



North Cascades Conservation Council
PO Box 95980
Seattle, WA 95980
ncccinfo@northcascades.org

Objections of North Cascades Conservation Council on the Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest (MBS) Forest-wide Thinning (FWT) Analysis Project #68852 Final Environmental Analysis (February 2026).

Deciding Official - Erin Uloth, Forest Supervisor, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

Submitted electronically to the MBS Objection portal for this project on March 21, 2026

Introduction

The North Cascades Conservation Council (NCCC) was founded in 1957, and our mission is to protect and preserve the scenic, scientific, recreational, educational, and wilderness values of the North Cascades. Thank you for the opportunity to submit objections to the Forest-wide Thinning Analysis Project.

On January 11, 2026, the North Cascades Conservation Council (NCCC) submitted comments on the Draft Environmental Assessment (2025) for the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest (MBS) Forest-wide Thinning (FWT) Analysis Project #68852. The objections described below were included as part of those comments. In order to prepare these objections NCCC reviewed: the February 2026 Final Environmental Analysis (EA) including Appendices A, B, D, and E; the Draft Decision Notice (DN) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI); the Western Washington Restoration Collaborative Zone (WWRCZ) Programmatic Biological Opinion between the USFS and NMFS (2025); the WWRCZ Programmatic Biological Opinion between the USFS and USFWS (2025); and various revised Specialist Reports.

We as members of the NCCC frequently recreate in the affected area and will be negatively impacted both by the project's physical activities, and by its alteration of the wild, natural quality of the area. We will be impacted by the loss of the present high quality recreation opportunities within a natural setting, and by the noise and danger associated with log truck traffic running through residential areas and quiet towns. We will also be adversely impacted by increased risks of landslides if units are located on unstable slopes, and possible degradation of aquatic habitat due to delivery of sediments from erosion, and possible adverse impacts to endangered species,

We recognize that limited thinning can result in improved long-term conditions for some of the stands on the MBS that were clear cut within the last 80 years. Proposed harvest units must be planned by fully assessing many variables. These include, but are not limited to, wildlife habitat; habitat for ESA-listed species; potential delivery of sediment to streams via erosion; unstable slopes; riparian reserves; the specific thinning prescriptions; impacts of mechanical thinning (Lindenmayer et al. 2026); possible of construction of new roads (temporary or otherwise); and the full obliteration of temporary roads and some existing roads.

Our primary objection comments continue to be related to FWT project impacts on aquatic habitats and aquatic species (especially ESA listed fish), riparian habitats, wildlife habitat (especially northern spotted owl habitat), LSR habitat, hydrology, fisheries, and unstable soils areas. Additionally, our objection reiterates our comments that utilization of condition-based management (CBM) as applied by the MBS to this proposed project analysis and future implementation, clearly does not meet NEPA, which requires site-specific analysis and effects disclosure to meet the "hard look" doctrine (as cited in recent court decisions on other USFS CBM projects and essentially any FS project court decision where NEPA was a legal challenge point). The Potential Implementation Areas (PIAs) contain Designated Critical Habitat for three ESA-listed Threatened fish species; Puget Sound Bull Trout, Puget Sound Chinook Salmon, Puget Sound Steelhead, northern spotted owl habitat, and Late-Successional Reserve areas. The PIAs contain eight Bull Trout Core Areas in the Puget Sound region (USDI FWS 2025), Puget Sound Chinook ESU, and Puget Sound Steelhead DPS (USDC NMFS 2025). This includes major watersheds and their tributaries in the Nooksack, Skagit, Stillaguamish, Snoqualmie, and White River systems.

From our review of the Final EA, we observe that the MBS has made essentially no changes to the proposed project in response to our NCCC comment letter, nor to any of the many other commenters. Additionally, no substantial information or details have been added to the Final EA to more fully and sufficiently describe and inform the existing stand, vegetation, and habitat conditions that are present within the 106,375

acres identified as Potential Implementation Areas (PIAs), despite many commenters requesting such information. Consequently, please incorporate the NCCC comment letter with this objection, as it includes more detail on our objections that may not be included here and on which these objections are based.

Objections

Our concerns and objections are generally categorized under the “**Topic**” titles listed in Appendix D: Response to Comments in the Final EA. All the objections described here were discussed in the comments that NCCC submitted on January 12, 2026.

Agency

In our earlier comments we described significant concerns about lack of adequate staffing and funding and ability to accomplish the many tasks identified in Appendices A and B, considering the recent staffing and funding cuts under the Trump Administration.

MBS response: *“FS capacity is expected to fluctuate over the 30-year period. The EA analyzes the maximum potential extent of implementation. Capacity will be considered when developing annual, site-specific implementation plans to ensure full compliance with the EA.”*

NCCC Objection

This response does not recognize, or acknowledge, the current very insufficient funding and staffing under the Trump administration, which may also continue under future administrations. Staffing on the MBS has been very inadequate for decades. In the early 2000s the MBS briefly formally referred to it ‘custodial staffing’. Ecosystems (science) staffing levels dropped by about 75% over less than a decade and have remained at similar levels to this date. The addition of multiple planned and ongoing large scale vegetation management projects that are intended to span many years, and in some cases decades, will overlap in time and it will not be possible to adequately staff all of them. This additional workload will be added to all other project types.

These limitations have resulted in some projects in the past on the MBS of not being able to meet or conduct some of the Project Design Criteria (PDC), project implementation and effectiveness monitoring, and mitigation requirements that projects require under the Forest Plan (MBS 1990) as modified by the NWFP and through project EAs and ESA BOs. This was, and continues to be, stretching staff far beyond their viable available time and funding to accomplish all required tasks listed among many competing ongoing projects. The emphasis here is that there is a long history of very inadequate staffing relative to project workloads. That ratio is likely worse now in some disciplines so there can be little confidence that all the scores of requirements and tasks described in Final EA; the WWRCZ BOs (USFWS 2025, NMFS 2025 - both available on MBS website); and the Specialist Reports can reasonably be fully complied with over the decades long proposed life span of this project.

In addition to all the requirements and tasks listed in Final EA and the WWRCZ BOs, please refer to the attached Standards and Guidelines from the MBS Forest plan. This version of the Standards and Guidelines highlights (in color) all the scores requirements that relate to this project.

We also have concerns about the poor track record of having virtually no road maintenance conducted on the MBS over the last 10-15 years. There has been, and continues to be, a gross lack of funding for staff with technical skills and equipment to conduct the numerous tasks associated with construction, decommissioning, and maintenance of roads and associated culverts, ditches, and bridges that are identified in the Project Design Criteria (Appendix B) for this project that spans the Forest.

Appendix A lists at least 96 tasks to be completed by resource specialists reviewing proposed units, logging systems, road work, etc., including: Wildlife Biologist - 10; Fisheries Biologist -10; Soil Scientist – 18; Hydrologist – 8; Fuels Planner – 6; Archaeologist – 6; Botanist – 4; Landscape Architect – 7; Recreation Specialist – 15; Transportation Planning – 6; and Engineering – 6.

Appendix B lists at least 203 different MBS enforcement tasks that will be required for the project preparation and implementation: Botany and Invasives – 16; Heritage – 7; Soil, Water & Fisheries – 71, Fire, Fuels, and Air Quality - 15; Wildlife - 58; Scenery -9; and Recreation - 27. Many of these tasks are assigned to contract administrators, timber sale administrators, project administrators, and numerous specialists (engineers, hydrologists, soils, etc.). How is the MBS going to get adequate funding to provide staffing to accomplish these tasks for this proposed project?

