

Upper Skagit Indian Tribe's Priorities and Concerns for the NWFP Amendments and Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

Tribal Sovereignty and Co-Management

The Upper Skagit Indian Tribe emphasizes the need to support sovereignty and treaty rights, ensuring culturally and historically significant lands are managed with tribal decision making. Collaborative co-stewardship protocols should integrate traditional practices, such as cultural burning and the protection of sacred places, into forest management. Enhancing tribal access to resources like cedar bark, huckleberries, and other first foods is essential. Closed roads should remain accessible for tribal gathering, and efforts should prioritize increasing the abundance and diversity of first foods, medicinal plants and fibers. Timber harvest could be a short-term solution to fix past actions that were left unchecked, but this amendment should not prioritize timber company profits and should never come at the expense of treaty rights. Regardless of the combination of alternatives used, Tribal stewardship and leadership should be central in the decision-making process.

Ecological Integrity and Aquatic Conservation

The amendments must maintain the original focus of the NWFP—preserving and restoring old-growth forests for species protection, clean water, and tribal culture. While the DEIS states that water resource impacts are not expected and has dismissed the subject from further analysis, this conclusion overlooks the fact that water resources are directly impacted by timber harvest activities. For example, riparian buffers are intended to protect streams but have historically proven insufficient in safeguarding water quality. To address this, clear-cutting as a practice should be eliminated entirely if water resources and the hydrologic cycle are to be genuinely protected. If any clearing is deemed necessary for ecological or cultural purposes, the size of those clearings should be justifiable for their purpose and role in the environment. Logging activities should remain strictly limited to restorative purposes, addressing degraded forest stands caused by past logging practices and mismanagement, including issues such as improper tree species compositions and excessive stocking densities. Furthermore, the DEIS recommendation to implement “ecological forestry” in stands up to 120 years old raises significant questions. The lack of a clear definition or explanation of how this will be accomplished, particularly without necessitating an unknown mileage of new roads, undermines its feasibility and the assessment of no impacts to water resources.

To ensure soil water content and water retention are not adversely affected, impacts to water resources need to be evaluated. The impact to water resources has to be looked at closer before rules and management strategies pertaining to these actions are made. This includes evaluating the environmental impacts of opening canopy, removing organics from the ground, compacting and exposing soils, prescribed burns and fuel reduction activities,

Wildfire Prevention and Response

Wildfire mitigation must balance ecological health with fire prevention efforts. Human-induced fires are responsible for 85% of wildfires in Washington and could have been prevented (Department of Natural Resources, <https://www.dnr.wa.gov/Investigations>). Measures to prevent the real cause of these intense, community destructive, wildfires need to be assessed along with measures to correct forest conditions that have become conducive to rapidly spreading wildfire. Care must be taken to prevent drying out the forest, which could exacerbate fire risks. Logging alone does not reduce wildfire intensity; instead, solutions should rely on science-backed and indigenous knowledge to improve forest health, species composition, canopy shade and soil water retention. All of which help prevent against disease and pestilence.

Access improvements are critical for wildfire prevention and suppression, which may involve reopening abandoned roads or constructing new ones. However, the environmental impacts of increased road networks—such as sedimentation, habitat segmentation, and the spread of invasive species—must be addressed with strict criteria and mitigations.

Fuel reduction should be focused on areas near people, property and infrastructure. Fuel reduction should not come at the expense of the Survey and Manage protocols.

Road Networks and Infrastructure

Changes to road systems remain unclear in the amendments. Roads are necessary for forest treatments and wildfire suppression, but their environmental and cultural impacts don't seem to be evaluated in these alternatives:

- Stream crossings should not impede fish passage or contribute to sedimentation.
- Roads should not encourage increased recreational access that might disrupt treaty rights or harm ecosystems.
- Maintenance must prevent degradation, sediment runoff, and "stream pirating."

Estimates of road building and recommissioning, alongside acreage planned for forest treatments, should be explicitly included in the amendments.

Sustainable Forest Management

It is unclear from this DEIS how logging will take place in old-growth, but it seems evident that the USFS intends to harvest within designated mature and old-growth stands. Without a clear picture of these intentions it is not possible to evaluate the ecological and cultural impacts. Logging must never prioritize timber profits over ecological and cultural needs. Changes to the NWFP should not provide loopholes or be used as justification to continue logging after beneficial treatments have been made. Economic development through timber supply is a short-term solution if it contributes directly to the restoration of old growth from degraded stands and improvements to the cultural activities of local tribes. Any economic growth should not expand beyond the long-term sustainable forest management levels to avoid further harm.

Rather than changing the stand age in which treatments can occur from 80 years to 120 years, develop a more targeted approach, involving tribes in planning and decision making, to address specific stands greater than 80 years old that are known to be in a condition that would benefit from some sort of management action. The acreage of LSR and mature and old-growth stands expecting treatment should be clearly documented in this amendment. Dense, overstocked forest stands that reseeded naturally after clear cutting are a problem that forestry practices of the past have created. The framework of acres per year, or projects per year could be evaluated at the forest level for which suits the needs of that region best and gives the most value and retains the most amount of protections.

Natural stands of LSR/mature and old-growth should be differentiated from those that grew unmanaged from early clearcuts. There are critical differences and these should be called out separately when looking at treatments and evaluating the impacts. This is another area where local tribes should be included in the assessment and decision making of which forest stands are included, rather than opening all LSR/mature and old-growth designated forests up to future abuse.

Protections must be in place to ensure:

- Activities under the Survey and Manage provisions should not have exemptions but could be revised to be less restrictive in areas designated as high-risk areas that require forest management.
- Metrics to evaluate local environmental conditions and wildfire risks before treatments proceed.
- Forest treatments avoid overharvest out of fear of fire and should aim to maintain diverse habitats and stand types.
- Grazing practices that harm water supplies must be reevaluated and regulated.
- Commercial bee hives in alpine areas should be discontinued to protect wild bees.

The NWFP already allows salvage harvests, we question the benefit of this vs the environmental loss of future snags and organic matter for soil development. Salvage in moist matrix areas should be limited to areas that are already accessible by road; they should not become a target that stimulates additional road building through unharmed forests.

Concluding Remarks

The Upper Skagit Tribe respectfully reserves the right to offer additional comments, insights, or recommendations as new information comes to light, unforeseen issues arise, or further developments occur in this process. It is essential to ensure that tribal concerns, priorities, and perspectives are fully considered and integrated into the decision-making framework as it evolves. The Tribe remains committed to active engagement and stands ready to provide meaningful input as necessary to uphold the protection of natural and cultural resources vital to its heritage and future. Proposed changes should address the potential effects on species and habitats critical to cultural and subsistence practices. Any actions must align with the preservation of reserved treaty rights and environmental preservation.