March 19, 2026

Blue Mountain District Ranger
c/o Bethany Parker
PO Box 909
John Day, Oregon 97845

Submitted electronically via: https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public//CommentInput?Project=53678

Re: Austin Project DEIS

Dear Ms. Parker,

WildEarth Guardians (Guardians) and Oregon Wild submit the following comments regarding the Austin Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and Emergency Situation Determination (ESD).

Guardians is a nonprofit conservation organization with offices in Oregon, Washington, and four other states. Guardians has nearly 200,000 members and supporters across the United States and works to protect and restore wildlife, wild places, wild rivers, and the health of the American West. Guardians and its members have specific interests in the health and resilience of national forests in Oregon, including the Malheur National Forest.

Oregon Wild is a nonprofit conservation organization with offices in Portland, Eugene, and Enterprise. It represents approximately 20,000 members and supporters who share its mission to protect and restore Oregon's wildlands, wildlife, and waters as an enduring legacy.

The Forest Service does not provide any support for treating portions of RHCAs in the same manner as uplands stands.

In 1995, the Forest Service, in consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service, established riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCAs) as a core component of the Pacific Anadromous Fish Strategy and the Inland Native Fish Strategy (PACFISH/INFISH). The agency established RHCAs after determining that strict rules for land management activities within riparian areas were needed to prevent further habitat degradation for aquatic species.

With the Austin Project the Forest Service proposes to split RHCAs into two zones. DEIS at 16. For each stream category, the agency divided each RHCA into an inner zone, or portion, and an outer zone.[1] The agency would pursue different levels and types of treatment depending on whether

[1] The agency defines inner and outer portions, or zones, of RHCAs by stream category. For perennial streams with fish present (Category 1), the inner zone is within 100 feet of the stream channel, and the outer zone is from 100

the area to be treated lies within the inner or outer zone of an RHCA. *Id.* As justification for these different treatments, the agency asserts that outer portions of RHCAs are "generally more ecologically similar to upland stands than to the inner portions of RHCAs." *Id.* The Forest Service offers no legal authority that RHCAs can be split into two zones, much less any reasoning or rationale applying that legal authority to the Austin Project. The agency assertion that outer portions of RHCAs are ecologically more similar to uplands stands than they are to inner portions of RHCAs is accompanied by no reasoning or evidence that this is true within the watersheds affected by the Austin Project. If an RHCA designation is to have any purpose, the agency can't simply reverse itself without explanation and claim that large portions of the RHCAs can be treated as if they were uplands stands. Absent reasoning, decision to divide the Austin Project RHCAs into two zones is arbitrary and capricious and violates the Malheur Forest Plan.

The DEIS failed to take a hard look at proposed treatments to restore streams and floodplains.

Federal agencies must take a "hard look" at the consequences of proposed actions, consider alternatives, identify unavoidable adverse impacts, and consult with other agencies and the public before making final decisions. *Robertson v. Methow Valley Citizens Council*, 490 US 332 (1989). Here, the DEIS states that "[s]ite-specific level and type of treatment would be based on topography, potential vegetation group, fuel loading, and existing road access.," and directs readers to consult Appendix A-Activity Tables for more information. DEIS at 17. The Stream and Floodplain Restoration activity table in Appendix A lists each unit that would receive stream and floodplain restoration activities and the number of acres that would be treated within each unit. However, Appendix A contains no description of how such treatments would differ depending on topography, potential vegetation group, fuel loading or current road access. Rather, the proposed treatment for all units is described only as "stream and floodplain restoration." Austin Project DEIS Appendix A at A-21—A-24. The Forest Service must explain how each individual unit is going to be treated and analyze the effects of those treatments. At the very least, it needs to describe how the different factors (i.e., topography, fuel loading, road access and potential vegetation group) will be used to establish site-specific levels and types of treatments and then describe the physical and logistical conditions of each unit. Without this additional information the Forest Service has not taken a hard look at the proposed treatments in streams and floodplains or their effects, as is required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The existing information is too vague for either the public or the decision maker to evaluate the intensity of the treatments that will take place in areas that provide habitat for threatened species and that Forest Service has acknowledged should not be exposed to additional degradation.

The proposed stream and floodplain restoration treatments in riparian habitat conservation areas will adversely affect threatened species.

