



June 23, 2025

Shaun McKinney, Forest Supervisor,  
1550 Dewey Ave.,  
Baker City, OR 97814

Submitted electronically to [objections-pnw-wallowa-whitman@usda.gov](mailto:objections-pnw-wallowa-whitman@usda.gov)

## **RE: Objections to Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project**

I am writing on behalf of Greater Hells Canyon Council ("GHCC") regarding the final Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and Draft Decision Notice 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 "HCNRA Act" or "Act") and signing it into law. As we requested during scoping and the draft EA comment periods, 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 appreciate the significant effort that Forest Service staff have invested in this project, especially the time consuming discussions between staff in fuels, silviculture, and wildlife, and the attention to detail from staff in fisheries and hydrology. We also 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.

That said, we still have some unresolved concerns to highlight as the agency prepares to wrap up this public process, each of which were raised in our scoping and/or draft EA comments. Our objection is filed pursuant to 36 CFR 218 and we respectfully request a meeting for potential resolution of our objection. Thank you for reviewing our comments.

### **The proposed decision does not substantively discuss compatibility with the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Act**

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. Section 7 of the *HCNRA Act* outlines some of the agency's responsibilities in that regard, which include:

1. *the maintenance and protection of the free flowing nature of the rivers within the recreation area;*
2. *conservation of scenic, wilderness, cultural, scientific, and other values contributing to the public benefit;*





3. *preservation, especially in the area generally known as Hells Canyon, of all features and 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;*
4. *protection and maintenance of fish and wildlife habitat;*
5. *protection of archeological and paleontologic sites and interpretation of these sites for the public benefit and knowledge insofar as it is compatible with protection;*
6. *preservation and restoration of historic sites associated with and typifying the economic and social history of the region and the American West; and*
7. *such management, utilization, and disposal of natural resources on federally owned lands, including, but not limited to, timber harvesting by selective cutting, mining and grazing and the continuation of such existing uses and developments as are compatible with the provisions of the Act.*

Discussion and analysis in the agency's documents have been so focused on the minutiae of the project that the agency has yet to make a case for how actions intended to occur within the HCNRA are compatible with the intent of the Act. While the Act and additional regulations for the HCNRA do discuss timber harvest, the clear intent for the HCNRA is for timber harvest to only occur in a way that is in alignment with *all* values outlined in section 7, not *just* subsection 7.

The compatibility section of the Hells Canyon Comprehensive Management Plan states: "*Com-O1: Continue recreation, livestock grazing, timber harvest, and mining as traditional and valid uses of the HCNRA, compatible with sections 7 and 13 of the HCNRA Act so long as these activities are managed to meet the goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines of this plan.*"

As a result, we object to the proposed commercial logging as currently planned within the HCNRA. Our concerns could be addressed by the agency modifying the proposed action to align with the intent of the HCNRA Act; providing clear and adequate documentation on how proposed actions within the HCNRA are compatible with the Act; and modifying the silvicultural prescriptions to better reflect the full suite of values described in the Act for the benefit of this unique and important National Recreation Area.

### **Temporary Roads**

The draft decision proposes decommissioning 17.4 miles of road, moving 3.4 miles to storage, and constructing 18 miles of temporary roads. Any additional creation or re-establishment of routes in the project area will move the area even further away from elk security and road density standards.

This is not acceptable in a project area where every subwatershed is above the threshold of road densities and are not meeting elk habitat requirements. Road densities were mentioned by a variety of commenters, many of which have no connection to our organization (e.g. RMEF, ODFW, members of the public). We asked in our scoping and draft EA comments for the agency to analyze an alternative in which no temporary roads were created.

Response to road-related comments was that "*this project does not propose any new road construction, but does allow for temporary roads to be built to facilitate silvicultural activities.*" We also received this relatively confusing response in the Comment and Response document (L32.C6.P4), that stated "*To achieve the objectives of the project, a tool such as commercial harvest is needed because minimal impact temporary roads are needed. This may seem counter intuitive, but temporary roads reduce skidding distances and the amount of skid trails needed to log a unit.*"





Setting the semantics of “temporary” vs “new” roads aside, temporary roads are not temporary in impact, and their effects on forests, soils, fish and wildlife can last for years or decades. It is well documented in the Blues that motorized vehicles often continue to use these routes long after implementation of camouflaging and other activities designed to leave them in a state of non-use. As a result, soil compaction, displacement, erosion, and sedimentation continue to occur, along with their associated impacts to fish and wildlife.

From an elk security perspective, the addition of any miles of temporary roads leads this project to a net gain in disturbance, especially when many of the roads slated for decommissioning are proposed for abandonment and were already not in use. The agency has extra incentive (and authority) to conduct road management activities in the HCNRA per 36 CFR 292.44, which prohibits *“the use of motorized and mechanical equipment off open designated Forest Service roads, trails and backcountry airstrips except where authorized by permit.”*

We object to the creation of any temporary roads and our concerns could be addressed by removing any temporary roads from the final project.

