



OFFICE OF FEDERAL ACTIVITIES

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

September 20, 2024

Jennifer McRae
Ecosystem Management Coordination
United States Forest Service
201 14th Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20227

Dear Ms. McRae:

In accordance with our responsibilities under Section 309 of the Clean Air Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has reviewed the United States Forest Service's (USFS) draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for the Land Management Plan Direction for Old-Growth Forest Conditions Across the National Forest System (CEQ No. 20240110). The CAA Section 309 role is unique to the EPA. It requires the EPA to review and comment on the environmental impact on any proposed federal action subject to NEPA's environmental impact statement requirements and to make its comments public.

This DEIS evaluates the potential environmental impacts of the USFS's change to all forest land management plans (LMP) to include language concerning the management of old growth forests. Executive Order 14072 directed the Department of Agriculture to develop policies to institutionalize climate-smart management and conservation strategies that address threats to mature and old-growth forests on Federal lands.

The Preferred Alternative is to amend applicable LMPs with management components including a statement of distinctive roles and contributions, goal, management approach, desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and plan monitoring requirements for managing old growth forest.

The EPA's primary concern is regarding public engagement around prescribed fires and other management practices. Other comments concern requests for additional information or clarification regarding aspects of the DEIS including monitoring and water resources. The EPA commends the USFS's efforts to improve the sustainability and resiliency of the nation's forests in the face of a changing climate. These issues, their associated impacts, and recommendations for potential mitigation are detailed in the enclosure.

The EPA appreciates the opportunity to review this DEIS and looks forward to reviewing the final EIS related to this project. If you have any questions, please contact Jacob Widner, the lead reviewer for this project, at 202-993-3272 or by email at widner.jacob@epa.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Prasad Chumble', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Prasad Chumble
Acting Director
Office of Federal Activities

Enclosure

Environmental Justice

Section 3 (b)(i) of EO 14096 directs the EPA to assess whether each agency analyzes and avoids or mitigates disproportionate human health and environmental effects on communities with environmental justice concerns when carrying out the EPA's responsibilities under Section 309 of the Clean Air Act, 42 U.S.C. 7609. The EPA notes the DEIS does not find any disproportionate and adverse effects on communities with environmental justice concerns with this programmatic amendment and states that project-level environmental analysis will consider impacts to communities with environmental concerns from specific actions during the NEPA analysis. The EPA appreciates the commitment to consider EJ impacts on a project-level scale. However, it may be advantageous to consider a programmatic strategy for public communication.

While project-level EJ concerns are localized, some vegetation management strategies described in NOGA-FW-STD-02a, such as prescribed burning, have the potential to cause periodic degradation of air quality and visibility and may present a human health risk. Those impacts may disproportionately impact communities with EJ concerns. For example, low-income populations, those with chronic diseases, of an older age, and those who work outdoors may have increased vulnerability or risk of exposure to wildfire smoke from prescribed burning. Epidemiologic studies of fine particle pollution provide initial evidence that low-income populations may have an increased risk of mortality due to short-term exposures.¹ People of color and impoverished children and adults bear a disproportionate burden of asthma and other respiratory diseases and therefore they may be at increased risk of health effects from wildfire smoke exposure.^{2,3} As a result, additional outreach activities and support may be required to properly communicate actions that communities with EJ concerns should take to reduce exposure to and protect themselves from wildfire smoke.

The EPA recognizes that, dependent on size and duration, some prescribed fire and pile burning impacts would likely be less severe than impacts from uncontrolled wildfires. We recommend a programmatic strategy to communicate the benefits and risks of management strategies via public engagement and community preparedness efforts. The EPA further recommends the FEIS:

- Provide direction to forest units for engaging early with communities and state and local public health and air quality agencies to facilitate community preparedness during vegetation management events that are likely to result in public health impacts (e.g., smoke readiness).
- Provide an overview of any smoke management program that would be followed or developed to avoid public health impacts and potential ambient air quality exceedances, both within the project areas and off-site. Work with state agencies to ensure appropriate implementation of any state smoke management plans.

¹ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. <https://cfpub.epa.gov/ncea/isa/recordisplay.cfm?deid=216546>. (Final Report, Dec 2009). US Environmental Protection Agency, Washington, DC, EPA/600/R-08/139F, 2009.

² Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). Retrieved April 19, 2019 from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/asthma.htm>.

³ Brim SN, Rudd RA, Funk RH, Callahan DB. <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article-abstract/122/1/e217/73033/Asthma-Prevalence-Among-US-Children-in?redirectedFrom=fulltext>. Pediatrics 2008;122(1):e217-222. doi: 10.1542/peds.2007-3825.

