



December 19, 2024

US Forest Service, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest  
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Submitted electronically to <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=58961>

## **RE: Comments on Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project Draft EA and FONSI**

I am writing on behalf of Greater Hells Canyon Council ("GHCC") regarding the Draft Environmental Assessment ("EA") and Finding of No Significant Impact for the Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project ("project"). GHCC is a non-profit conservation organization based in Northeast Oregon with over 2,000 members and supporters. We were founded in 1967 (as Hells Canyon Preservation Council), and our mission is to connect, protect, and restore the wild lands, waters, native species and habitats of the Greater Hells Canyon Region, ensuring a legacy of healthy ecosystems for future generations.

Our organization was created through grassroots efforts to stop Hells Canyon and the Snake River from being dammed. Not only did we stop the dam, our advocacy helped create the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area ("HCNRA"). We continue to advocate for the highest levels of protection and true ecological restoration of the National Recreation Area. It's a place that is central to our mission and close to our hearts. In 1975, the U.S. Congress and President Ford recognized its value by passing the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Act and signing it into law. As we requested during scoping, we ask the Forest Service to recognize and honor the unique and precious values of this special place as they finalize the Morgan Nesbit project.

We truly appreciate the significant effort that Forest Service staff have invested in this project, especially the substantive discussions between staff in fuels, silviculture, and wildlife, and the attention to detail from staff in fisheries and hydrology. While we do continue to have reservations about this project, the changes made between scoping and the proposed action do address several of our top-level concerns. We very much appreciate the agency's decisions to decommission 17.4 miles of defunct roads and to not log trees over 21" DBH, as these are two issues of critical importance to our membership.

With that being said, here are some of the issues that we are most concerned about in the proposed action. Thank you for reviewing our comments.

### **Insufficient analysis of alternatives**

This is a large project area covering a very ecologically complex landscape. Considering just the preferred action and a no action alternative doesn't do it (or NEPA's requirements for analysis) justice. While we understand that the timeline on this project is already long, taking shortcuts by not considering multiple alternatives does a disservice to both the public and the agency by not giving a complete picture of possible opportunities and impacts. As with everything, we advise the agency to follow the old adage of *go slow to go fast*. While the proposed action does incorporate some of the specific requests we made in our scoping comments, there were other reasonable requests made that were not considered (for example, an alternative without any temporary road building).





**The proposed action does not make clear how lands in the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area will be treated differently from lands in the Wallowa Valley Ranger District, despite them having separate management plans with notable and important differences.**

While there are brief mentions of the HCNRA's Comprehensive Management Plan ("CMP") in several specialist reports, we did not find a substantive discussion in any document that recognized the special values of the HCNRA or the agency's charge to care for it differently despite asking for this directly in our scoping comments.

43% of this project area is inside the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, a place specifically recognized, and protected, by Congress for its special values. These values are outlined in the legislative direction of the *HCNRA Act*, and include:

- *conservation of scenic, wilderness, cultural, scientific, and other values contributing to the public benefit;*
- *peculiarities believed to be biologically unique including, but not limited to, rare and endemic plant species, rare combinations of aquatic, terrestrial, and atmospheric habitats, and the rare combinations of outstanding and diverse ecosystems and parts of ecosystems associated therewith;*

HCNRA Management Area 10 (forage emphasis), which is included in this project area, has specific direction that "timber stringers will be managed as old-growth habitat"; that these lands are "intended to maintain habitat diversity, preserve aesthetic values; and to provide old-growth habitat for wildlife"; and that they "usually contain a multi-layered canopy and trees of several age classes".

We recognize that there are management areas included in the HCNRA with timber emphases, and that the *HCNRA Act* also includes provisions for "management, utilization, and disposal" of natural resources as long as they are compatible with the provisions of the act. What appears lacking in the existing documentation is a substantive discussion of if or how the proposed action is compatible with the intent of the *HCNRA Act*. Please include this in the final EA.

