also create confusion and ambiguity in the implementation of any local effort as managers would not have to align local standards with national goals.

The Organizations would like to recognize the value of these amendments to all forms of recreational opportunities. While we have heard extensive concerns about the value of old growth trees, the Organizations submit that even after the issuance of EO 14072, old growth timber is simply another in many values that the agency must balance in management. This management balance means resources must be actively managed and sometimes management means cutting trees. Passive management will not achieve these goals but will allow poor forest health and impacts from wildfire to continue to expand. While the draft does a good job at highlighting the limited number of developed recreation sites that would be impacted by the amendments,¹ this amendment would allow flexibility for all recreational opportunities, and this is critical as well. This clarity could be more important for dispersed opportunities as they are far more extensive in scope and usage but often as valuable to the recreational communities that are using and supporting these dispersed recreational opportunities. Any situation where old growth timber could be removed in a campground setting but not be able to be removed on trails adjacent to the campground would be very concerning to the Organizations as our members actively use both campgrounds and dispersed trail networks.

We must state our concerns regarding the fact that many of the tree diameters proposed to be the minimum for designation as old growth are small in size, even if they are measured at breast height. The Organizations are aware that immense amounts of conflict have resulted from competing interests in timber and recreation as evidenced by the NYS litigation on tree diameter and its impact on the ability to maintain trails on NYS lands. The Organizations vigorously assert

¹ See, Proposal Socio-Economic report at pg. 54.

the NYS experience must be used as a learning experience for the USFS effort and allow us to avoid the USFS effort to avoid these problems moving forward. The Organizations would also request more information in the EIS related to altered determinations on tree diameter and how this could relate to management designations and progression of forests through their anticipated lifespan.

3(a) We welcome the clarity around the proactive stewardship concept.

The Organizations welcome the consistency that has been applied around proactive stewardship as concept. Under the scoping version of the Proposal, this concept was applied to old growth timber in isolation, which could have created confusion in implementation. While the Proposal focuses on old growth timber, the concept of proactive stewardship is a general management concept and has been effectively applied to many resources. As an example, often our efforts address the proactive stewardship of recreational opportunities for trails, such as repairing storm damage on trails before the entire trail washes into the stream below and possibly creates significantly more management challenges. We believe that the Proposal now reflects the concept of proactive stewardship in a more generally applicable manner, and this should aid the application of the concept in a consistent and efficient manner.

3(b) We welcome the clarity that the mere presence of old trees does not trigger old growth management requirements.

The Organizations also vigorously support the recognition in the Proposal that Old growth areas are more than just old trees. The Proposal clearly states this as follows:

“NOGA-FW-DRC describes old-growth forests as dynamic systems that are distinguished by, but comprised of more than, old trees. NOGA-FW-DC-04 also recognizes the contributions of old-growth forests to the ecological integrity of other terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Still, unit- and regional-level old-growth criteria are generally tree-centric. Thus, even when areas continue to meet the

definition and associated criteria for old-growth forest after incidental tree cutting or removal (per NOGA-FW-STD-02b), there may be impacts to understory species and other resources valued by people. These potential impacts would be evaluated in project-level environmental analysis.”²

It has been the experience of the Organizations that often targeted planning efforts fail to recognize these efforts create impacts on the larger ecosystem and what is more effective for all interests is the development of a healthy and vibrant ecosystem. A healthy and vibrant ecosystem provides quality wildlife habitat, fisheries, high quality recreational opportunities and habitat for healthy trees. As has been highlighted by efforts such as the Endangered Species Act, when planning overly focuses on a particular resource or value above the entire ecosystem, the entire ecosystem is negatively impacted. This negative impact can create far more problems than it resolves, and we are glad this symbiotic relationship of all values is recognized in the Proposal. Protecting old growth timber at the expense of all other management values makes little sense.

As the Organizations noted in the scoping comments on the Proposal, the NYS Court of Appeals Protect the Adirondacks decision from 2021 highlights how well-intentioned management decisions that lack clarity can have significant impacts on other resources and values. The Organizations support the basic direction of the Proposal in avoiding these types of situations on federal lands. Any removal or reduction in management standards providing this type of clarity and flexibility would be immensely problematic for other multiple uses of federal lands and would be opposed by the Organizations.

4. Management decisions must be kept local.

The Organizations have participated in RMP revisions and updates across the Country for extended periods of time and can confirm that old growth timber has been a major planning concern for decades. The Organizations vigorously support the movement of these local RMP

² See, DEIS at pg. 117.

updates forward in the Proposal as old growth timber has often already been resolved in the balance that these plans have struck for the management of these areas. The last thing the Organizations would want to do is reopen all these RMP to rebalance these uses under the erroneous assumption that old growth timber was not addressed at the time of the RMP development. We are aware of several RMP and RMP Amendments that sought to balance old growth timber management with the protection of other important resources such as communities from wildfires. Reopening the balance that these existing RMP have struck could take years and generally our interests would be less than supportive of the need to update in this manner given the years to effort that has already occurred in the development of these RMP. The Organizations are also aware that many of these RMP have adopted significantly different definitions of old growth timber, and we welcome the clarity that a definition of old growth will provide in future planning efforts.

5. Conclusion.

Please accept this correspondence as the support of the Organizations for Alternative 2 of the Proposal. The Organizations are opposed to Alternative 3 of the Proposal due to the more restrictive standards that are applied and the large amount of additional analysis that would be required to implement these standards. The Organizations are also opposed to any expansion of the scope of the Proposal to include areas that have been identified as mature forest or any identification of areas to be designated as old growth management areas in planning. This would be in direct conflict with the EO. This would result in significant barriers to the management of other multiple uses in a timely manner.

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The Organizations and our partners remain committed to providing high quality and sustainable recreational resources on federal public lands while protecting resources and would welcome discussions on how to further these goals and objectives with new tools and resources. If you have questions, please feel free to contact Scott Jones, Esq. (518-281-5810 / scott.jones46@yahoo.com) or Fred Wiley (661-805-1393/ fwiley@orba.biz).

Sincerely,



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