CASCADE FOREST CONSERVANCY
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Ms. Jacque Buchanan, Regional Forester
Pacific Northwest Region
United States Forest Service
1220 SW 3rd Avenue
Portland, OR 97204

Submitted via webportal: https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public//CommentInput?Project=64745

RE: Comments on the Northwest Forest Plan Amendment Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Dear Ms. Buchanan:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the Northwest Forest Plan Amendment Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). Cascade Forest Conservancy's (CFC) mission is to protect and sustain the forests, streams, wildlife, and communities in the southern Washington Cascades through conservation, education, and advocacy. We represent over 12,000 members and supporters, primarily based in the Pacific Northwest. We focus much of our efforts within the Gifford Pinchot National Forest (GPNF), a forest managed under the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP). We have several suggested edits to the Proposed Action, Alternative B. Along with specific changes to plan components in Alternative B, we also suggest incorporating the Wildfire Resistance and Resilience components in Alternative D into the Proposed Action. These changes will better fit the purpose and need of the project and the needs of our communities here in southwest Washington. We also have some concerns that the DEIS's analysis is not currently compliant with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Endangered Species Act (ESA). All suggestions and concerns are addressed below by topic.

I. Tribal Inclusion Plan Components

CFC is generally supportive of the tribal inclusion portions of the Proposed Action (Alternative B). However, the plan components as a whole treat tribes as a monolith and do not contemplate or identify how to deal with conflict or disagreement between tribes. For example, what if two or more relevant tribes have very different goals, objectives, or wishes for managing first foods,

protecting old-growth forests, or preserving areas of cultural significance to both tribes? Currently, the Proposed Action does not seem to acknowledge that tribes are ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse, which could lead to the possibility of differences of opinion. The Proposed Action does not directly address how to handle those differences in a way that is respectful of all relevant tribes.

CFC believes it is important for all relevant tribes to be heard in a fair and transparent decision-making process. Therefore, it is imperative that the Forest Service have a process to inquire about and handle any difference of opinion between tribes with respect and dignity. To address this likely scenario – particularly with the increased need to consult and cooperate with all relevant tribes – the plan components should either include a process for handling differences between tribes in a transparent manner or direct the Forest Service to develop such a process.

Additionally, the plan component that discusses training, cultural competency, and shared learning should include information about the current and historical relationships between relevant tribes around the Forest where staff work (TRIBAL-AWA-DC 01, TRIBAL-AWA-OBJ 01 & 02). These changes to the Tribal Inclusion plan components will help the Forest Service navigate the complex relationships between relevant tribes and help ensure all interested tribes have the opportunity for meaningful engagement. CFC requests that these changes be incorporated into the Proposed Action.

II. Forest Stewardship Plan Components

CFC is generally supportive of the Forest Stewardship plan components included in the Proposed Action (Alternative B). We have a few targeted changes that will better align with the Federal Advisory Committee's (FAC) recommendations and the best available science. CFC requests that all of the suggestions in this section be incorporated into the Proposed Action.

CFC is very supportive of protecting all old-growth regardless of Land Use Allocation. Old-growth provides many benefits, including maintaining water quality, serving as fire refugia, offering social and cultural value, and providing critical habitat for sensitive species. Although the current plan components in Alternative B include language preventing harvest in moist forest old-growth, they have a few exceptions including "to reduce wildfire risk to communities." This exception is not appropriate or needed for moist forests. For both standard FORSTW-LSR-MOI-STD 01 and FORST-MTX-MOI-STD 01 the exception to reduce wildfire risk to communities and infrastructure should be removed. Old-growth in moist forests are already resistant to wildfire[1] and treatment in these micro-climates can actually increase wildfire risk, which is

[1] *See* Sarah J.K. Frey et al., *Spatial models reveal the microclimatic buffering capacity of old-growth forests*, 2 SCI. ADVANCES e1501392 (2016); Harold S.J. Zald & Christopher J. Dunn, *Severe fire weather and intensive forest management increase fire severity in a multi-ownership landscape*, 28 ECOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS 1068-1080 (2018); Jonathan R. Thompson & Thomas A. Spies, *Vegetation and weather explain variation in crown damage*

counter to the intent of these exceptions.[2] To better meet the goals of these components, the fire reduction exceptions to harvest in moist old-growth forests should be removed. Additionally, the goal of this exception is already addressed by the Community Protection Area plan components or the Wildfire Resistance and Resilience plan components in Alternative D. Keeping community-specific exceptions in mature and old-growth moist forests will only create confusion and pull focus away from where management can do the most good, in the Wildland-Urban Interface.[3]

