



Intermountain Forest Association

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Jennifer Schuller, Acting Aspen-Sopris District Ranger, Responsible Official
White River National Forest
Glenwood Springs, Co

Submitted via: <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=68876>

Re: Comments on the Twin Peaks Project and Draft Environmental Assessment

Dear Ranger Schuller:

Intermountain Forest Association (IFA) is a member-based organization that advocates for healthy forests and healthy communities, including actively promoting sound forest management that provides a stable and sustainable supply of timber from public and private forestlands. IFA's members engage in many aspects of forest management and are an important stakeholder partner to the United States Forest Service (USFS). IFA's members presently, and plan in the future, to engage in timber removal in some capacity from the project area.

IFA appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the draft environmental assessment (EA) for the Twin Peaks Project. IFA is supportive of the USFS and their willingness to manage National Forest lands to improve forest diversity and resiliency, and to provide a sustainable supply of commercial timber to forest products producers.

DECISION CRITERIA AND NEPA COMPLIANCE

USFS identifies three criteria on which its decision will be based, one of which includes how well the selected alternative protects the human environment (EA at 4). IFA generally supports USFS' basis for making decisions; however, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) does not require decisions to be based on protection of the human environment. NEPA is a procedural statute and does not impose substantive environmental obligations (7 CFR 1b.2). While it is desirable to select alternatives that satisfy both project needs and protection of the human environment, NEPA does not mandate such criteria. Therefore,

decisions should not require environmental protection as a prerequisite for selection, and should not be identified as such in the EA.

ANALYSIS OF ALTERNATIVES

No Action Alternative

The project area is in critical need of forest management to improve overall forest health, as well as to maintain industry infrastructure. While IFA acknowledges differing viewpoints, we emphasize that active management at meaningful scales—including the use of all available tools, such as industry involvement—is indispensable for the long-term protection of forest health. Consequently, the No Action alternative fails to meet the purpose and need of the proposal, and we agree with USFS that it should not be regarded as a viable option.

Proposed Action

As previously mentioned, the project area is in need of critical forest management, and IFA appreciates the USFS' acknowledgement of the importance of providing a sustainable commercial timber supply to local facilities. Accordingly, we support the timber-focused zones designated in Project Area Map 1. Nevertheless, it is observed that a significant portion adjacent to Treatment Area 2, classified as Management Area 5.13 (resource production/forest products), does not include proposed vegetation management. If prior treatments have occurred in this area, disclosure would be beneficial. Depending on the (previous) silvicultural prescriptions, there may be further opportunities for thinning within the matrix or for additional volume removal, which would satisfy the purpose and need for the Twin Peaks Project.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Forest Vegetation

The Twin Peaks Project vegetation analysis area encompasses 13,793 acres and consists of mostly mature Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir (62%), with aspen stands (22%) and non-forested areas (16%). The stands have multi-layered canopies but face threats from insects and diseases. A late 1990s spruce beetle outbreak caused mortality in spruce, and while beetle levels are currently mostly at endemic levels, drought and western spruce budworm remain concerns. The budworm is currently the most damaging insect.

IFA urges aggressive management where spruce budworm is at, or projected at epidemic levels, including sanitation harvest and clearcuts to break infestation cycles. Without action, long-term damage will increase. Also, creating defensible spaces and fuel breaks is recommended to control catastrophic fires and protect the public. IFA also recommends treatments beyond 400 feet where feasible, as future opportunities may be limited.

Elk Management

The Twin Peaks Project area encompasses 4,297 acres and is situated within an Elk Data Analysis Unit (DAU) established by Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) for elk herd management. DAU E-15 spans approximately 544,000 acres, with 75% designated as public land. Of this, USFS land comprises 67% (364,572 acres), while wilderness areas account for 39% (212,022 acres) of the total DAU. The project area represents roughly 0.73% of the entire DAU E-15 (EA at 26). The entire project area falls within elk habitat management area 5.43 under the Forest Plan, which sets seasonal restrictions to protect elk during calving (May 15–June 20), migration (October 14–November 30 and April 15–June 20), summer (June 16–October 14), and winter (December 1–April 14).

The CPW E-15 DAU Plan (2013)¹ underscores that the primary challenges affecting elk herd populations are the absence of large-scale habitat improvement projects and the ongoing degradation of undeveloped habitat. This degradation stems not only from increased human recreational activity, but also from decades of fire suppression and, crucially, a lack of proactive habitat management, which has resulted in older, less productive forage for elk. As the Forest Plan wisely recommends, it is vital to “provide for adequate forage” for elk (Forest Plan at 3-62). CPW’s management goal for DAU E-15 is to sustain a healthy herd population between 3,600 and 5,400 elk, maintaining a robust ratio of 17–27 bulls per 100 cows (E-15 DAU Plan. 2013 at 31). While CPW does identify development and recreation as stressors that have reduced winter range, it is important to note that such pressures do not impact summer or calving habitat (*see, id.* at 2, 15, 25-26). Notably, the most recent population estimate within the unit stands at 3,960 elk, with a sex ratio of 24 bulls per 100 cows², which is well within CPW’s management objectives for DAU E-15. So even despite human disturbance, degraded habitat and less productive forage the elk herd has thrived.