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

By implying that the MBS will complete all the enforcement tasks identified in the EA, as well as through ESA Consultation with the USFWS and NMFS, they are not being accurate or realistic, especially considering all the unknowns regarding funding and staffing to accomplish these tasks. Because of these significant funding and staffing unknowns, it is highly likely that many Project Design Criteria (PDC), identified tasks, and mitigation measures, would not be completed.

This would be in violation of the National Forest Management Act via non-compliance with some of the requirements within the MBS Forest Plan (1990) as modified by the NWFP. It would also be in violation of the ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Zone (WWRZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk.

Suggested Remedy

Minimize construction of temporary roads. Avoid constructing temporary roads in riparian reserves or key watersheds. Document via implementation and effectiveness monitoring of other recent past or ongoing vegetation management projects on the MBS how all of the many PDCs and required Standards and Guidelines actually occurred. In addition, document how the scores of required terms and conditions contained in the WWRCZ BOs are being, or will be, complied with in other ongoing projects. These are all things that MBS staff, the tribes, and the public need to know in order to make necessary adjustment to abide by mandatory elements. This is all regular and normal implementation and monitoring as required under the NWFP. It would document for both the USFS and public if the MBS has that staffing and funding to complete this work for both this project and future projects. This information is a valuable tool since the USFS, tribes, USFWS, NMFS, and the public need to know all these requirements are actually possible to complete, and if they are effective.

Analysis

One of our earlier comments concerned relying on old stand exams or lack of funding to conduct stand exams in the PIAs.

MBS response: *“The 1996 source cited in the comment provides a general definition of the stem exclusion stage of stand development (see Oliver and Larson, 1996)”*

NCCC Objection

We object because the depiction of widely varying current stand conditions across hundreds of PIAs that span the entire Forest is based on an extremely small sample. The assumptions used in the analysis for this EA are, according to the Silviculture Report, based on 10 reference stands selected from recent timber sales or NEPA projects across the forest that contained Common Stand Exam (CSE) data collected from 2018 to 2025. This sample likely represents less than 1% of the 106,375 acres (stated in the Project Wildlife Report) that is comprised in the PIAs. Such a small sample of reference stands does not reflect stand conditions across the rest of the PIAs, and it does not adequately demonstrate and support the stated need for the project within the purpose and need statement, nor does it provide the information needed by the MBS to prioritize treatment areas as trees grow and conditions change over the proposed 30 year project life span.

Similarly, it does not provide minimally adequate information on current and likely future stand conditions to design appropriate harvest prescriptions for widely varying PIAs across the Forest. The proposed single harvest prescription applied to all PIAs, even though extremely few have been surveyed, and current conditions are largely unknown

is arbitrary and inappropriate. Prescriptions need to vary based on species, tree diameters, trees per acre, health, and other factors.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy:

Using only ten reference stands within hundreds of possible treatment areas (over a project with a proposed life span of 30 years across the entire MBS) to extrapolate assumptions about the remaining forest stands is fatally flawed. This implies that these 10 reference stands represent forest stand conditions across all the PIAs. In addition, it assumes that the MBS will have the funding and staffing be able to complete all the stand exams necessary for FWT Project, especially considering all the unknowns regarding funding and staffing to accomplish these tasks.

Using information that is not current but is used to make assumptions and decisions in the FWT Project is not compliant with NEPA, nor adequate for ESA consultation. Failure to collect data and analyze the effects of full project implementation renders the analysis highly uncertain.

Because of the significant funding and staffing unknowns, and the lack of data on the rest of the stands proposed for thinning in the PIAs, it is likely that many Project Design Criteria (PDC), and other identified tasks, would not be completed. This would be in violation of ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Zone (WWRZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk.

Suggested Remedy

Minimize construction of temporary roads. Avoid constructing temporary roads in riparian reserves or key watersheds. Conduct additional stand exams to get an accurate, and a statistically valid descriptions of the actual range of current stand conditions on the scores of proposed harvest areas across the entire MBSNF.

Analysis

NCCC commented that Condition-based Management (CBM) violates NEPA and that CBM decision points do not provide the level of analysis required for a hard look. We also commented that CBM lacks site-specific analysis required under NEPA and detailed analysis would occur during implementation rather than prior to the decision being signed.

MBS responses: *“By adhering to clearly defined decision points, the Forest wide Thinning EA will comply with NEPA through thorough field surveys prior to*

implementation, ensuring treatments are applied in areas that best meet the Purpose and Need, deliver the greatest ecological benefit, and remain operationally feasible. The annual implementation process will ensure that the annual site implementation plan remains consistent with the proposed action and effects analysis outlined in this EA.”

“Under CBM, all analyses are completed and disclosed in the ERA and supporting documents. Decision points for existing conditions (stand condition and age), Forest Plan management areas, NWF Plan land allocations, and existing road network determines where implementation may occur within the potential implementation areas. Prior to implementation, site-specific surveys will be conducted to confirm that each location meets the conditions outlined in the proposed action and that anticipated effects will be within those analyzed in the EA. If the IDT finds that an implementation plan is outside the bounds of this analysis, the plan will be modified, or a supplemental EA will be conducted.”

NCCC Objection

This MBS response is unacceptable because it delays many decisions, and all site-specific decisions for years or even decades, long after the Final Decision Notice is issued. Considering the very large spatial extent of this project, and a proposed 30-year life span the with very little specific described, Condition Based Management (CBM) for this project is not sufficient nor appropriate, and it is not compliant with hard look requirement of NEPA.

There are proposed annual opportunities for the public to informally discuss what is proposed for the upcoming year, but how those meetings will be advertised and what information will be made available is not described for a project that is supposed to span 30 years. In addition, the MBS may make no changes consequent to these meetings and there would be no opportunity for the public to formally to comment or object. As we have seen in previous MBS EAs (SF Stillaguamish Vegetation Management Project (USDA FS 2017), NF Stillaguamish LA Project (USDA FS 2025), and NF Nooksack Vegetation Management Project (USDA FS 2022), CBM is being be used to cut corners by doing very little on the ground surveys at this time and assuming that the very few surveyed units are representative of all the varied stand conditions across the project area. That is not a valid assumption. extrapolating very limited existing data to get around NEPA compliance.

In addition, CBM is mentioned in the “Consistency Request for the MBS NF FWT Project” letter to justify increasing the allowable harvest tree diameter from 20” to 26” DBH within select LSR stands (Submitted by Sarah Thibeault and Kevin James on November 2025 in the on-line project file) states “For the purpose of this condition-

based (CBM) EA, the PIA is defined as previously managed stands under 80-years of age located where the MBS land and resource management plan, as amended by the NWFP, allows for commercial timber harvest.” The analysis for this effort addresses 10% of the nearly 650,00 acres of LSR across the MBS NF.

We noted in our Draft EA comments how the application of condition-based management (CBM) with the FWT project violates NEPA requirements for site-specific data and analyses and a “hard look” at project impacts. As utilized for this proposed FWT EA project, the condition-based management and analysis process is wholly inadequate to disclose unit specifics of existing stand and habitat conditions and post-treatment conditions. There is a lack of disclosure of information on which we and the public can make a reasonable assessment and understanding of potential impacts from the proposed project. The extremely limited sample stand data (10 stands of undescribed age, stand size/acreage, tree species composition, and tree size class distribution) and post-treatment modeling data is unconvincing and insufficient to support the conclusion that post-treatment stands will provide suitable canopy cover for even NSO dispersal habitat (greater than 40% canopy cover) or that some stands do not currently provide suitable owl foraging habitat (despite claims that no stands currently do, including as represented to the REO in the LSR Workgroup Consistency review request to cut trees larger than 20” dbh and up to 26” dbh in LSR stands). The scant existing conditions table from only 10 sample stands is totally inadequate for site-specific assessment of project effects to NSO habitat and effects to potential units in LSR. For example, stand data for regenerating clearcut stands ranging from about 40 to 80 years of age would be expected to show substantial variability in overstory tree size class. However, the table provided shows little variation and does not show key data, such as stand age of the 10 sample stands, trees/acre by size class, or sample stand acres. Consequently, it is not clear that the sample stands capture the variation in existing stand conditions that would be expected from stands that have a wide range in age (40 to 80 years old).