Additionally, moist Late Successional Reserves (LSRs) are not an appropriate place to manually create early seral habitat. However, FORSTW-LSR-MOI-GDL 01 (b) currently states that LSRs should "maintain or restore habitat for other species *that depend upon younger stands*."[4] LSRs in moist forests should continue to be blocks of contiguous older forests that are moving toward a late successional stage. Although LSRs do have some early seral and non-forest habitats, as is appropriate, those types of small openings can currently be created and enhanced with the other existing management direction. The language of (b) goes far beyond what would be appropriate patches of early seral in contiguous late-successional forests. It seems to contemplate and even encourage the manual creation of large early seral patches in LSRs. If the intent was to explicitly allow for harvest in non-forested habitat, such as for meadow restoration, that is covered in FORSTW-LSR-MOI-GDL 02. Habitat for young forest-associated species should be removed as a purpose for management activities in LSRs. The FAC did not intend this type of management for LSRs and in summarizing their recommendations, state "[r]etain the passive management paradigm of Late-Successional Reserves (LSRs) *intended to conserve and recruit large, contiguous blocks of mature and old growth forests*" and "raise the age to which younger age classes of moist forests in LSRs can be managed to *enhance late successional characteristics* to 120 years."[5] Given the intent of LSRs and the FAC's recommendations, CFC requests the Forest Service remove (b) from FORSTW-LSR-MOI-GDL 01 to better meet the true purpose of LSRs and the intent of the FAC's recommendations.

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within a large mixed-severity wildfire, 258 FOREST ECOLOGY & MGMT 1684-1694 (2009).

[2] "Overstory density reductions can increase daily temperature extremes, VPD, and wind speeds in the forest understory, leading to concerns that thinning could increase fire behavior by drying surface fuels and curing live foliage. . . .These findings suggest that in at least some westside conifer forests of the Pacific Northwest, closed-canopy stands with mature to late-successional structural characteristics (i.e., multi-storied stands with many large-diameter trees and abundant coarse woody debris) may be less prone to high severity fire than dense young plantations." MATTHEW D. POWERS, DEPARTMENT OF FOREST ENGINEERING RESOURCES AND MANAGEMENT, OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY, SILVICULTURAL TREATMENT IMPACTS ON FUELS AND WILDFIRE BEHAVIOR IN MOIST, WESTSIDE PACIFIC NORTHWEST FORESTS: A SUMMARY OF RELEVANT LITERATURE (2021) (internal citations omitted).

[3] *See* DEFENSIBLE SPACE - PREPARE YOUR HOME, WASHINGTON DEPT. OF NATURAL RESOURCES, dnr.wa.gov/firewise, (last visited March 3, 2025) ("Studies show that as many as 80 percent of homes lost to wildfire may have been saved if brush around homes were cleared and defensible space created around structures.").

[4] NORTHWEST FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT, DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT, APPENDIX A1. PROPOSED ACTION, A1-18 (Nov. 2024) (emphasis added).

[5] NORTHWEST FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT: FEDERAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE, 34 (July 2024) (emphasis added).

In young moist forests, it was also the intent of the FAC to prioritize plantations or previously managed stands for active management. In the section discussing the goals of young moist matrix and AMA stands, the recommendations state: "[p]lantations should be prioritized for active management."[6] Therefore, young moist stand plan components in the Proposed Action should be updated to include references to plantations or previously managed stands. The intent of raising the age in LSRs from 80 to 120 seems to be primarily to allow for management of plantations that have otherwise "aged" out under the existing standards and guidelines. Additionally, stands already developing complex characteristics, particularly in LSRs, would be better served by passive management.[7] While discussing moist forests, the FAC recommendations state:

> There is little ecological rationale for tree removal in old growth and advanced mature moist forests because these stands are well adapted to large accumulations of live and dead tree biomass. Across the vast majority of the landscape where old growth and advanced mature forests are found, we recommend passive management as the primary tool to achieve desired future conditions.[8]

Therefore, active management should be prioritized for previously logged stands, where some management could help create some diversity and accelerate growth. Plan components FORSTW-LSR-MOI-GDL 01, FORSTW-MTX-MOI-OBJ 01, and FORSTW-MTX-MOI-PMA should all be edited to include language prioritizing plantations or previously managed stands to better align with the FAC's recommendations and the best available science.