The Austin Project proposes to remove up to 308 acres of "commercial byproduct" in riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCAs), which would include removal of Douglas-fir and grand fir trees 21 inches or larger diameter at breast height. DEIS at 18. The Project also proposes to log 339 acres

to 300 feet of the stream channel. For perennial streams without fish (Category 2), the inner zone is within 100 feet of the channel and the outer zone is 100 to 150 feet from the channel. For intermittent streams without fish present (Category 4), the inner zone is within 50 feet of the channel and the outer zone is 50 to 100 feet from the channel. DEIS at 16.

of riparian meadows in the planning area. *Id.* at 19. This logging in riparian meadows and RHCAs will adversely affect threatened Middle Columbia River steelhead and Columbia River bull trout by reducing shade on and near streams. Reducing shade increases water temperatures, contravening the riparian management objective of no measurable increase in water temperature. The activities associated with logging, such as skidding trees across streams and construction of temporary roads, will increase fine sediment loads in streams in the project area. Fine sediments plug interstitial spaces in gravel that steelhead and bull trout need for successful spawning.[2] Logging activities in and adjacent to streams also decrease stream bank stability.[3] Commercial logging is inappropriate in critical habitat for bull trout and steelhead.

The Austin Project is not eligible for use of Section 40807 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act's emergency authority.

Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) Section 40807 authorizes the Forest Service to carry out certain emergency actions when the agency has determined that an emergency situation exists on national forest lands. *See* 16 U.S.C. 6592c. Agriculture Secretary Rollins has determined that 66,940,000 acres of national forest lands rated as very high or high wildfire risk are an emergency situation as defined by IIJA Section 40807. Secretary's Memorandum 1078-006, April 3, 2025, Increasing Timber Production And Designating An Emergency Situation On National Forest System Lands (S.M. 1078-0006). S.M. 1078-0006 directs that "[t]o be eligible to use this authority, at least 50 percent of the treatment areas supporting this authorized emergency action must be within the designated areas." *Id.* at 3.

Section 40807 specifies forestry activities that are authorized as emergency actions. The list of authorized emergency actions includes:

(A) the salvage of dead or dying trees;
(B) the harvest of trees damaged by wind or ice;
(C) the commercial and noncommercial sanitation harvest of trees to control insects or disease, including trees already infested with insects or disease;
(D) the reforestation or replanting of fire-impacted areas through planting, control of competing vegetation, or other activities that enhance natural regeneration and restore forest species;
(E) the removal of hazardous trees in close proximity to roads and trails;
(F) the removal of hazardous fuels;
(G) the restoration of water sources or infrastructure;
(H) the reconstruction of existing utility lines; and
(I) the replacement of underground cables.

16 U.S.C. 6592c (b)(2).

The Forest Service is asserting the Section 40807 emergency situation determination applies to applicable activities for the Austin Project. Austin Project DEIS Appendix E at E-38. The Malheur Forest Supervisor determined that

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[2] Quantifying Fine Sediment Infiltration in Spawning Gravel Used by Chinook Salmon (Oncorhynchus tshawytscha) in the Sauk River Basin, Washington, 2018–21.
[3] Hydrologic effects of logging in western Washington, United States paper.

> more than 50 percent of the planning area falls within the high or very high wildfire hazard area designated by Secretary Rollins and proposed activities would reduce wildfire risk to communities and key ecological values, reduce hazardous fuels, and support forest resiliency.

Id.

Despite the Malheur Forest Supervisor's determination, the Forest Service has not shown the Austin Project complies with the S.M. 1078-0006 eligibility requirement that more than 50 percent of *treatment areas* have been designated as an emergency situation. The Malheur Forest Supervisor relies on planning area rather than treatment area to conclude that the Austin Project is eligible to rely on Section 40807 authority. Planning and treatment areas are not necessarily the same, and the Forest Service has not stated whether a majority of treatment area acres fall with the high or very high wildfire hazard area designated by Secretary Rollins. The DEIS itself does not even state the total number of acres to be treated under the proposed action[4] and does not analyze or provide evidence of how many of those treatment acres are within the high/very high wildfire hazard area. Project documentation does not include a map that shows overlap between treatment areas and high/very high wildfire hazard areas. A significant portion of the proposal's treatment area is RHCAs and riparian meadows, site types not normally thought of as at high or very high risk of wildfire hazard.