The need for cutting trees over 20” up to 26” in LSR is not supported by data that indicates how many trees over 20” dbh are present in even the minimal 10 sample stands. Additionally, the acreage of each sample stand is not presented. Presumably the total acreage of the sample stands represents less than 1% of the 106,375 acres of PIA, assuming the sample stands total 1,000 acres or less (100 acres X 10 stands). This may be an overestimate because it is likely that most sample stands are less than the 40 acre maximum allowed under NFMA because most clearcuts likely occurred after enactment of the 1975 NFMA, when the highest timber production was occurring in the Pacific Northwest and MBS. This would mean the sample stands likely represent only about 0.5% of the PIAs.

Additionally, the March 2, 2026, REO LSR Workgroup Consistency review authorization letter states “Site-specific vegetation management activities which differ from existing exemption criteria for commercial thinning in Regional Ecosystem Office (REO) memorandums 694 and 801 are submitted for review.” As stated above, the proposed FWT EA project information is not site-specific to any reasonable degree relative to the 106,375 acres in PIAs. As the MBS states, the project information is condition-based, and it appears the REO policy for site-specific vegetation management activities has not been met for the MBS request to cut trees >20” dbh up to 26” dbh.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

Use of CBM for this specific project does not comply with the requirements of NEPA, including the hard look requirement. EPA has formally stated that it considers CBM to be insufficient to meet NEPA compliance and discredits its use. We believe the proposed project with a wholly condition-based analysis that lacks any site-specificity (e.g., actual units are not delineated, actual forest conditions are not disclosed, etc.) violates NEPA requirements for a site-specific hard look to adequately assess and disclose current vegetation conditions and expected project impacts. The post-NEPA decision “Thinning Implementation Process” (EA Appendix A), including 30-day “Public Review” period, does not substitute for or meet NEPA requirements for a legally sufficient EA to disclose project impacts and inform the public and the decision. A look at the Thinning Implementation Process underscores the fact that this CBM EA does not represent a well-developed project with supporting site-specific information because this annual post-decision process indicates that is when actual project development and existing conditions information will be collected and formed into smaller timber sale projects.

The MBS acknowledges this in their EA Appendix D Comment Response (p. 110) when they state, “Prior to implementation, site-specific surveys will be conducted to confirm that each location meets the conditions outlined in the proposed action and that anticipated effects will be within those analyzed in the EA.” In fact, EA Appendix A: Thinning Implementation Process details all the work and tasks for all the resource specialists that should have been done for a site-specific EA that meets NEPA requirements and underscores that work has not yet been done for this FWT Project EA.

A growing body of court decisions [for example, see *Alliance for the Wild Rockies v. US Forest Service* (Colville NF, Sxwuytn-Kanisku Connections Trail Project), September 16, 2025; *Center for Biological Diversity v. US Forest Service* (Custer-Gallatin NF, South Plateau Landscape Project), December 11, 2025; *Southeast Alaska Conservation*

Council v. US Forest Service (Tongass NF, Prince of Wales Landscape Project), March and June 2020 court decisions] have found against the Forest Service and their application of condition-based management on these three vegetation management projects. These projects are similar in scale and impact relative to this project. The court concluded each time that these project analyses and decisions were too vague and in violation of NEPA and the requirement for site-specific data, mapped units, and analyses and the “hard look” necessary to inform the decision and to disclose adequate information to the public. The FWT Project EA essentially has the same faults identified in these court decisions.

Suggested Remedy

Because the CBM analysis as applied to this project is wholly inadequate and too vague, our suggested remedy is to withdraw the EA and FONSI/Decision documents and start anew with smaller site-specific project analysis areas and to provide actual existing conditions, proposed units, and unit-specific treatment prescriptions that are based on existing unit conditions on the ground. By breaking the proposed 30-year long project into smaller project EAs, these could provide site specifics of actions and impacts and enable more of the actual significant decisions to be made within the NEPA process, not years or decades after it ends with a Decision Notice issued for a vague 30-year program EA.

Fisheries

NCCC commented that proposed activities could negatively impact threatened fish populations.

[NOTE: The NCCC comment mistakenly had typo that referred to “endangered fish populations.” There are no ESA-listed endangered fish populations on the MBS, only threatened species (Puget Sound Bull Trout, Puget Sound Chinook, and Puget Sound Steelhead).]

MBS response: *“The fisheries specialist report discloses effects from sedimentation, stream temperature and other facets of aquatic habitat elements needed to support Federally listed fishes in the project analysis area. Per the conclusions of the fisheries specialist report, the project effects are spatial and temporal in scale and do not result in a Jeopardy determination for Federally listed fishes.”*

NCCC Objection

As stated in the EA and Fisheries Resource Report “not all fish-bearing perennial streams have been sampled for presence or absence of various species. Those unsampled streams represent a data gap, which can be addressed as part of project

implementation through booth modeling and field verification.” Again, we are concerned that due to lack of MBS funding and staff, these tasks will not be conducted before the project starts.

Even with proposed mitigation measures there are significant risks of adverse effects to ESA-listed fish species across many of the proposed treatment areas. We believe that the lack of site-specific analysis in the EA and the assumed reliance of thorough MBS staff monitoring and enforcement of scores of PDCs and BO terms and conditions for of each unit over the next 30 years is flawed and unjustified and will increase risks of adverse effects compared to the site specific EAs that we proposed should be conducted.

This due to extensive areas of naturally unstable soils, steep ground, and history of stability problems in many riparian areas in the PIAs. This includes, but is not limited to, the examples of the NF Stillaguamish Landscape Analysis (USDA FS 2005) and NF Nooksack Vegetation Management (USDA FS 2022) projects. We have great concerns about the potential for resource damage (sedimentation, increased stream temperatures, etc.) in these and other watersheds where PIAs are planned for this project. Areas.

As stated in the EA and the Fisheries Resource Report “not all fish-bearing permanent streams have been sampled for presence or absence of various species. Those unsampled streams represent data a gap, which can be addressed as part of project implementation through both modeling and field verification.” Again, we are concerned that due to funding and staffing issues, this may not be accomplished before plans for individual units are finalized.

Many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, these high-risk riparian areas. A good recent MBS example is the NF Stillaguamish LA Project, where timber stands to be thinned (variable density thinning=SRI) were shown on project area maps. When overlayed with soil stability (Soil Resource Inventory) maps that were provided, many of the units were on, or immediately adjacent, to unstable areas with a Moderate and High risk of instability.

A significant amount of unstable soils in the proposed NF Stillaguamish LA Project area have a high risk of failures and damage that could result from the proposed timber stand thinning and road-related activities for the project, especially in the valleys of Deer Creek, Little Deer Creek and Higgins Creek and upper NF Stillaguamish River areas. On the soils maps there is a significant amount of “Unstable & Very Unstable” (red) and “S8 Soils” (purple) shown in the Deer Creek, Little Deer Creek, Higgins Creek, and

middle to upper NF Stillaguamish River portions of the project area, with many located immediately adjacent to potential project stands (commercial & non-commercial).