Finally, the dry forest plan components in Alternative B protect all trees over 150 years old, but they do not do much to recruit new older trees. The Proposed Action should include language in Standards and Guidelines to recruit new old trees in dry forests, not just protect the existing old trees. There is a deficit of old-growth in the region and the amendment should attempt to make up that deficit with specific Standards and Guidelines.

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[6] *Id.* at 38.

[7] "Overall, late-successional reserves and managed late-successional areas have been effective in protecting existing dense multi-layered, old-forest habitats across the NWFP area and protecting against further loss of old forests on federal lands. Late-successional reserves have largely met expectations for contributing to the conservation of dense multilayered old forests and the species that depend on them. late-successional reserves have worked well in combination with other land management designations such as wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, and riparian reserves to provide a network of habitats for fish and wildlife species." SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT TO THE BIOREGIONAL ASSESSMENT OF NORTHWEST FORESTS, U.S. DEPART. OF AGRICULTURE, U.S. FOREST SERVICE (March 2021).

[8] NORTHWEST FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT: FEDERAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE, 35 (July 2024)

III. Wildfire Resistance and Resilience Plan Components

A. Community Protection Zones

CFC is generally supportive of plan components that will better allow for fire-resilient communities. However, the scope and scale of those protection areas and protection zones need to be adjusted to better focus the resistance and resilience work where it will truly make a difference.

For the Community Protection Areas from the Proposed Action (Alternative B), the components set a buffer of 1 mile around communities when there is not an existing map or plan from the community.[9] However, the Forest Service has already created a map, *The 2010 Wildland-Urban Interface of the Conterminous United States*, which would serve the purposes of this section better.[10] This highly technical and rigorous exercise already mapped the Wildland Urban Interface for the whole nation. This existing document should instead be set as the Community Protection Area, which would greatly simplify the implementation of the Community Protection Areas component and rely on existing resources. This would allow for more targeted implementation of fuels management in areas where fuels management will have the most benefit. If this approach is selected, CFC requests that the Forest Service update the definition of the Community Protection Areas to be the WUI as defined in the 2010 map referenced in this section.

For the wildfire zoning created in Alternative D, the Community Wildfire Protection Zone and the General Wildfire Protection Zone could both benefit from a more targeted size definition to more efficiently meet each zone's objectives. Given the intention of the Community Wildfire Protection Zone, the zone should be the Home Ignition Zone as defined by North et al. 2015 & 2024.[11] The General Wildfire Protection Zone should be the rest of the Wildland-Urban Interface, or approximately 1,000 meters from structures as defined by North et al.[12] These more targeted areas proximate to community structures would help focus implementation where it will have the greatest effect on public safety.

CFC does believe the Wildfire Resistance and Resilience sections from Alternative D should replace the Community Protection Areas in the Proposed Action (Alternative B). The mapping of

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[9] NORTHWEST FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT, DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT, APPENDIX A1. PROPOSED ACTION, A1-24 (Nov. 2024) ("In situations where a more comprehensive fire risk assessment does not exist, this plan direction applies in all LUAs within 1 mile of a community.")

[10] SEBASTIÍN MARTINUZZI, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOREST SERVICE, NORTHERN RESEARCH STATION, THE 2010 WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE OF THE CONTERMINOUS UNITED STATES. RESEARCH MAP NRS-8 (2015).

[11] Malcolm P. North et al, *Reform forest fire management*, 349 SCI. 1280–1281 (2015); Malcolm North et al., *Strategic fire zones are essential to wildfire risk reduction in the Western United States*, 20 FIRE ECOLOGY 1 (2024).

[12] *Id.*

areas prior to fire and increasing use of fire as you move away from public safety risks seems like a more reasonable and effective approach in the long term. Regardless of which approach is selected, the agency should ensure the zone or area closest to community structures is accurately sized, as described in this section, to ensure efficient and effective implementation.

