



Kootenai Tribe of Idaho

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Tim Gilloon
Forest Supervisor

Sent via email

Dear Mr. Gilloon,

Kootenai Tribe elders pass down the history of the beginning of time, which tells that the Kootenai people were created by Kwitqa Nupika, the Supreme Being, and placed on earth to keep the Creator- Spirit's Covenant – to guard and keep the land forever. The Kootenai have never lost sight of their original purpose as guardians of the land.

Bands of the Kootenai or Ktunaxa Nation have inhabited Ktunaxa Territory, including portions of Idaho, Montana, Washington, British Columbia, and Alberta, since time immemorial. The Kootenai Tribe of Idaho (hereinafter "Kootenai Tribe") is one of two bands in the United States. The Kootenai Tribe possesses federally reserved fishing, hunting, and gathering rights within Ktunaxa Territory, as reserved in the Treaty of Hellgate of 1855.

The Tribe and the USFS enjoy a close working relationship and often collaborate on issues of common concern to protect the fish, wildlife, and plant resources within our Territory. Management of the old-growth resources within Kootenai Territory is essential to fulfilling our Covenant with the Creator to keep and guard the land forever.

The Kootenai Tribe received the Scoping Letter from the USFS Idaho Panhandle National Forest (IPNF) on March 19, 2025, which invited the Tribe to government-to-government consultation on the planning effort for the Sandpoint South Forest Health Project on the Sandpoint Ranger District.

The Sandpoint South Project is located within Ktunaxa Territory and is essential to the Kootenai Tribe. The Tribe is pleased to see the project moving forward for the reasons set forth in this scoping letter.

Forest management over the last century, through fire suppression policies, overharvest, and other misguided land management policies, has led to poor health in federal forests. The Kootenai Tribal Council heeds the words of its elders, who say the forests in the Territory do not look the way they are supposed to look based on Ktunaxa oral histories, nor do they support the Territory of the Ktunaxa people in the manner they should. The Covenant must be honored to make the forests healthy once again. The Tribe believes the Sandpoint South Project is a step in the right direction. The Tribe's significant investment of time and energy in the ecological restorations of National Forests lands is a testament to its unwavering commitment to the project's success.

The Tribe supports the project's goals of managing forest stands to enhance their health and resilience (USFS, Scoping Letter, Page 7). We recognize that the proposed units in the Sandpoint South Project are at an age where they can benefit from silvicultural treatments that will support the success of the desired tree species. Additionally, mitigating the risk of wildfire damage supports the Tribe's goals of maintaining a healthy forest ecosystem resistant to fires, insects, and disease.

Armillaria root disease, laminated root disease, and dwarf mistletoe infections are noted as being issues prevalent throughout the project area, with several species noted such as Douglass fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), grand fir (*Abies grandis*), and western larch (*Larix occidentalis*) resulting in continuously declining health of the forest ecosystems. However, the Tribe requests clarification on a plan(s) of action to combat these diseases in order to facilitate successful forest regeneration and future stand health, as unsuccessful treatment without addressing the root of these pathogenic issues may result in unhealthy forest environments. We understand that drastic measures must be taken for the overall health of the forest, however encourage the exploration into viable alternatives wherever possible.

We request clarification on the following:

- The status of any surveys have been conducted to determine an estimation of current damage due to disease within the project area.
- What the extent of the damage, as well as severity is within the project area.
- As noted within the scoping document, there are several primary target diseases, and if specific treatments are being optimized to combat the diseases.
- What methods of treatment are being employed specifically to address these issues individually, or due to the severity and overlapping nature of the problem has it resulted in somewhat of a drastic plan (larger openings, clear-cuts, etc).

The Tribe supports the reconstruction of the proposed total 84 miles of roads and trails to facilitate safe and efficient transportation for the project. We recognize that efficient and expedient completion of the project minimizes wildlife disruption, and reconstruction of roads to combat erosion ultimately aids in our shared goals of preserving and maintaining the area's natural water resources. Additionally, the Tribe supports the decommissioning of Forest System Road (FSR) 2239 following the conclusion of the project. We request clarification regarding the approximately 5 miles of roads currently slated for decommissioning. Additionally, we encourage the 6.9 miles of newly constructed roads within the project boundaries be placed into storage following the conclusion of the project.

The Tribe supports the redesignation of trails FSR 231 & 232 from off-highway vehicle (OHV) use to motorcycle use. With motorcycles being the area's predominant form of motorized recreation and the lessened impact motorcycles have on erosion and wildlife disruption, the Tribe would also encourage the remaining trails proposed to be designated for OHV use (02, 03, 2247, and 630E) to be redesignated to motorcycle use. Of the ~20 miles of recreational trails within the project boundary, only about 4.5 miles are for OHV recreation (USFS, Scoping Letter, Page 25, Table 6). Designating these trails for motorcycle recreation would have minimal impact upon regional OHV recreation.