Figure 10 in the EA illustrates the substantial acreage within DAU E-15 designated as summer concentration areas, in contrast to the minimal acreage affected by the proposed action. The project is situated along the northern fringe or boundary of the concentration zone, providing extensive space for elk to disperse during vegetation management activities.

The EA highlights at 31:

“The 5.43 Elk Habitat summer concentration area (25,565 acres) and surrounding elk habitat identified by CPW (113,578 acres) are large enough to allow elk to move freely and avoid disturbances associated with vegetation management activities.”

¹ Colorado Parks and Wildlife. 2013. Avalanche Creek Herd E-15 Data Analysis Unit Plan. Available at: <https://cpw.widencollective.com/assets/share/asset/mm8dryosvs>

² Colorado Parks and Wildlife. 2024 Post-Hunt Elk Population Estimates with Ratios. Available at <https://cpw.widencollective.com/assets/share/asset/glcdwjrsmb>.

Additionally, the biological evaluation (BE) supporting the NEPA analysis for the Twin Peaks Project notes that elk calving (production) areas exist to the east, west, and middle of the project area with haul routes passing through *some* of these areas (BE at 37). The BE also identifies *potential impacts* to calving areas to include disturbance to elk during calving season, reduction in recruitment, temporary displacement, and short-term impact to habitat effectiveness.

To minimize these potential impacts, the project proposes extending the calving restriction in treatment areas 1, 2, 3, and 4 to July 1 annually. This extension aims to reduce potential stress on cows and calves during the calving period. However, in light of the stressors and other limiting factors (recreation, development, winter range, and lack of habitat management) identified by CPW, IFA contends that extending the calving restriction is wholly inappropriate, especially considering the herd population objectives for DAU E-15 are well within range. The extension would not substantially benefit calving, rearing, or recruitment given the project's location to ample ground outside the project area. The potential loss of two weeks of operational time in June outweighs the marginal impact to elk if operations proceed during this period.

Moreover, any potential disturbance from the proposed treatments is expected to be minimal and unlikely to result in lasting negative effects on elk herd populations. Additionally, these treatments are anticipated to enhance elk habitat both immediately and over time, benefiting the herd. Both the EA and biological evaluation fail to justify extending the calving restriction to July 1. Instead, the biological evaluation concluded that the cumulative effects of past and proposed treatments are “insignificant and discountable at the DAU level” (BE at 53). It also found:

“Across the DAU, elk productivity [calving] would continue at or near baseline conditions since the aciton (sic) alternatives **would not contribute impacts in mapped calving areas**. Management actions have the potential to impact elk and elk habitat, but not to the point that cumulative effects are likely measurable” (*id.* at 53, 61-62, emphasis added).

Based on USFS’ own findings of potential impacts, extending the calving restriction is erroneous and fails to follow basic logic. To that end, IFA recommends USFS in the final EA and decision documents modify the proposed timing restrictions so that it allows for the most flexible operational dates, considering the immeasurable impacts to elk and the high impacts to harvest operations, doing so meets the purpose and need of the project.

Habitat Effectiveness

Throughout both the EA and the biological evaluation the habitat effectiveness threshold is misrepresented. The EA states:

“The 2002 Forest Plan Wildlife Standard 7 states that vegetation treatments and new roads and trails will not reduce the elk habitat effectiveness index

below **0.45** by Data Analysis Unit (DAU) or further reduce effective habitat in DAUs that are already at or below 0.40 on National Forest System lands” (EA at 32, emphasis added).

However, this misrepresents what is stated under Standard 7 in the Forest Plan. Instead, Standard 7 states:

“Vegetation treatments and new roads and trails will not reduce the elk habitat effectiveness index **below 0.40** by Data Analysis Unit (DAU), or further reduce effective habitat in DAUs that are already at or below 0.40 on National Forest System lands” (Forest Plan at 2-16, emphasis added).

To that end, IFA recommends that this language be updated with the correct language from the 2002 Forest Plan in the final environmental assessment and decision documents.

DESIGN FEATURES AND GUIDELINES

IFA asserts that the following project design features are excessively restrictive considering the anticipated impacts, the established elk population objectives, and the primary constraints on elk habitat. These restrictions undermine the purpose and need of the Twin Peaks Project.

Wildlife #1: In treatment units 1, 2, 3 and 4, prohibit log hauling and all harvest activities (loading, skidding, cutting) from May 15-July 1st annually, to minimize effects to elk calving.