Further, the Austin DEIS does not explain whether each proposed treatment fits IIJA Section 40807's list of authorized emergency actions. Hazardous fuels treatments are proposed for 2,718 acres; this meets the definition of emergency action (F). Treatments for stream and floodplain restoration and riparian meadow restoration arguably fit action (G): restoration of water sources or infrastructure. Winter shading treatments fit action (E): removal of hazard trees near roads. But the majority of the proposed vegetation treatments, do not fall within the emergency actions list. The upland forest restoration and unique habitat restoration activities do not meet the definition of action (D): the reforestation or replanting of fire-impacted areas, as the DEIS makes no claim that the project area has been impacted by fire. The road activities proposed here also do not fall within any of the listed emergency actions. It appears the agency is attempting to improperly shoehorn a proposal dating back to at least 2018 within the contours of a 2025 secretary's memorandum that would allow it to fast track the project by evading standard NEPA alternatives analysis and its own administrative appeals process.

[4] The Austin Project DEIS Appendix A – Activity Tables document includes tables identifying acres proposed for various treatments, but it is not clear whether all treatment areas are distinct or, rather, some areas would be subject to more than one treatment. None of the activity tables have totals for treated acres.

The Austin DEIS Understates the Significance of Cutting Large Grand and Douglas-Fir Trees.

Cutting large Douglas-fir and grand fir up to 30" DBH in size, as proposed with the Austin Project, will have significant negative effects on carbon values, snag habitat and aquatic habitats. The Forest Service fails to properly disclose these effects in the DEIS. Large diameter trees are key to the ability of forests to accumulate substantial amounts of carbon needed to mitigate climate change and to maintain ecological integrity in the face of a changing climate. Logging large diameter trees removes natural climate solutions and deprives the ecosystem of much needed large snags and dead wood that provide habitat for a wide array of wildlife species. Large diameter trees are also integral to a variety of crucial aquatic and riparian ecosystem functions and processes. They play central roles in these ecosystems, such as helping to store sediments and nutrients; shape channel morphology and instream habitats and conditions necessary for fish and other aquatic organisms; support groundwater flows, hyporheic flows and groundwater storage. Unfortunately, the DEIS did not adequately analyze impacts on carbon values, snag habitats and aquatic habitats.

1. <u>Cutting Douglas-fir and Grand Fir up to 30" DBH Will Have Significant Effects on Snag Habitat</u>

Logging large trees will deprive the Malheur's old growth ecosystems of much needed large snags and the critically important role played by snags and dead wood recognized in the 1994 Everett Report (p 23):

> [In]... presettlement forest fires ... [t]rees were killed but not removed by fire and a considerable biomass of dead wood was left standing. Before being incorporated into the soil, these dead trees functioned first as dead shade-moderating site conditions for the establishment of new conifer seedlings, shrubs, and herbs; snags- providing food, roosts, and homes for various birds and small mammals; and down logs- again providing food and shelter, and substrate for arthropods, plants, soil bacteria and fungi, and moisture retention.
>
> Dead trees and down logs play important roles in ecosystems. An important goal of research will be to determine the amount of dead wood that is needed to conserve biological diversity and long-term productivity. An important goal of ecosystem management will be to match management actions to the disturbance ecologies of ecosystems. ... [Y]ield expectations for harvested acres should be scaled to accommodate the dead wood needs of ecosystems.
>
> ... Large amounts of standing and down dead wood should be left after harvest.
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> ... Under ecosystem management, planned thinning can leave behind important dead and down wood in all of its needed

forms.

Significant progress has been made to improve the identification of the appropriate amount of snags and dead wood that should be maintained over time in eastside Oregon forests such as the Malheur, but the proposed forest plan amendments would eliminate any clear requirement to meet the quantifiable needs of snag-associated wildlife when designing timber sales. In addition, there is no valid ecological rationale for the Austin Project's plan to remove Douglas-fir and grand fir trees 21-30 inches DBH, given that large shade-tolerant trees provide disproportionate ecological value in terms of cavity habitat. Ponderosa pine are not as cavity prone.

The Austin Project would shift conifer species composition away from shade-tolerant species like grand fir and Douglas-fir and as a result would have significant effects on habitat for species like pileated woodpecker. This point has been made by Drs. Franklin, Johnson, and Seager, who have argued that addressing habitat under LOS for late-closed and late-open associated wildlife species

> fails to account for conifers species composition, and more importantly, the stand specifics of each conifer species (e.g., DBH, spatial placement) for wildlife habitat requirements. Since different alternatives allow the harvest of different tree species, sizes, and ages, it does not hold that post-treatment stands classified as late-open or late-closed will inherently contain the habitat needed ... [L]ate-closed forests without proper conifer species composition providing rapid decay (e.g., grand fir or white fir) will not provide appropriate pileated woodpecker habitat.