### **Wildlife and roads**

We want to express our sincere gratitude for the amount of work that went into creating the wildlife corridor map for the project area, and we recognize this took substantial time and effort from staff across multiple resource areas. Thank you.

As you have heard us say time and time again, this project area is in an incredibly important location from a wildlife habitat and connectivity corridor standpoint. We appreciate the time that was taken to compare the project area with the OCAMP Priority Wildlife Connectivity Area map.

We still have significant concerns regarding the existing road density and quality of elk security habitat in the project area. Our membership spans the gamut of interests from vegetarian wildlife watchers to avid backcountry hunters, and this problem affects the resources they care about equally. Every subwatershed in the project area is above the acceptable threshold of road densities and are not meeting elk habitat requirements. While we generally have misgivings about the size of this project area, analyzing at such a large scale presents the agency with an opportunity to address issues like road density at the scale at which they must be addressed: the landscape scale and across multiple subwatersheds.

As mentioned above, the *HCNRA Act* also contains specific requirements in this regard and warrants further discussion by the agency of how silvicultural prescriptions may harm (or improve) the resource





as a whole. The HCNRA CMP description of Management Area 11 requires that the agency “maintain big-game habitat at no less than 60 percent of the optimum potential size and spacing of hiding cover for any one TRI compartment (or area of similar size)”. It’s not sufficient to make decisions based primarily on how logging will affect forage availability, road densities must also be addressed.

We recognize that some forest types in the project area make managing for elk security challenging. The wildlife resource report states that the *“lack of satisfactory cover within the project area is in part due to the preponderance of dry forest types and non-forested areas, which lack the biophysical capability to develop and sustain satisfactory cover. This is because in dry forest stands comprised mostly of ponderosa pine, a 70 percent canopy cover objective is not biologically feasible, even at the maximum density stocking level.”* These forest types allow for longer sight lines, and as a result longer distances from roads and routes are required to achieve elk security. While we appreciate the proposed action’s current level of road decommissioning, we would like to see additional user-created routes and obviously duplicative system roads closed so road densities can drop to an acceptable level. We sincerely believe there is a way to do so in coordination with the motorized community that would not substantially affect access for hunting, firewood cutting, and the like.

While we realize roads can be a “third rail” topic, this is not an unsolvable problem and other parts of the West have found success in getting stakeholders to the table to find resolution. For better or worse, the Wallowa-Whitman and HCNRA are home to many of the most desirable landscapes for elk hunters in the region. ODFW manages the animals, and public land management agencies have the unique responsibility (and burden) of managing the habitat. The agency must keep up its end of the deal, and shouldn’t wait for travel management planning to get started.

Please create a final project with no temporary roads, and a final EA that takes a hard look at opportunities for closing additional roads in the project area. We care deeply about this issue and remain committed to working with the agency and other stakeholders towards resolution.