### **Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas**

The draft decision proposed 236 acres of commercial and 459 acres of noncommercial thinning treatments in Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (“RHCAs”).

It’s clear that staff put a lot of time into this part of project development – thank you! We appreciate the thoughtfulness and attention to detail around prescribed fire backing in, where to refuel, as well as the no skidding PDCs and no ground disturbance buffers.

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 lives. Riparian areas are used by the large majority of species in the Blues for at least part of their lifecycle, and are important corridors for movement and raising young. They are disproportionately valuable on the landscape considering how few acres they occupy.

As a result, we do have concerns about the possibility of higher-intensity thinning and homogenization of forests within RHCAs of all categories, especially in headwaters of smaller streams in the project area. Although there may only be intermittent or ephemeral water sources, they still play a critical role for a variety of species. Language around remaining down wood and remaining canopy cover percentages leave the door open for relatively denuded riparian areas that would lack sufficient cover for wildlife.

Our concerns could be addressed by removal of commercial treatments from RHCAs; adding PDCS for jackstrawing around riparian areas to deter detrimental impacts from grazing ungulates (beyond existing PDCs for felling trees for large wood in/near the channel); and instituting minimum basal area of 80 square feet per acre for retention in RHCAs to provide habitat for American marten and other wildlife species who depend on canopy cover for their habitat.

### **Tethered Logging**

Tethered logging is currently proposed on 1,579 acres. We appreciate that tethered logging is not proposed within RHCAs.

We also 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 agency’s goal of seeking to improve worker safety and minimize detrimental soil impacts, we have







concerns that tethered harvest systems are being integrated into forest projects without more certainty on their impacts to soils, fish, and wildlife.

That concern is not alleviated when the first citation we check that's used to justify a statement like *"these systems have been successful at treating slopes greater than 30% while minimizing soil impacts and improving safety and productivity"* specifically says *"the question of whether steep slope tethered operations are environmentally acceptable is beyond the scope of [this] NIOSH-funded research"* (Garland et. al. 2019).

The Forest Service refers to preliminary results from Sparta and research with OSU, information which to our knowledge has still not been made available to the public. 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 unfavorable results, and that the promised post-implementation monitoring that would inform future projects may not occur.

It seems like the agency is planning these units expecting that the study results will land in their favor. What if they don't? We object to the use of tethered equipment in this project without a clear discussion and analysis of current (even if they are preliminary) findings. Our concerns could be addressed by the agency disclosing the current status and findings from any relevant local research on tethered logging operations.

### Concerns regarding treatment units

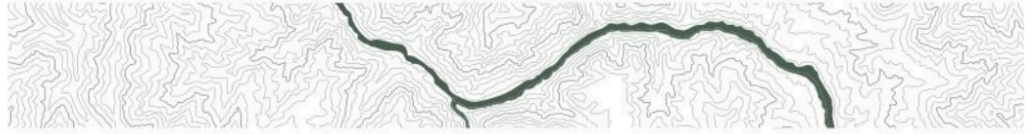
While we appreciate that provisions for cutting trees >21" have been removed, we still have concerns about treatments in mature and old forests such as MA-15 Old Growth Preserves. We do not feel that these intended treatments were well disclosed in the EA or other documentation aside from a brief mention in the silviculture specialist report. The specialist report states that *"Non-commercial thinning treatments in combination with prescribed burning would be used within some designated MA-15 stands to reduce fuel loads, and make stands more resilient to stand replacement wildfire."*

It's important to note that Old Growth Preserves are important not only for their large trees, but for the overall complexity and "messiness" provided by the entirety of the late seral forest ecosystem. This includes smaller trees, duff and litter piles, downed wood, and a variety of other values that may not be desirable from a fuels standpoint. As more parts of the project area are thinned and burned, the ecological value of more untouched areas like MA-15 stands only increases.

We also have concerns with treatment units in lands that are part of the Lands That May Have Wilderness Characteristics layer from the Blue Mountain Forest Plan Revision process, as well as other places throughout the project area that are previously unlogged. In responses to comments on this issue, the agency said that "the majority" of areas proposed for treatment have had some form of past vegetation treatment or logging. However, this is not true for the whole project area.

Our concerns could be addressed by dropping any units in MA-15, as well as units in the Lands That May Have Wilderness Characteristics areas and units not associated with past management activities.





Thank you for your consideration of these objections to Morgan Nesbit. We appreciate the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest's commitment to thoughtful stewardship of our public lands.

Sincerely,

*Jamie Dawson*

Jamie Dawson, Conservation Director  
Greater Hells Canyon Council  
PO Box 607  
Enterprise, OR 97828  
541-963-3950  
[jamie@hellscanyon.org](mailto:jamie@hellscanyon.org)