2. Cutting Douglas-fir and Grand Fir up to 30" DBH Will Have Significant Effects on Aquatic Habitat

Aquatic and riparian ecosystems are especially vulnerable to negative impacts from the loss of large trees (and the loss of recruitment for large tree structure), both from logging within riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCAs) and from upslope logging. Because the Austin Project proposes to amend the Malheur Forest Plan to permit logging of large (greater than 21" DBH) Douglas-fir and grand fir trees, commercial thinning would have significant effects on aquatic and riparian ecosystems within the project area. Nearby, the Umatilla National Forest has implemented several proposals over the past decade that permitted logging within RHCAs along streams that are currently not meeting multiple riparian management objectives (RMOs), including along streams that regularly exceed stream temperature standards for RMOs and state water quality standards.

The Austin Project planning area include numerous stands of historic Douglas-fir/grand fir dominance. The Project proposes vegetation treatments—mostly commercial logging—that seek to shift species composition towards early seral species and reduce the amount of mature grand fir and Douglas-fir in stands within RHCAs and in upslope areas. The proposed action amends the Malheur forest plan to permit logging of Douglas-fir and grand fir greater than 21 inches DBH that is currently prohibited by the Eastside Screens. The Forest Service intends to remove most mature Douglas-fir and grand fir in the Austin Project planning area. Riparian forests, aquatic habitats, fish, and water quality will be significantly affected by this proposal as a result of increased logging of large trees in the uplands and within RHCAs. The DEIS ignored or glossed over key issues such as decreased natural recruitment of large woody debris; likely increases in stream temperature and excess fine sediments; alteration of watershed hydrology due to the increased loss of large trees; and other likely negative effects to aquatic systems. Large trees are integral to a variety of crucial aquatic and riparian ecosystem functions and processes on the Malheur National Forest. They play central roles in these ecosystems, such as helping to store sediments and nutrients; shape channel morphology and instream habitats and conditions necessary for fish and other aquatic organisms; support groundwater flows, hyporheic flows and groundwater storage, and so provide cold water flows into streams; and provide key habitat for numerous species. (Bisson et al., 1987; Frissell et al., 2014; Hicks et al. 1991; Ralph et al.1994; Bilby and Bisson 1998; Spies et al. 2013; Pollock and Beechie 2014). Should the Austin Project be implemented, the loss of large trees due to logging, and the loss of future recruitment of large trees, would likely have significant detrimental effects that haven't been properly analyzed.

3. <u>The Project's Cutting of Large Douglas-fir and Grand Fir Will Have Significant Effects on Carbon Values</u>

The accumulation of carbon in forest ecosystems is crucial for mitigating ongoing climatic change, with large-diameter trees storing disproportionally massive amounts of carbon in forests worldwide. Globally, forests removed the equivalent of about 30 percent of fossil fuel emissions annually from 2009 to 2018 and while boreal and tropical forests have received a great deal of attention, 44 percent of the carbon removed by forests from 2009 to 2018 is attributed to temperate forests such as the Malheur (Friedlingstein et al., 20197). Temperate forests of the U.S. consistently offset about 14 percent of the United States' CO2 emissions and are the largest category of land sinks in the country (EPA, 2020). Forest ecosystems in the U.S. have the potential to continue rapid atmospheric CO2 removal rates in addition to the massive carbon stores they currently hold (Moomaw et al., 2019). Forest carbon accumulation is a central component of a natural climate solutions framework that is receiving substantial attention in the science community and in President Biden's Executive Order 13990. (Griscom et al., 2017; Fargione et al., 2018; Cook-Patton et al., 2020).