#### **Request for incorporation of new information on monarch butterfly**

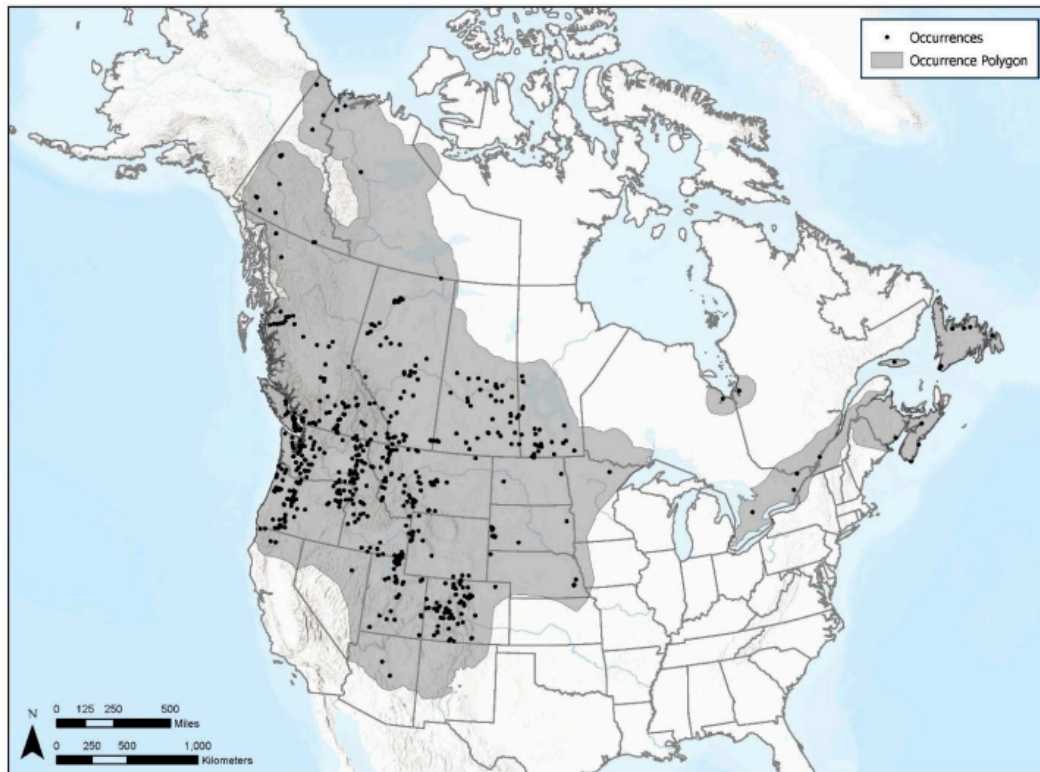
After the publication of the draft EA and FONSI, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the proposed listing of the monarch butterfly, a species that is present in this region. We request that additional analysis be conducted on possible impacts to the species and their habitat and that this information is included in the final EA.

#### **Request for incorporation of new information on Suckley’s cuckoo bumble bee**

After the publication of the draft EA and FONSI, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the proposed listing of the Suckley’s cuckoo bumble bee as endangered. Our organization has been working with volunteers to survey and collect data on pollinator species in the region for the last several years for inclusion in the Pacific Northwest Bumble Bee Atlas. The Atlas is a partnership between the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the Xerces Society to track and conserve bumble bees across the three states. With the exception of a recent report published to the website iNaturalist, it appears that the last verified sighting of this species was in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. We request that additional analysis be conducted on possible impacts to the species and their habitat and that this information is included in the final EA.







*Occurrence polygon of Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee in grey overlaid with all known occurrence points from 1893-2022 in black.*

Source: [Suckley's Cuckoo Bumble Bee \(\*Bombus suckleyi\*\) Species Status Assessment](#)

### **Request for additional amendments to commercial units, road decommissioning, and temporary road construction**

We appreciate the amendments that have already been made to accommodate the creation of the wildlife corridor map and to decommission old and used roads in the Lick Creek and Tyee Creek-Big Sheep Creek watersheds. Given the existing conditions of elk security habitat, we request that the agency not create any temporary roads and drop any units that require temporary roads for access.

We also request that commercial logging units that are unroaded and in the HCNRA are either dropped or converted to non-commercial hand thinning, especially in the most densely roaded subwatersheds and/or where the CMP standards for elk security are not being met. Ideally, the entire project can be re-evaluated from the lens of road densities and the agency can consider how to make beneficial changes to each subwatershed as finalizes plans for units and strategies for entry.

When it comes to patch cuts, we recommend smaller acreage, sinuous in shape, with snags throughout. A sinuous shape with irregular borders enhances the "edge effect" benefits. We recommend landscape burning following any patch cuts. We recommend creating snags in created openings either by girdling or prescribed fire. We recommend reducing the maximum acreage of patch cuts from 5 acres to 2.5 acres. We recommend adopting a prescription similar to that used in the Sheep Creek Vegetation Management Project on the La Grande Ranger District:

*Patch Opening for Habitat Enhancement (HBT ENHANCE) treatment creates biologically appropriate conditions for dry forest avian focal species by maintaining all large trees and*