B. Integrating Beavers into Wildfire Management Strategies

We are supportive of the plan components proposed under all action alternatives to promote improved beaver presence in priority watersheds. The recognition of beavers' benefits to groundwater, surface water, and aquatic habitat complexity is reflected in TRIBAL-BIO-DC-01 and CLIMATE-GOAL-02. However, CFC requests that the action to improve beaver presence also be incorporated in the Wildfire Resistance and Resilience section. Beavers and the wetlands they create serve as effective natural fuel breaks, slowing or stopping fire spread and providing critical post-fire refugia for wildlife.[13] Their ponds raise the water table, while their canal systems distribute water across the floodplain, leading to significant water storage even during dry periods. This process reduces vegetation flammability and expands fire-resistant riparian zones. In addition to limiting wildfire spread into riparian ecosystems, beaver dams and associated ponds help protect water quality by filtering out ash, fire-produced pollutants, and excess sediment that enter waterways during and after wildfires.[14] The DEIS notes that wildfire treatments should focus on "reducing the negative impacts of wildfires to watershed health, wildlife habitat, and community values at risk."[15] Given their role in enhancing watershed resilience for plants, wildlife, and downstream communities, beaver restoration (beaver relocation and/or beaver habitat creation) should be recognized as a key component of the potential management approaches for Wildfire Resistance and Resilience.

IV. Transportation Plan Components

In amending the Northwest Forest Plan, the Forest Service must take into account its oversized and unsustainable road system and incorporate specific Standards and Guidelines aimed at reducing the size of its road network to restore watersheds and fish habitat and achieve greater habitat connectivity. There are approximately 90,000 miles of National Forest System roads in the Pacific Northwest Region, by far the largest road system of any Forest Service region.[16] The NWFP recognized "[t]his extensive network has the potential to significantly affect the

[13] *See* Emily Fairfax & Andrew Whittle, *Smokey the Beaver: Beaver-dammed riparian corridors stay green during wildfire throughout the western United States*, 30 ECOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS e02225 (2020); Alexa Whipple, Riparian Resilience in the Face of Interacting Disturbances: Understanding Complex Interactions between Wildfire, Erosion, and Beaver (Castor canadensis) in Grazed Dryland Riparian Systems of Low Order Streams in North Central Washington State, 114 (2019) (unpublished M.S. thesis, on file with Eastern Washington University).
[14] *See* Jeff Baldwin, *Potential mitigation of and adaptation to climate driven changes in California's highlands through increased beaver (Castor canadensis) populations*, 100 CAL. FISH & GAME 218–240 (2015).
[15] NORTHWEST FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT, DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT, VOL. I, 3-38 (Nov. 2024)
[16] *See* Jacob Smith, *Mile By Mile: Ten Years of Legacy Roads and Trails Success*, App. D (2017).

hydrology of many streams" within the planning area.[17] Reducing these impacts should be a key component of this amendment process.

Such an objective aligns with existing Forest Service regulations and programs. For example, a primary objective of the agency's travel management rule is for each forest to identify a "minimum road system" that "minimizes adverse environmental impacts."[18] Relatedly, that rule also sought to "aggressively decommission" roads that are "damaging to the environment" or "no longer necessary for achieving resource management objectives."[19] In addition, the Legacy Road and Trail Remediation Program (LRT) requires the Forest Service to prioritize funding for projects that, among other things, "protect or improve water quality in public drinking water source areas" and "restore habitat for threatened, endangered, or sensitive fish or wildlife species."[20]

Right now, the DEIS does include a Desired Condition related to roads (CLIMATE-DC 05) but does not include any corresponding Standards or Guidelines to achieve the stated DC. The Final EIS should include Standards and/or Guidelines to help the Forest Service achieve the desire to have a "transportation network that is resilient."[21]

V. Impacts to Wildlife Under-Analyzed

The original Northwest Forest Plan originated from the listing of the northern spotted owl. Any amendment to the plan should seriously consider impacts to northern spotted owl populations and recovery, and is required to comply with NEPA and ESA. Compliance with NEPA requires a "hard look" at the impacts of the alternatives, which would include impacts to listed species such as the northern spotted owl, other listed species, and other sensitive species in the plan area. Although the DEIS does mention wildlife and the northern spotted owl, the analysis is not robust and does not meet the "hard look" standard.

NEPA exists to "protect the environment by requiring that federal agencies carefully weigh environmental considerations and consider potential alternatives to the proposed action before the government launches any major federal action."[22] The agency must analyze the "reasonably foreseeable environmental effects of the proposed agency action."[23] Agencies must take a "hard

[17] U.S. FOREST SERVICE, FINAL SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT ON MANAGEMENT OF HABITAT FOR LATE-SUCCESSIONAL AND OLD-GROWTH FOREST RELATED SPECIES WITHIN THE RANGE OF THE NORTHERN SPOTTED OWL, CH. 3& 4-55 (Feb. 1994).
[18] 36 C.F.R. § 212.5(b)(1) (2024).
[19] 66 Fed. Reg. 3206, 3207 (Jan. 12, 2001); *see also* 36 C.F.R. § 212.5(b)(2) (2024).
[20] 16 U.S.C. § 538a(c)(2)(C) (2024).
[21] NORTHWEST FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT, DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT, APPENDIX A1. PROPOSED ACTION, A1-28 (Nov. 2024) (CLIMATE-DC 05).
[22] *Barnes v. U.S. Dep't. of Transp.*, 655 F.3d 1124, 1131 (9th Cir. 2011).
[23] 42 U.S.C. § 4332 (c) (i) (2024).