- As previously discussed, there is no reasonable justification for extending calving season restrictions in light of the amount of available productivity/calving habitat outside of the project area as well as current population numbers meeting CPW objectives within the DAU, and USFS’ own findings (*supra.* at 4) that impacts to calving habitat is unaffected or *de minimis* at best.

Wildlife #2: In treatment units 1, 3 and 4, prohibit log hauling and all harvest activities (loading, skidding, cutting) from July 1-August 15 annually, to minimize effects to elk in their summer concentration area.

- The project area is located at the edge of the CPW summer concentration area, which spans 113,578 acres (BE at 37). The project *analysis* area comprises 3.78% of the summer concentration area, with only 1.8% of the summer concentration area *proposed* for treatment. The impacts are considered localized and temporary to a few individuals, as 96.22% of the summer concentration area will remain unaffected by the proposed treatments and provides ample space for elk to disperse to and forage (BE at 37, 52).

As previously mentioned, CPW has not identified summer concentration areas as a limiting factor for the elk population for DAU E-15 (*see generally*, E-15 DAU Plan 2013). Based on the extremely small footprint for proposed treatments (1.8%), and the extensive amount of accessible summer habitat for elk to disperse to, IFA recommends that USFS consider not enforcing summer timing restrictions at all, and disclose potential impacts in a revised draft EA.

To be clear, the proposed timing restrictions are *guidelines* found under the Forest Plan and may be deviated from so long as management objective(s) are met i.e. provide *adequate* forage to sustain elk populations, emphasis added. Although the project may temporarily displace some elk and slightly reduce habitat effectiveness—without dropping below the 0.4 threshold—the effects are limited to specific areas and are short-lived. Ultimately, the project aims to enhance elk forage and habitat quality in the long-term.

Recreation #2: Log hauling on NFSR 300.3 shall be prohibited on weekends (noon on Friday thru midnight on Sunday), holidays (Memorial Day, 4th of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years Day, Presidents Day), and one day prior to the start of each big game rifle-hunting season to minimize conflicts with recreational users. Deviation from this restriction may be approved on case-by-case basis after consultation with District Ranger, recreation specialist and special use permit administrator.

- Log hauling is limited by environmental conditions, typically occurring on a finite number of days each year. In areas dominated by spruce or subalpine fir, dry or frozen ground—essential for these operations—is limited. Subcontractors average less than 160 working days annually, and this figure is further reduced after accounting for restrictions for weekends, hunting seasons, and Federal holidays.

Timber sales must adhere to the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) standards, ensuring safe and consistent traffic control nationwide across all road types. MUTCD guidance enables the public to safely navigate roadways throughout the year. For timber sales, companies implement appropriate signage in accordance with MUTCD requirements, publish activity notices locally, and display information at trailhead kiosks. Current safety measures are robust. Considering these precautions and operational limitations, further restrictions on logging, hauling, or road maintenance are unwarranted.

Restricting log hauling on NFSR 300.3 during weekends, holidays, and the day before major rifle-hunting seasons is not justified. NFSR 300.3 is equipped with multiple pullouts and effective signage to minimize potential conflicts with the public. Haulers proactively self-regulate to avoid congestion and shift hauling times to earlier hours when traffic increases. Additionally, since the widespread adoption of VHF radios—on the same

frequency as USFS—has substantially improved real-time communication among trucks regarding public locations. For these reasons IFA recommends that USFS allow weekend hauling with mutual agreement, allow hauling on non-major holidays (MLK Day, Presidents' Day, Juneteenth, Columbus Day, and Veterans Day), and remove hauling restrictions on the day preceding major rifle-hunting season openings.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and recommendations provided, IFA urges the USFS to prioritize flexible and practical operational timelines in the final EA and decision documents for the Twin Peaks Project. The facts demonstrate that the project area is in critical need of active forest management to support forest health, maintain industry infrastructure, and ensure a sustainable supply of timber. While the protection of elk habitat is important, the evidence indicates that the proposed timing restrictions—particularly the extension of calving restrictions—are excessively restrictive given the extensive available habitat and the current elk population meeting CPW objectives. The impacts of the project are expected to be localized and temporary, with long-term benefits to elk habitat and forage.

Furthermore, IFA recommends that USFS update habitat effectiveness language in the EA to accurately reflect Forest Plan standards and reconsider the necessity of project design features that impose operational limitations beyond what is required to meet Forest Plan objectives and desired conditions for the protection of wildlife and recreational users. The current safety measures, traffic management, and communication protocols for log hauling are sufficient to minimize public conflicts, and further restrictions on weekends, holidays, and hunting season are unwarranted.

In summary, IFA supports the Twin Peaks Project and encourages the USFS to adopt recommendations that balance the needs of forest health, wildlife management, and industry operations. The project should proceed, allowing for operational flexibility to achieve the purpose and need and maximize benefits for both the forest and local communities.

Respectfully Submitted,



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