*snags, promoting the development of early seral species with wide spacing and creation of openings (up to approximately 2.5 acres in size) to create grassy areas for foraging. This treatment also includes skipped areas (SKIP) of approximately 1-2 acres where no treatment would occur enhancing canopy diversity and providing patches of wildlife hiding cover within treatment units.*

### **Treatments utilizing tethered equipment**

The proposed action plans to utilize steep slopes equipment for a variety of prescriptions on slopes above 30%, including commercial thinning, commercial thinning with patch cuts, irregular shelterwood cuts, noncommercial thinning in and outside of RHCAs, and shaded fuel break cuts in and outside of RHCAs.

We appreciate the amount of time that soils staff were able to spend in the field reviewing this project area and giving careful consideration to logging system selection. While we generally support the utilization of equipment that can improve worker safety and minimize detrimental soil impacts, we have concerns that tethered harvest systems are being rapidly integrated into forest projects without more certainty on their impacts to soils, fish, and wildlife. While things like fine sediment levels and rutting are relatively easy to measure, it is harder to quantify the relative value of habitat on steep slopes that may have been serving as replacement security and cover habitat with road densities being as high as they are.

We recognize that there are very preliminary results from Sparta, which to my knowledge have not been made available to the public yet. With reductions in seasonal workforce and agency budget limitations, we have concerns that the learn-as-you-go strategy with this logging system could lead to some unfavorable results.

We request that units proposing to use tethered equipment inside RHCAs and the HCNRA be dropped, and implore the agency to ensure that all the specifics in the PDCs are translated into contracts and implemented on the ground.

### **Fish passage and culverts**

We appreciate the plans for culvert replacement and removal across the project area. Thank you.

### **Aspen and wetland treatments:**

Generally speaking, we support non-commercial thinning to restore aspen stands and wet meadows. The appropriate post-treatment fencing should be built and maintained.

### **Prescribed fire**

We appreciate the focus on landscape-scale prescribed fire and very much support this approach as an important part of forest restoration. Thank you for including provisions to allow for possible future cultural burning in partnership with tribal governments.

### **Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas:**

Protecting entire riparian systems, including the upper reaches and headwaters, is imperative in order to maintain hydrologic function and the full suite of habitats needed for fish and wildlife throughout their life cycles. We would like to echo the Nez Perce Tribe's scoping comments dated March 31st, 2023, which state:

*"Riparian areas within and adjacent to the Project area must be fully analyzed, and Riparian Management Objectives for this Project need to be clearly defined and specifically linked to*





*improving riparian function. Designated critical habitat for Chinook salmon includes the adjacent riparian zone, which is defined as those areas within 300 feet of the ordinary high-water mark. As defined in the Federal Register, critical habitat for all listed Snake River salmon includes the bottom and water of the waterways and the adjacent riparian zone<sup>1</sup>. The riparian zone includes those areas within 300 feet (91.4 m) of the normal line of high water of a stream channel or from the shoreline of a standing body of water<sup>2</sup>... Riparian areas should only be treated if the treatment will clearly and positively meet Riparian Management Objectives and create positive biological effects. When RHCA treatments are needed, they should be light in nature, non-mechanical, non-commercial, and small in terms of acreage.”*

**We agree with these comments from the Nez Perce Tribe, and recommend that all forest treatments in RHCAs should be limited to non-commercial, non-mechanical hand thinning of smaller trees designed to meet Riparian Management Objectives and provide the highest protections for fish habitat.**

We appreciate the time that the agency has devoted to public engagement on this project, especially at the open house events in Enterprise on March 15, 2023 and November 19, 2024. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this planning process and for your review of these comments. GHCC looks forward to working with the Forest Service as this project progresses. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

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<sup>1</sup> Designated Critical Habitat; Snake River Sockeye Salmon, Snake River Spring/Summer Chinook Salmon, and Snake River Fall Chinook Salmon, 58 Fed. Reg. 68,543, 68,548 (Dec. 28, 1993)

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