Large-diameter trees have an outsized role in the ability of forests to accumulate the substantial amounts of carbon needed to mitigate climate change (Luyssaert et al., 2008; Lutz et al., 2018; Stephenson et al., 2014). Large-diameter trees comprise about half of the mature forest biomass worldwide and on average, 50 percent of the live tree biomass carbon in all types of forests globally is contained in the largest 1 percent of trees (Lutz et al., 2018). However, the value for the U.S. is lower (~30 percent) in the largest 1 percent of trees due to widespread historical logging of large trees (Lutz et al., 2018; Pan et al., 2011). The relationship between large-diameter trees and overall biomass suggests that forests cannot accumulate aboveground carbon to their ecological potential without large trees (Lutz et al., 2018). Recognition of the importance of large-diameter trees in the global forest carbon cycle has led to management recommendations to conserve existing large-diameter trees and those that will soon reach large diameters (Lutz et al., 2018; Lindenmayer et al., 2014).

In any forest, the largest trees relative to the rest of the stand contribute disproportionately to ecological function such as increasing drought-tolerance, reducing flooding from intense precipitation events, altering fire behavior, redistributing soil water, and acting as focal centers of mycorrhizal communication and resource sharing networks (Bull et al., 1997;

Brooks et al., 2002; Brown et al., 2004; Luyssaert et al., 2008; Beiler et al., 2015; Lindenmayer et al., 2017). In the U.S. Pacific Northwest ("PNW"), carbon dense old growth forests buffer against increasing temperatures by creating microclimates that shelter understory species from rising temperatures (Frey et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2019). Forests with large-diameter trees tend to have high tree species richness, and a high proportion of critical habitat for endangered vertebrate species, indicating a strong potential to support biodiversity into the future and promote ecosystem resilience to climate change (Lindenmayer et al., 2014; Buotte et al., 2020). Harvest practices can substantially alter carbon storage and accumulation (Kauppi et al., 2015; Masek et al., 2011; Turner et al., 2011; Krankina et al., 2012; Law et al., 2018). There is a negative relationship between harvest intensity and forest carbon stocks whereby as harvest intensity increases, forest carbon stocks decrease while emissions increase (Hudiburg et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2009; Simard et al., 2020). It can take centuries to re-accumulate forest carbon stocks reduced by harvest (Birdsey et al., 2006; McKinley et al., 2011), and climate mitigation targets need to be met in the next few decades.

Carbon storage is an important management objective for National Forest Lands in the U.S. (Depro et al. 2008; Dilling et al., 2013; Dugan et al., 2017; Birdsey et al., 2019). Western U.S. forests, including the Malheur National Forest, show considerable potential to accumulate additional carbon over the coming century, especially forests within the PNW that are projected to have relatively low to moderate vulnerability to future drought and fire (Buotte et al., 2020). This reinforces the importance of protecting large trees on the Malheur National Forest to help abate our current trajectory toward massive global change (Fargione et al., 2018; Buotte et al., 2020).

Current research reveals the large carbon stocks associated with large-diameter trees in "eastside forests," and the potential for significant losses in aboveground carbon stocks ("AGC") with large tree logging (Mildrexler et al., 2020). These findings document the important role of large trees in storing carbon in eastside forest ecosystems, and are consistent with previous findings on the disproportionately important role of large trees in the forest carbon cycle (Hudiburg et al., 2009; Stephenson et al., 2014; Lutz et al., 2012; Lutz et al., 2018). The rapid increase in carbon storage with increasing tree diameter emphasizes the importance of preserving mature and old large trees to keep this carbon stored in the forest ecosystem where it remains for centuries (Law et al., 2018; Lutz et al., 2018). Harvest of large-diameter trees—even focused on a specific species (e.g. grand fir and Douglas-fir)—can remove a significant fraction of tree AGC from these ecosystems. While the 21-inch Screen standard was initially conceived to protect remaining late successional and old-growth forest and the native species that depend on these unique ecosystems for survival (Henjum et al., 1994), carbon storage associated with the 21-inch standard on the Malheur National Forest has been a significant co-benefit of this protective measure (Mildrexler et al., 2020). Logging large Douglas-fir and grand fir trees under the Austin Project proposal would lose these carbon stores, and release large amounts of carbon to the atmosphere. The amount of carbon that remains stored in wood products is insufficient to offset the loss of carbon stored in the forest. Life cycle assessment shows that 65 percent of the wood harvested in Oregon over the past 115 years has been emitted to the atmosphere, 16 percent is in landfills and only 18 percent remains in wood products (Hudiburg et al., 2019). Harvesting the large trees will increase, not decrease, emissions and end centuries of long-term carbon storage in the forests.