- Consider measures to prevent or reduce risk of exposure to wildland firefighters and nearby communities to a fungus that causes Valley Fever in humans. Rising temperatures have allowed for its spread.

According to the DEIS, opportunities for meaningful involvement for all people may be reduced in a national-level amendment, but there will be opportunity for meaningful involvement through project-level analysis and development of Adaptive Strategies for Old-Growth Forest Conservation (NOGA-FW-OBJ-01). The EPA recommends:

- The FEIS provide additional information on the meaningful involvement efforts that will occur during project-level environmental analysis to engage communities with environmental justice concerns, including providing information and participation opportunities accessible for individuals with disabilities or people with limited English proficiency.
- NOGA-FW-OBJ-01 include specific language for engagement with communities with environmental justice concerns during the process for developing or adopting an Adaptive Strategy.

Monitoring

Page S-6 of the DEIS, bullet #4 indicates a national monitoring framework to track trends and distribution patterns of old-growth forests will be established. The DEIS also indicates that priorities may change and funds will be re-allocated accordingly. The DEIS does not indicate how this would affect the monitoring framework and its use for inventory, evaluation, assessment, adaptive management purposes, and enable swifter progress toward desired conditions. The EPA recommends the FEIS:

- Explain the effects of budget priorities reducing or eliminating funding for monitoring activities (e.g., would funding be prioritized for certain parts of the country or for certain National Forests experiencing the most dramatic effects due to climate change).

Page 7 of the DEIS, bullet #4 also refers to establishing a national monitoring framework to track trends and distribution patterns of old-growth forests as part of the purpose for the proposed action. However, the DEIS does not indicate whether the subsequent monitoring report will be shared with the public. The EPA recommends the FEIS:

- Explain whether the monitoring report will be available to the public via the USFS website or other means, such as subsequent NEPA analyses for proposed management activities.

Page 75 of the DEIS discusses forest management and forest carbon, explaining that management activities such as removing live tree density or enhancing species, structural or age-class diversity may have short-term carbon emissions, but yield long-term carbon benefits and can increase resiliency to disturbance. The Ecological Impacts Analysis also discusses modeled old-growth trends and factors that influence forest carbon dynamics, including carbon dioxide concentrations, climatic variability, disturbance events (e.g., fire, insects, and disease) and the availability of growth-limiting nutrients. The EPA recommends the FEIS:

- Discuss how the alternatives are expected to impact carbon storage on federal lands, given projected disturbances and old-growth area.

Water Resources

On page 80 of section 3.2.1, the DEIS indicates that “Restrictions or constraints on activities within riparian areas affect management of old-growth forest where it overlaps with those areas.” The EPA recommends the FEIS:

- Clarify whether the Preferred Alternative will maintain existing unit-specific riparian, aquatic habitat, and watershed management plans (e.g., Aquatic Conservation Strategy).

General Comments

The DEIS states on page 106 that some activities (e.g., mining) can have significant local effects, but usually have a small footprint when compared to an entire National Forest. Similarly, the DEIS on page 127 indicates that “The potential for spatial overlap between mineral and energy resources and old-growth forest is minimal due to the small percentage of national Forest system lands currently known to be occupied by both resources.” While percentages are included in the DEIS for numerous other facts (e.g., percent of all old-growth and a breakdown of wilderness, national wild and scenic rivers, etc. versus percentage found within inventoried roadless areas (pg. 79); percent of total tree cutting across USFS lands from 2000 to 2020; percent change in old-growth forests due to insects and disease; severity percentages of fire-disturbed old-growth forests (pg. 71)), the DEIS does not include any breakdown to support these statements. The EPA recommends the FEIS:

- Include percentages based on mining activities and energy requirements that encompass National Forests (e.g., overall footprint and percentage of each National Forest impacted by mining activities).

Page C-4 of the Appendices, third paragraph states “Categories 2, 3 and 4 LMPs will be amended with the full suite of proposed plan components (goal, objective, management approach, and plan monitoring PLUS desired conditions, standards and guidelines) unless there are unique circumstances presented that would justify not amending them with the full suite of proposed plan components.” The DEIS is unclear about what constitutes “unique circumstances” that would justify not amending the LMPs with all components included in the Preferred Alternative. The EPA recommends the FEIS:

- Clarify this statement and provide examples of “unique circumstances” to better inform decision-makers and the public when LMPs might be amended.