In addition, the project proposal currently requires the opening of new rock sources to be used as gravel for these reconstruction efforts. The Tribe would encourage that the exploitation of such resources be kept to a minimum in order to minimize potential impacts to cultural resources, habitat loss and wildlife disruption. We request clarification on the

number of existing gravel pits in the project area, as well as their current locations. Additionally, there are only two visible proposed pit locations (USFS, Scoping Letter, Figure 10 & 11), we request clarification on the specific number of proposed pits in the event that any are obscured by other map features. And last, if there are new rock sources, the Tribe requests ongoing government-to-government and Section 106 consultation to ensure impacts to cultural resources are prevented or mitigated.

Bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) hold cultural significance for the Tribe, and we want to emphasize the importance of minimizing disruption in areas of historical bald eagle nests along Lake Pend Oreille within, and in close proximity to, the project area as bald eagles are particularly sensitive to human activity. Additionally, smaller lakes located within the extent of the project boundary such as Kelso Lake historically housed bald eagle nesting territories. We would encourage surveys to be conducted within and along the project area to thoroughly assess potential disturbances to bald eagle nesting territories. Areas of concern include Kelso Lake & Hoodoo Creek, Maiden Rock, Blacktail, Talache, Garfield Bay, and Mineral Point territories.

The Tribe is concerned in regards to the potential disruption for fisher (*Pekania pennati*) habitat, notably within the units proposed to have openings >40 acres, an estimated 41% of the entire project area (USFS, Scoping Letter, Table 4). Fishers rely on areas of significant tree coverage and mature or old growth forests with an average diameter breast height (DBH) greater than 15 inches, relying on snags or trees with large cavities as dens to rear their kits. The overwhelming majority of trees within the project treatment area, 73%, are trees with a DBH of 15" or greater (USFS, Scoping Letter, Table 1). Additionally, approximately 61% of the project treatment area's biophysical setting (warm/moist type) could serve as prime fisher habitat (USFS, Scoping Letter, Table 2). We encourage the USFS to conduct an analysis on the impact the project proposals would have upon fisher populations and habitation within the treatment areas when drafting the environmental assessment (EA).

The Tribe would encourage surveying efforts be placed within the 2015 wildfire area for black-backed woodpecker (*Picodes arcticus*) populations and activity. Optimal habitat occurs within 3-5 years following fire activity, however activity can extend up to 10 years in certain burn areas with population directly corresponding with the increase of wood-boring beetles in a given fire area (Stillman et al., 2023). Areas prescribed for burns may serve in the future as preferred habitat for black-backed woodpeckers, which would further facilitate healthy forest habitat and potentially combat harmful insect infestations as potentially problematic wood-boring insects are their primary food source.

The Tribe is concerned regarding the prevalence of large >40 acre openings within the project area slated for regeneration harvesting. Silvicultural practices such as regeneration harvesting can be beneficial to forest health as well as reestablishing native variance; However, there isn't sufficient information within the scoping document regarding the methodology and classification of these larger units. We request clarification or elaboration on the following:

- If the >40 acre openings are classified as fuel breaks, or if these are designated under a separate category.
- On the number of units and which units will be clear-cut, and what is the total project treatment acreage planned for clear-cutting.

- If an analysis been conducted, or will be conducted, on the erosional and depositional effects of large opening and clear-cut units.
- The viability of an assessment regarding the least, or less disruptive methods of harvest. Skidding creates a high degree of soil disruption and if there are plans to conduct any environmental remediation to any disrupted areas to facilitate rapid plant reestablishment.

The Tribe would like to formally request the shapefiles for this project, which should include the roads, units, treatment types, and updated vegetation shapefiles for the proposed stands.

The Tribe hopes USFS will continue to develop and implement ecological restoration projects like the Sandpoint South on the IPNF for the benefit of all concerned.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these issues/comments and participate in the Sandpoint South Project process. The Tribe looks forward to working with USFS as the process continues.

Sincerely yours,



Jennifer Porter, Chairwoman

Kootenai Tribe of Idaho

Literature Cited

- Cinq-Mars, J., & Noyes, C. (2025, March 19). Sandpoint South Project Scoping Document. Sandpoint, Idaho; United States Forest Service.
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=67684>
- Stillman, A. N., Wilkerson, R. L., Kaschube, D. R., Siegel, R. B., Sawyer, S. C., & Tingley, M. W. (2023). Incorporating pyrodiversity into wildlife habitat assessments for Rapid post-fire management: A woodpecker case study. *Ecological Applications*, 33(4). <https://doi.org/10.1002/eap.2853>