Trees over 30 inches DBH in size are relatively rare on the Malheur National Forest and their rarity highlights the relative importance of the sub-30 inch DBH large trees, and the value in allowing these trees to continue growing and replenish the stock of rare trees over 30 inches DBH (Mildrexler et al., 2020). This strategy is the most rapid means for accumulating additional quantities of carbon in forests and out of the atmosphere (Moomaw et al., 2019). Ecological restoration that gives protection to large and old trees, reduces surface and ladder fuels, and understory thinning treatments where appropriate with reintroduction of low-intensity fire at intervals (Allen et al., 2002; Brown et al., 2004; Agee and Skinner, 2005; Noss et al., 2006) can achieve the benefits of carbon storage and accumulation in the larger, most fire-resistant trees and reduction of fuel loads and stem density in the smaller diameter trees.

The recent history of high-grade logging on the Malheur National Forest targeted large and old trees (Henjum, 1994; Rainville et al., 2008). Historical abundances of large trees on the Malheur National Forest landscape were much greater than today (Kauppi et al., 2015; Hagmann et al., 2013; Wales et al., 2007), and thus would have represented a larger fraction of aboveground biomass than currently found on these forests. While large tree composition may have shifted today relative to European settlement times, these large trees nonetheless continue to perform important functional attributes related to water and climate such as carbon storage, hydraulic redistribution, shielding the understory from direct solar radiation, and providing wildlife habitat. These functional attributes of large trees, irrespective of species, characterize ecosystems through thousands to millions of years (Barnosky et al., 2017), and cannot be quickly replaced.

Preserving carbon stores in large trees also supports important components of biodiversity and is associated with increased water availability (McKinley et al., 2011; Perry and Jones, 2016; Berner et al., 2017; Law et al., 2018; Buotte et al., 2020). Large-diameter snags account for a relatively high proportion of total snag biomass in temperate forests (Lutz et al., 2012). Large hollow trees, both alive and dead, are the most valuable for denning, shelter, roosting, and hunting by a wide range of animals (Bull et al., 2000; Rose et al., 2001). In the Interior Columbia River Basin, grand fir and western larch form the best hollow trees for wildlife uses (Rose et al., 2001). Downed hollow logs serve as important hiding, denning, and foraging habitat on the forest floor (Bull et al., 1997; Bull et al., 2000). Large decaying wood influences basic ecosystem processes such as soil development and productivity, nutrient immobilization and mineralization, and nitrogen fixation (Harmon et al., 1986).

The importance of forest carbon storage is now greatly amplified by a warming climate that must urgently be addressed with reductions in greenhouse gases and natural climate solutions (IPCC, 2018; Ripple et al., 2020). Rather than holding ecosystems to an idealized conception of the past using historical conditions as management targets, a good understanding of the environmental co-benefits associated with large tree protection is needed to inform management strategies that contribute toward solving humanity's most pressing Earth system challenges (Millar et al. 2007; Rockstrom et al., 2009; Barnosky et al., 2017; Ripple et al., 2020).

Replacing large diameter trees with seedlings within the Austin Project planning area will create a major carbon loss to the atmosphere during harvest (Harris et al., 2016) and not achieve storage of comparable atmospheric carbon for the indefinite future. Continuing to protect large trees in the Austin Project planning area provides the greatest benefit for carbon, habitat, and biodiversity.

Although the DEIS claims, incorrectly, that reduced forest resiliency resulting from climate change supports logging large trees, it failed to analyze the effects of cutting large Douglas-fir and grand fir on carbon values, including climate mitigation and adaptation and carbon stocks. As outlined above, the impacts of the Austin Project on these values is significant and was not properly analyzed. A robust analysis of the impacts of the Austin Project's logging large Douglas-fir and grand fir on carbon values would show that it will likely make the climate issue worse.

Conclusion

We appreciate the Forest Service's time and attention considering these substantive comments. The Austin Project would have significant impacts on a substantial portion of the Malheur National Forest. The Forest Service should not proceed with this project until it has taken a hard look at these impacts.

The Forest Service has failed to make the case that this project is authorized under IIJA Section 40807. Upland restoration activities—the largest proposed vegetation treatment type by acreage—do not meet the definition of any of the nine emergency actions listed in the IIJA. In addition, the Malheur Supervisor relied on the finding that more than half the planning area was part of the 66,940,000 acres of national forest lands rated as very high or high wildfire risk, when S.M. 1078-0006 requires that more than half the treatment area be classified as high/very high risk of wildfire hazard.

Sincerely,

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