These areas have a considerable amount of deep, unstable, glacial lake deposits, till and outwash soils and this instability is caused by a combination of steep slopes, fine textured plastic subsoils, and restrictive drainage, where natural deep-seated failures frequently occur, and are greatly accelerated by management activities (Snyder and Wade 1970).

Many of the PIA watersheds (Fig. 1) contain similar areas with deep glacial soils and deep glacial lake-deposit soils (Lacustrine) which are generally highly erosive and unstable as well as deep, unstable soils occurring on steep toe-slop and mid-slope drainages. These concerns should be taken seriously.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

Because of the significant funding and staffing unknowns, and the lack of data on the rest of the stands proposed for thinning in the PIAs, it is likely that many Project Design Criteria (PDC) will not be completed. In addition, many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, high-risk riparian areas, posing significant risk of impacts to aquatic species, including ESA-listed threatened fish species, from soil erosion, sedimentation, and increased water temperatures.

This would be in violation of ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Zone (WWRZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk.

Suggested Remedy

Minimize construction of temporary roads. Avoid constructing temporary roads in riparian reserves or key watersheds. Disallow the use of any heavy equipment within any riparian reserves. Place seasonal restrictions on harvest to times when soils are usually dry. Any exceptions to this this would have to be via on-ground surveys of proposed units by a hydrologist or soils scientist (as well as a wildlife biologist or fish biologist when needed) versus solely remotely discussing with a sale administrator. There are now very few science staff based on Ranger Districts. Most of the few scientists on the MBS are stationed in the Supervisors Office in Everett. The Final EA and the WWRCZ BOs state there will be on-the-ground surveys by some staff at some units. It is very likely that there will be insufficient staff time and funding to conduct on-the-ground surveys of many of these PIAs now, much less ensure that they will be made over the next 30 years when there will be different staffing, different funding, and many other competing priorities.

Hydrology and Analysis

NCCC commented on watershed analyses being decades old and that no longer adequately depict and analyze current conditions, primary concerns and goals, and integration of various discipline priorities. There have been very few revisions of any watershed analyses on the entire MBS over the last 25-30 years

MBS response: *“The NWFP states that a watershed analysis is required before timber harvest can occur in key watersheds but does not specify a timeframe for when existing watershed assessments need to be updated.”*

NCCC Objection

We object to this response. Just because an exact time frame was not listed is no excuse to use outdated watershed information when making land use impacting decisions.

According to in the ROD S&G’s NW Forest Plan (USDA FS & USDI BLM 1994) watershed analysis will be an on-going, iterative process that will help define important resource and information needs (USDA FS 1995). As watershed analysis (WA) is further developed and refined, it will describe the processes and interactions of all applicable resources. The ROD S&G’s (pages B-20 to 23) state that the WAs should be as necessary based on monitoring, changing management conditions, social values, or process knowledge.

Since the 1990’s, when most of the WAs on the MBS were completed covering all HUC 12s for the FWT Project (Kelley 2025), many land management activities and habitat changes (flood events, landslides, road failures, timber harvest, etc.) have occurred in this project area, as well as downstream private and state lands in these watersheds, making these watershed analyses badly out of date and in need of update, revision, or amendment, which reflect these changes. Even with the addition of Watershed and Aquatic Resource Assessment Analysis and Proposal Development for Whole Watershed Scale Projects (WARA) and the Watershed Condition Framework (WCF), this still does not meet the Aquatic Conservation (ACS) Objectives for watershed analysis. In addition, this project involves thinning stands of trees located in RRs and actively managing roads (temporary and system) in and near RRs over a period of at least 30 years.

Twenty WAs are listed under “Supporting Documentation” on the project website. Since many of these WA’s were completed, ESA federal listing of threatened species status of Chinook (1998), bull trout (1999), and steelhead trout (2003), has occurred. In addition,

external watershed partner monitoring results, changing management conditions, wildfires, and reoccurrence of large flood events from 1995-1996 and into the 2000's has occurred. These management activities should have been included in an updated watershed analysis for the project area.

For example, the recent NF Stillaguamish LA EA (USDA FS 2025) and specialist reports, did not appear to have used much of the Deer Creek (USDA FS 1996) or North Fork Stillaguamish watershed analyses (USDA FS 2000), which is the whole idea of a watershed analysis, one of the principal analyses for implementing the Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS) set forth in the Northwest Forest Plan (USDA & USDI 1994).

The Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest Plan (USDA 1990) involved a forest-wide watershed condition analysis. Nineteen watersheds were rated as being in an unacceptable condition and fifty-one in an acceptable condition (Appendix H in the MBS LRMP, USDA FS 1990). Most of the unacceptable watersheds (80%) were found on the more geologically sensitive north end of the MBS where many of the PIAs are located (Figure 1).

Even though the FWT proposes thinning a maximum rate of 1200 acres per year, and would be distributed over space and time, project impacts all depend on where the thinning treatments are located.

Stands in, or near, riparian and Riparian Reserve (RR) areas and their proximity to high risk and geologically unstable soil areas, should be avoided due to the risk of exacerbating erosion of existing unstable soils and opening the canopy, increasing water temperature in temperature-sensitive streams.

Many of the watersheds proposed for thinning in the PIAs are sensitive and at risk. They typically contain extensive naturally occurring unstable soils, sensitive soils and steep topography, high frequency of glacial geology, history of rain-on-snow flood events, extensive slope stability issues, poor road maintenance, and a history of extensive logging and road building impacts. It is critical that these treatments be done carefully, focus on areas that have stable soils, and can be easily reached from existing roads, so that fewer new roads are needed.

This combination of factors and steepness of many of the channels, together with land management history, has created unstable stream banks along the mainstem of many rivers and streams in the PIAs. Especially at risk, are upper NF Stillaguamish River (Deer Creek, Little Deer Creek, Higgins Creek, and major tributaries), NF Nooksack

River (Canyon Creek), SF Nooksack River (Wanlick Creek), Skagit River (Finney Creek), just to name a few.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

The MBS watershed analyses being used for the FWT Project are out of date. They were completed in the mid-1990s to early 2000. Without recent WAs, that reflect current conditions, the FWT Project would pose a risk of exacerbating erosion of existing unstable soils and opening the canopy, increasing water temperature in temperature-sensitive streams and fails to demonstrate compliance with the ACS.

Many of these WAs contain information that is not current but is used to make assumptions and decisions in the FWT Project. Failure to collect data and analyze the effects of full project implementation renders the analysis highly uncertain. This would violate NEPA and the NWFP ACS Objectives (USDA FS & USDI BLM 1994).

Suggested Remedy

Break the project into a few site specific EAs. Each would span reasonably foreseeable time frames so that data and conditions are sufficient to plan units, assess impacts, and fully mitigate. The current EA contains very little site-specific EA information and defers most of the significant decisions to various times along a 30-year time span while still relying on a very outdated EA. Revise Watershed Analyses in those basins where harvest is before drafting more site specific EAs.

Public Involvement

NCCC commented on its concern that no scoping process was conducted for this project. We also commented on concerns about how/if the planned annual opportunities for public informal comment would be advertised and the any resultant changes in planned actions would be documented and made available.