look" at potential environmental consequences.[24] "General statements about 'possible effects' and 'some risk' do not constitute a 'hard look.'[25] If the agency's analysis is insufficient, then neither the decision maker nor the public can meaningfully compare the environmental impacts of the alternatives.[26] In other words, the agency must thoroughly analyze environmental impacts.[27]

The DEIS does not provide enough context around the differences between the alternatives and how that would affect spotted owl recovery if each were implemented. There is some mention of keeping different densities of dry forests in Alternative C and D, but there is no real discussion about how this might impact northern spotted owl recovery. Additionally, the DEIS does not seem to include an analysis or any discussion about how the exceptions to old-growth harvest in Alternatives B and D[28] would impact ESA species and sensitive species. In other words, there is no real comparison of how the different alternatives impact species, negatively or positively. To comply with NEPA, the Final EIS should include a more in-depth species analysis that compares how the different alternatives will impact and/or benefit wildlife, including ESA-listed species like the northern spotted owl. CFC requests that the Forest Service update the species-related analysis to be more robust to comply with NEPA and ESA

VI. Cumulative Effects Under Analyzed

The DEIS rightly includes a cumulative effect section, however the section is very cursory and not detailed enough to comply with NEPA. Forest Service regulations require the following when conducting a cumulative effects analysis:

> Once the agency has identified those present effects of past actions that warrant consideration, the agency assesses the extent that the effects of the proposal for agency action or its alternatives will add to, modify, or mitigate those effects. The final analysis documents an agency assessment of the cumulative effects of the actions

[24] *High Sierra Hikers Ass'n v. Blackwell*, 390 F.3d 630, 639–40 (9th Cir. 2004).
[25] *Neighbors of Cuddy Mountain vs United States Forest Service*, 137 F.3d 1372 at 1380 (9th Cir. 1998).
[26] *Southeast Alaska Conservation Council v. U.S. Forest Serv.*, 443 F. Supp. 3d 995, 1014 (D. Alaska 2020) (Court found that the EIS's ambiguity about "location, concentration, and timing of timber harvest and road construction" violated NEPA. Also found that a "lack of site-specific information in the Project EIS, detracts from a decision maker's or public participants ability to conduct a meaningful comparison of the probable environmental impacts among various alternatives.").
[27] *Blue Mountain Biodiversity Project v. Blackwood*, 161 F. 3d 1208, 1216 (9th Cir. 1998).
[28] NORTHWEST FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT, DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT, APPENDIX A1. PROPOSED ACTION, A1-18 & A1-20 (Nov. 2024) (FORSTW-LSR-MOI-STD 01 "No timber harvest shall occur in moist forest stands older than 120 years old. . . .except to provide for tribal co-stewardship and cultural use or reduce wildfire risk to communities."; FORSTW-MTX-MOI-STD 01 "no timber harvest shall occur in old-growth stands . . .except to provide for tribal co-stewardship and cultural use or to reduce wildfire risk to communities and infrastructure.").

> considered (including past, present, and reasonable foreseeable future actions) on the affected environment.[29]

The cumulative effects analysis in the DEIS does not comply with the agency's own regulations. The DEIS does list what past, present, and reasonable future actions may impact the area, but it fails to actually analyze what the cumulative effects of all those actions would be on the environment, species, etc. The cumulative effects analysis also fails to compare the cumulative effects of the different alternatives. The Final EIS should analyze the actual cumulative effects for each alternative to comply with the requirements of NEPA.

I. Conclusion

In conclusion, CFC is supportive of the Proposed Action (Alternative B) if it is edited to include the suggested plan component changes above, including adopting the Wildfire Resistance and Resilience components currently found in Alternative D. Additionally, the Final EIS should do a more thorough analysis of impacts to ESA listed species, other sensitive species and a more robust cumulative impacts analysis. These edits and corrections to the analyses will allow the Forest Service to make a more informed decision on the amendment and more effectively steward forests in the future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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[29] 36 C.F.R. § 220.4 (f) (2024).