MBS response: *“Scoping is not a statutorily required step in the NEPA review procedures and there is no prescribed process or procedure required for scoping (7C.F.R. & 1b).”*

NCCC Objection

Although the July 2025 USDA NEPA regulations no longer ‘requires’ scoping or a comment period for EAs, both are still optional. A project spanning 30 years across an entire Forest clearly needs both scoping and comment periods. Both would provide valuable input for the MBS to improve meeting the purposed and need. Also, if scoping is not a required step in the NEPA process, then why is “Scoping Start on 9/3/2025”

listed under “Project Milestones” in the online FWT Analysis Project page as starting on 9/3/2025? That did not occur.

All past MBS projects had scoping periods where the public could provide comments prior to a Draft EA, and that option is still available. The MBS has not provided any basis or justification for not conducting public scoping for such large project on public lands with public funds. It appears to solely be to reduce public involvement. Other projects in the future that do not have scoping and/or a comment period will have similar objections.

As stated by the National Research Council (2008) “When done correctly, public participation improves the quality of federal agencies’ decisions about the environment. Well-managed public involvement also increases the legitimacy of decisions in the eyes of those affected by them, which makes it more likely that the decisions will be implemented effectively.”

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

The 2025 USDA NEPA regulations no longer ‘require’ scoping or comment periods to occur, but scoping was required when this project was initiated and the project website states that scoping would begin September 3, 2025. Scoping would have provided valuable public input prior to issuance of the Draft for a project that is proposed to span 30 years across the entire MBS. Public comments and additional information provided during a scoping period would have resulted in better planning and more public understanding and support. Without a full and adequate opportunity for early public involvement the FWT Project may also result in controversy and confusion and may lead to unsafe recreation and other public conditions in the PIAs due to lack of public knowledge. There have been no significant changes in the proposed project between the Draft EA and the Final EA regarding the significant concerns submitted by multiple parties during the comment period, and the responses as to why no changes were made were inadequate for many comments. This is a violation of the intent of NEPA.

Suggested Remedy

Send out extensive public notices (public news media, newspapers, etc.) to alert the public of annual upcoming projects for each proposed PIA prior to commencing project activities. Record significant comments and any changes that will be made in project plans. Make such changes available for public review in some form and allow for some consistent form of public response. If this does not occur the planned annual public information meetings may well result in the public having no actual influence on planned actions if comments are essentially ignored, or no follow-up documentation of what, if any, changes resulted from those meetings. No one will attend if they think their

comments will have no influence on outcomes. In addition, this proposed plan is supposed to span 30 years. There will be hundreds of other projects that overlap in time and space over the next 30 years, and they will all compete for MBS staff time. Provide a mechanism or process that will ensure that such annual meetings will actually be funded and occur.

Roads

NCCC commented on concerns whether all temporary roads constructed for the project will actually be fully decommissioned and revegetated following implementation, along with a clear description of the decommissioning process.

MBS response: *“Temporary Road decommissioning will be implemented as outlined in the project design criteria, which will be incorporated into timber sale contracts “*

NCCC Objection

We object to the assumption that there will be funding to ensure that all temporary roads constructed will be successfully fully decommissioned following implementation per the project design criteria. Many of the PIAs, contain extensive areas with steep slopes, deep glacial-lake soils (Lacustrine), which are generally highly erosive and unstable. Construction and decommissioning of temporary roads in these areas will risk sediment delivery to streams and increase risks of localized slope failures. Full and adequate road decommissioning may be as or more expensive as the road construction.

The EA estimates that annually over 30 years up to 6 miles of temporary roads, up to 24 miles of road reconstruction, up to 14 miles of road reconstruction would occur within 500 feet of LFH (Listed fish species habitat), and up to 160 miles of roads would be maintained within timber sale contract areas annually (Table 4. Appendix A, USDI FWS 2025). These roads would be placed on currently abandoned roads with limited adjustments to accommodate modern logging systems. Project activities could last at least 30 years, so how many of these roads be closed and then opened again during this period to conduct thinning activities? We are concerned about repeated impacts to downstream aquatic systems from conducting road-related work over the 30 years of the project, especially in sensitive watersheds that have extensive areas of unstable soils prone to failures and landslides.

We are concerned that there is no guarantee that there will be funding to fully decommission all temporary roads. This concern is based partly, but not solely, on experience with other recent vegetation management actions, including the NF Stillaguamish EA 2025. That EA states that the project is dependent on timber revenues and changes will be ongoing due to those revenues. It does not commit to any

minimum numbers of fish passage barrier removals of construction of log structures, only that some 'may' occur. The same issue applies to decommissioning temporary and unneeded system roads, and correcting fish passage barriers within the action area of this project. Full maintenance of all roads and their water passage features in the project area is just as critical. How will funding for all these actions be ensured for this project?

The FWT Project estimates that annually, over a period of 30 years, up to six miles of temporary roads, up to 24 miles of road reconstruction (up to 14 miles along streams within 500 feet of LFH (Listed species habitat), and up to 160 miles of other roads would be maintained within the timber sale contract area (Table 4. Appendix A, USDI FWS 2025).

Table 1 of the Soils specialist report titled Resource Indicators and Measures lists four "Indicators" of which only two list respective metric for "Threshold of Significance" which are either "> 20% detrimental soil conditions in any one unit" or "> 20% detrimental soil conditions in any one unit within landslide prone areas". The other two simply state "No irreversible damage" under the threshold category. The report does not explain how the two metrics thresholds would be used in planning and limiting harvests, and anything regarding how "increases in erosion from temporary roads" and "decreases in instability" will be avoided, minimized, and fully mitigated. This information is needed in order to plan actions and assess impacts.

The annual combined impacts from all these road-related activities could have significant adverse impacts to ESA-listed fish species, and other aquatic organisms in the more sensitive PIA watersheds.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

Because of the significant funding and staffing unknowns, and the lack of data on the rest of the stands proposed for thinning in the PIAs, it is likely that many Project Design Criteria (PDC), mandatory terms and conditions contained in the WWRCZ BOs, and other listed mitigation measures may not occur over a 30-year project span. In addition, many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, high-risk riparian areas, posing significant risk of impacts to aquatic species, including ESA-listed threatened fish species, from soil erosion, sedimentation, and increased water temperatures.

This would be in violation of ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Zone (WWRZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk. This would violate NWFP ACS Objectives (USDA FS & USDI BLM 1994).

Suggested Remedy

Minimize construction of temporary roads. Avoid constructing temporary roads in riparian reserves or key watersheds. If temporary roads are built, demonstrate through implementation and effectiveness monitoring of other recent MBS vegetation management actions were actually completed full decommissioning of temporary roads compared to what their EAs stated would occur. Explain any deviations in those other projects and explain how this will not occur in this project that is planned to span 30 years across the entire MBSNF. This information on other projects should be readily available because the MBS should have collected it per Forest Plan requirements.

Roads

NCCC commented on concerns that roads may be constructed within riparian areas and key watersheds.

MBS responses: *“Road construction within key watersheds and riparian areas will be minimized, and environmental impacts will be mitigated in accordance with management direction and project design criteria.”*

NCCC Objection

The objections for the preceding issue apply to this issue. In addition, soil stability maps (Snyder and Wade 1990) show that many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, these high-risk riparian areas.

The damage resulting from thinning-related treatment activities may be more than any habitat benefits that might result. It is estimated that an average of 345 acres of RR will be impacted annually (Table 2, Appendix A, USDI FWS 2005).

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

Many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, high-risk riparian areas, posing significant risk of impacts to aquatic species, including ESA-listed threatened fish species, from soil erosion, sedimentation, and increased water temperatures. The EA does not provide justification of why roads would need to be built in key watershed or riparian areas to meet the stated purpose and need. The MBS response to concerns only states that ‘environmental impacts will be mitigated’ in these areas. They need to be avoided.

Any future adverse impacts to riparian or aquatic habitats that have not been assessed in this EA would be in violation of ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Zone (WWRZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk.

This would violate NWFP ACS Objectives (USDA FS & USDI BLM 1994). In addition, a 30-year project life span is impracticable to ensure adequate planning and management of road construction within Key Watersheds and riparian areas.

Suggested Remedy

The preferred remedy is to scale down the FWT Project to include only those PIAs that are accessible from existing roads that are not located in riparian reserves. If temporary roads are built, they should not be allowed to be built in riparian reserves and there would need to be thorough justification for any to be built in key watersheds. If temporary roads are built, demonstrate through implementation and effectiveness monitoring of other recent MBS vegetation management projects that the mitigation actions described in their EAs were completed and effective. Explain any deviations in those other projects and explain how this will not occur in this project that is planned to span 30 years across the entire MBSNF. This information on other projects should be readily available because the MBS should have collected it per Forest Plan requirements.

Soils

NCCC commented requesting explanation of the **References** for gSSURGO, FSDMP, and the R6 soil quality definitions, as well as use of the 1970 soil mapping by Snyder and Wade.

MBS response: *“The Snyder and Wade mapping circa 1972 was county-level mapping that is included as part of the national soil survey and SSURGO database. A citation was also added.”*

NCCC Objection

It is good to see in Appendix D the MBS finally acknowledging the Soil Resource Inventory (SRI) mapping conducted by Snyder and Wade (1970). It is unclear how this SRI mapping information was included in the SSURGO database.

However, this important historical and useful reference was not added to the EA or the Soil Report. Many of the PIAs contain extensive areas with deep glacial soils and deep glacial lake-deposit soils (Lacustrine) which are generally highly erosive and unstable as well as deep, unstable soils occurring on steep toe-slopes and mid-slope drainages. Many valleys in the PIAs have a considerable amount of deep, unstable, glacial lake deposits, till and outwash soils. This instability is caused by a combination of steep slopes, fine textured plastic subsoils and restrictive drainage and natural deep-seated failures that frequently occur and are greatly accelerated by management activities (Snyder and Wade 1970).

This extensive soil mapping conducted by Snyder and Wade (1970) was not referenced in the Draft EA or Soil Report. These SRI maps were ground-truthed and identified unstable and S-8 areas across the whole MBS and were used extensively by MBS project planning for many years.

As mentioned previously, even with proposed mitigation measures, due to the extensive areas of naturally unstable soils, steep ground, and history of stability problems in many riparian areas in the PIAs, especially watersheds on the north end of the MBS, and recent experience evaluating the NF Stillaguamish Landscape Analysis (USDA FS 2025) and NF Nooksack Vegetation Management (USDA FS 2022) projects, there are significant concerns about the potential for resource damage (sedimentation, increased stream temperatures, etc.) resulting from thinning-related activities ((treating alder stands, understory thinning, skyline yarding corridors, fall and leave treatments such as previous examples of damage from dropping trees into stream channels in the NF Nooksack River system (Ruth Creek near Hannigan Pass Trailhead and NF Nooksack River near Excelsior Group Camp) that could directly, or indirectly, impact ESA-listed Puget Sound bull Trout, Puget Sound Chinook, and Puget Sound steelhead.

Many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, these high-risk riparian areas.

Also, with the significant funding and personnel cuts under the Trump Administration there are significant concerns about the ability of the MBS to conduct field work needed to ensure that proposed treatment stands do not contain unstable soil areas and that buffers are sufficient to mitigate any potential erosion hazard into streams from project activity.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

It was unclear how the SRI mapping data was used and based on experience with the NF Stillaguamish Landscape Analysis (USDA FS 2025), where many thinning treatment stands were located in, or immediately adjacent to, unstable soils areas identified on Maps 2 & 3 (USDA FS 2025). It is even more unclear how the SRI mapping data was used or will be used for the PIAs for the FWT Project.

There is a significant risk that the FWT Project will adversely impact instream habitat for ESA-listed species (temperature, sediment) in those watersheds that have significant areas of unstable soils. This may also result in some water segments directly downstream of PIAs not meeting Washington State water quality standards for sediment.

In addition, because of the significant funding and staffing unknowns, and the lack of data on the rest of the stands proposed for thinning in the PIAs, it is likely that many Project Design Criteria (PDC), mandatory terms and conditions, and mitigation measures may not be completed over the 30-year project life span. In addition, many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, high-risk riparian areas, posing significant risk of impacts to aquatic species, including ERA-listed threatened fish species, from soil erosion, sedimentation, and increased water temperatures.

This would be in violation of ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Zone (WWRZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk. This would also violate NWFP ACS Objectives (USDA FS & USDI BLM 1994).

Suggested Remedy

Break the project into a few site specific EAs. Each would span reasonably foreseeable time frames so that data and conditions are sufficient to plan units, assess impacts, and fully mitigate. The current EA contains very little site-specific information and defers most of the significant decisions to various times along a 30-year time span while still relying on a very outdated EA. Revise Watershed Analyses in those basins where harvest is before drafting more site specific EAs.

Minimize construction of temporary roads by emphasizing use of existing roads. If temporary roads are built or if existing roads are reconstructed, a soil scientist or hydrologist must first verify on the ground that they are not located in, or immediately adjacent to, unstable soil areas as mapped on the SRI (Snyder and Wade 1990).

Soils and Hydrology

NCCC commented concerns that thinning in riparian areas/near streams, especially in areas of unstable slopes, will increase water temperatures, runoff, sediment delivery to streams, and adverse impact so soils from disturbance, displacement, and compaction from mechanized equipment associated with timber harvest and yarding through riparian areas.

MBS response: *“No cut buffers will be implemented in the vicinity of riparian areas to minimize impacts on ground and surface water. Additionally, erosion modelling of the project areas will be undertaken to ensure buffers are sufficient to mitigate any potential erosion hazard from project activity.”*

NCCC Objection

Even with the no-cut buffers proposed there may be significant risks of adverse effects to aquatic habitats and the species they support. This is due to extensive areas of naturally unstable soils, steep ground, and history of stability problems in many riparian areas in the PIAs. This includes, but is not limited to, the NF Stillaguamish Landscape Analysis (USDA FS 2025) and NF Nooksack Vegetation (USDA FS 2022) projects.

We have significant concerns about the potential for resource damage to upland, riparian, and aquatic habitats and dependent species. These could stem from soil compaction and displacement, erosion, delivery of sediments to stream channels, and increased soil and stream temperatures resulting from heavy thinning prescriptions, mechanized equipment, and skyline yarding corridors. Many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, these high-risk riparian areas. Impacts could adversely affect ESA-listed Puget Sound bull trout, Puget Sound Chinook, and Puget Sound steelhead.

Neither the EA nor the supporting specialist reports describe what on the ground data and GIS/aerial photography data would be used in modeling. In addition, several models were cited. There was no explanation for how decisions would be made to select a model(s) over the wide range of PIA locations in very different geological, topographic, soil, and rainfall and snow settings (including rain-on-snow events). Nor does the EA or specialist reports give any estimated confidence bounds of results of those models. Without all above information the adequacy and applicability of selected models can't be assessed by either the USFS or the public.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

Because it is unclear how the SRI mapping data was used and based on experience with the NF Stillaguamish Landscape Analysis (USDA FS 2025), where many thinning treatment stands were located in, or immediately adjacent to, unstable soils areas identified on Maps 2 & 3 (USDA FS 2025) it is unclear how the SRI mapping data was used or will be used for the PIAs for the FWT Project.

Based on these factors, and due to this uncertainty of funding and staffing over 30 years to conduct identified tasks (PDCs, mandatory terms and conditions under the BOs, other mitigation measures), harvest in the riparian reserves of some PIAs under the methods and prescription proposed would result in significant risks of degradation of riparian and aquatic habitat. Mechanized harvest, reduced canopy cover, and yarding within the riparian reserves of those watersheds that have significant areas of steep and/or unstable soils risks erosion and soil displacement. In some stream settings

heavy thin prescriptions in riparian reserves that would result in 40% SDI could also result in increased water temperatures, even with the no-cut buffers.

“Section 208 of the Clean Water Act and Section 319 of the Water Quality Act of 19087 are the legal precedents that most affect forest management because they address nonpoint source pollution. The Region has established some guidelines on how to comply with those water quality requirements.

1. Requirements of the Clean Water Act will be met by applying Best Management Practices. (See FSM 1561.5, R-6 Supplement 48 (8/79), agreement with the State of Washington).

2. Within the concept of Best Management Practices, cumulative effects should be addressed and impacting activities scheduled and dispersed, when water quality might be unacceptably impacted. This is particularly important for high-risk areas where management activities have been or might be concentrated over a short period of time.

3. Within the bounds of the above direction, Forest should address water quality in their analysis in the manner most appropriate given their information base and particular conditions.

Condition #2 above is not being met because the EA does not assess cumulative effects. Condition #3 is not being met because neither the EA nor specialist reports state what actions will be taken to improve water quality for those stream reaches within the project area that are already not meeting State standards as described below.

Many of the PAIS contain water body segments (stream reaches) that do not meet surface waters standards for sediment and/or temperature under Washington State Administrative Codes (WACs): 173-201A-200 (Fresh water designated uses criteria), 173-201A-602 (Table 602-Use designations for freshwaters by water resources inventory area WRIA), and 173-201A 300, 600 and 602. When these standards are not met, the WAC regulations mandate that the land manager write either an improvement plan or a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) plan to improve water quality conditions. On USFS lands it is the responsibility of the USFS to conduct surveys of water quality and to complete these plans where necessary. The MBS has conducted very little water quality surveys and only issued a few improvement plans or TMDLs. It is not the responsibility of the WDOE to do this, it's the responsibility of the USFS.

In addition, because of the significant funding and staffing unknowns, and the lack of data on the rest of the stands proposed for thinning in the PIAs, it is likely that many

Project Design Criteria (PDC), other identified tasks, and mitigation measures, would not be completed. In addition, many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, high-risk riparian areas, posing significant risk of impacts to aquatic species, including ERA-listed threatened fish species, from soil erosion, sedimentation, and increased water temperatures.

This would be in violation of ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Zone (WWRCZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk. This would also violate NWFP ACS Objectives (USDA FS & USDI BLM 1994).

Suggested Remedy

Break the project over time into a few site specific EAs. Each would span reasonably foreseeable time frames so that data and conditions are sufficient to plan units, assess impacts, and fully mitigate. The current EA contains very little site-specific EA information and defers most of the significant decisions to various times along a 30-year time span while still relying on a very outdated EA. Revise Watershed Analyses in those basins where harvest is before drafting more site specific EAs.

Minimize construction of temporary roads by emphasizing use of existing roads. If temporary roads are built or if existing roads are reconstructed, a soil scientist or hydrologist must first verify on the ground that they are not located in, or immediately adjacent to, unstable soil areas as mapped on the SRI (Snyder and Wade 1990).

Avoid construction of temporary or roads in key watershed or riparian areas. If they are proposed there needs to be justification and fully adequate mitigation. Demonstrate through implementation and effectiveness monitoring of other recent MBS vegetation management projects that the mitigation actions described in their EAs were completed and effective. Explain any deviations in those other projects and explain how this will not occur in this project that is planned to span 30 years across the entire MBSNF. This information on other projects should be readily available because the MBS should have collected it per Forest Plan and NWFP requirements. .

Timber

NCCC commented on concerns about increasing the thinning treatment diameter limit to 26 inches.

MBS response: *“This is addressed in the pending REO Request and Concurrence documents.”*

NCCC Objection

The FWT Project would thin a maximum of 1,200 acres annually over 30 years and the Regional Ecosystem Office (REO Letter 3/2/2026) approved increasing the upper diameter limit from 20 inches to 26 inches DBH (diameter at breast height) in LSR. According to the 11/2025 request letter the “current 20-inch diameter limit would prohibit work needed to meet project objectives.” We object. The reason for this change seems to be more about increasing the commercial timber value for the timber sale. Leaving trees in stands between 20-26 inches DBH, after thinning smaller diameter trees around them, would provide better opportunities for these larger trees to better meet LSR objectives, rather than to be harvested.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

The basis and need for increasing allowable harvest up from 20 inches to 26 inches has not been adequately supported. This increase is not necessary to support the stated purpose and need. The issuance of a letter from the REO consenting to this increase does not supersede the requirement to adequately support the decision under NEPA.

Suggested Remedy

Revise the EA and specialist reports to fully justify this increase or limit harvest to 20 inches.

Watershed Management

NCCC commented that proposed no-harvest riparian area buffer requirements are too small to effectively control sediment during harvest and to provide adequate riparian habitat after implementation.

MBS response: *“Standards and Guidelines for the NWFP states, ‘Apply silvicultural practices for Riparian Reserves to control stocking, reestablish and manage stands, and acquire desired vegetation characteristics needed to attain Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives.’ The NWFP does not have no-harvest buffers standards. No-harvest buffer does not equate to the entire Riparian Reserve. The no-harvest buffers for this EA follow the Western Washington Programmatic BO, in consultation with USFWS and NMFS.”*

NCCC objection

As mentioned previously, even with the proposed mitigation measures and proposed limited no-cut buffers, the extensive areas of naturally unstable soils, steep ground, and history of stability problems in the riparian areas of many of the PIAs are of concern. The no-cut buffers widths need to wider than proposed in those areas. The WWRCZ BOs only give minimum no-cut buffers. They do not assert that buffers should not be

wider as is warranted in some locations. Many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, these high-risk riparian areas.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

The narrow buffer widths applied to all streams regardless of soils, topography, or rainfall, snowfall, or flow regimes could result in not Washington State Administrative Codes for sediment and potentially for temperature per WAC 173-201A-200 (Fresh water designated uses criteria), 173-201A-602 (Table 602-Use designations for freshwaters by water resources inventory area WRIA), and 173-201A 300, 600 and 602.

In addition, because of the significant funding and staffing unknowns, and the lack of data on the rest of the stands proposed for thinning in the PIAs, it is likely that some of many PDCs, mandatory terms and conditions, identified tasks, and mitigation measures would not be completed over the project's 30-year life span. In addition, many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, high-risk riparian areas, posing significant risk of impacts to aquatic species, including ESA-listed threatened fish species, from soil erosion, sedimentation, and increased water temperatures.

This would be in violation of ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Zone (WWRCZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk. This would also violate NWFP ACS Objectives (USDA FS & USDI BLM 1994).

Suggested Remedy

Break the project into a few site specific EAs. Each would span reasonably foreseeable time frames so that data and conditions are sufficient to plan units, assess impacts, and fully mitigate. The current EA contains very little site-specific EA information and defers most of the significant decisions to various times along a 30-year time span while still relying on a very outdated EA. Revise Watershed Analyses in those basins where harvest is before drafting more site specific EAs.

Minimize construction of temporary roads by emphasizing use of existing roads. If temporary roads are built or if existing roads are reconstructed, a soil scientist or hydrologist must first verify on the ground that they are not located in, or immediately adjacent to, unstable soil areas as mapped on the SRI (Snyder and Wade 1990).

Watershed Management.

NCCC commented on concern that the project could disturb unstable soils within the project areas, potentially resulting in negative impacts to aquatic habitat and increasing the risk of future flooding and landslides.

MBS response: *“Regarding hillslope erosion and failure (including landslides), independent of anthropogenic influences, these processes are a naturally occurring phenomena on the landscape. The most erosive soils have already been removed from consideration for this project. Those that remain, are subject to strict criteria to mitigate potential soil erosion including maintaining good groundcover, minimizing machinery passes, and utilizing alternative logging methods. Refer to project design criteria SWF 6 and 76 which include evaluation and identification of unstable slopes/soils during timber sale layout procedure.”*

NCCC objection

We disagree with the implication that naturally occurring phenomena on the landscape (hillslope erosion and failure, including landslides) are not affected by anthropogenic influences. There are many examples in the literature where timber harvest activities (clear cuts, roads, etc.) have contributed to, or exacerbated, existing natural soil and glacial geology hillslope instabilities. The disastrous 2014 Oso Slide that claimed 43 lives, and the 1984 Deforest Creek Slide which seriously damaged the Deer Creek/NF Stillaguamish River system, are just two examples.

Many of the watersheds proposed for thinning in the PIAs are sensitive and at risk. They typically contain extensive naturally occurring unstable soils, sensitive soils and steep topography, high frequency of glacial geology, history of rain-on-snow flood events, extensive slope stability issues, poor road maintenance, and a history of extensive logging and road building impacts. It is critical that these treatments be done carefully, focus on areas that have stable soils, and can be easily reached from existing roads, so that fewer new roads are needed.

This combination of factors and steepness of many of the channels, together with land management history, has created unstable stream banks along the mainstem of many rivers and streams in the PIAs. Some of the highest risk systems are upper the NF Stillaguamish River (Deer Creek, Little Deer Creek, Higgins Creek, and major tributaries), NF Nooksack River (Canyon Creek), SF Nooksack River (Wanlick Creek), Skagit River (Finney Creek), the Miller River, the Greenwater River, and the Carbon River.

Due to the extent of naturally unstable soil areas in many watersheds where PIAs are located and based on our recent experiences evaluating the NF Stillaguamish Landscape Analysis Project (USDA FS 2025), when actual field work for each stand and road access is finally completed, many stands will be dropped due to these high-risk factors. Therefore, there may not be enough commercial timber value left for a viable

timber sale contract. A major concern regarding this is the risk that there may not be sufficient funds to upgrade drainage features on reconstructed system roads or fully decommission temporary roads for scores of PIAs spread across the MBS over 30 years.

A good recent MBS example is the NF Stillaguamish LA Project (USDA FS 2025), where timber stands to be thinned (variable density thinning) were shown on project area maps. When overlayed with soil stability (Soil Resource Inventory) maps that were provided, many of the units were on, or immediately adjacent, to unstable areas with a Moderate and High risk of instability. A significant amount of unstable soils in the proposed NF Stillaguamish LA Project area have a high risk of failures and damage that could result from the proposed timber stand thinning and road-related activities for the project, especially in the valleys of Deer Creek, Little Deer Creek and Higgins Creek and upper NF Stillaguamish River areas. On the soils maps there is a significant amount of “Unstable & Very Unstable” (red) and “S8 Soils” (purple) shown in the Deer Creek, Little Deer Creek, Higgins Creek, and middle to upper NF Stillaguamish River portions of the project area, with many located immediately adjacent to potential project stands (commercial & non-commercial).

These areas have a considerable amount of deep, unstable, glacial lake deposits, till and outwash soils and this instability is caused by a combination of steep slopes, fine textured plastic subsoils, and restrictive drainage, where natural deep-seated failures frequently occur, and are greatly accelerated by management activities (Snyder and Wade 1970).

Many of the PIA watersheds (Fig. 1) contain similar areas with deep glacial soils and deep glacial lake-deposit soils (Lacustrine) which are generally highly erosive and unstable as well as deep, unstable soils occurring on steep toe-slop and mid-slope drainages. These concerns should be taken seriously.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

There is a significant risk that harvest in some of the PIAs would result in not Washington State Administrative Codes for sediment and potentially for temperature per WAC 173-201A-200 (Fresh water designated uses criteria), 173-201A-602 (Table 602- Use designations for freshwaters by water resources inventory area WRIA), and 173-201A 300, 600 and 602.

In addition, because of the significant funding and staffing unknowns, and the lack of data on the rest of the stands proposed for thinning in the PIAs, it is likely that many PDCs, mandatory terms and conditions, identified tasks, and mitigation measures,

would not be completed over the 30-year project life span. In addition, many of the PIAs proposed for treatment are in, or immediately adjacent to, high-risk riparian areas, posing significant risk of impacts to aquatic species, including ESA-listed threatened fish species, from soil erosion, sedimentation, and increased water temperatures.

This would be in violation of ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Zone (WWRZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk. This would also violate NWFP ACS Objectives (USDA FS & USDI BLM 1994).

Suggested Remedy

Break the project into a few site specific EAs. Each would span reasonably foreseeable time frames so that data and conditions are sufficient to plan units, assess impacts, and fully mitigate. The current EA contains very little site-specific EA information and defers most of the significant decisions to various times along a 30-year time span while still relying on a very outdated EA. Revise Watershed Analyses in those basins where harvest is before drafting more site specific EAs.

Minimize construction of temporary roads, especially in key watershed and riparian reserves by emphasizing use of existing roads. If temporary roads are built or if existing roads are reconstructed, a soil scientist or hydrologist must first verify on the ground that they are not located in, or immediately adjacent to, unstable soil areas as mapped on the SRI (Snyder and Wade 1990).

Roads, Hydrology, and Timber

NCCC commented that project activities could alter the landscape in ways that increase vulnerability to future storm impacts, such as flooding, increased sedimentation, landslides, and damage to infrastructure.

MBS response: *“No permanent changes to the road system will occur under this project. Roads used for timber haul will be improved and temporarily reduce road-stream interactions and lower sediment input along those segments. Thinning activities will retain 60-70% of crown cover and the largest trees, leaving most root systems intact. Therefore, no increase in vulnerability to future storm events is anticipated as a result of project activities.”*

NCCC objection

The response directly contradicts text and figures in the EA and in the specialist reports. The EA states that the desired design SDI for the project is 35%. For stands of the age ranges likely to occur in the PIAs this would equate to no more than about 40%

crown closure post-treatment, The wildlife report states that post thinning crown closure will be 35-50%, averaging about 40%. This is vastly different than the 60-70% stated in the response. Figures 3 and 4 (and others) in the EA clearly indicate crown closures of no more than 50% post treatment. The silviculture report does not include the same numbers as the wildlife report, and it may not include any post-treatment canopy cover estimates. In addition, neither the EA nor the specialist reports explain or justify why a 35% max SDI post-treatment would be appropriate for all stands, regardless of current conditions including ages, species, and locations. It is not appropriate.

The MBS response also states “*Roads used for timber haul will be improved and temporarily reduce road-stream interactions and lower sediment input along those segments*”. This does not correspond to what is in the EA. The EA states that that annually, over a period of 30 years, up to six miles of temporary roads, up to 24 miles of road reconstruction (up to 14 miles along streams within 500 feet of listed fish habitat (LFH), and up to 160 miles of other roads would be maintained within the timber sale contract area. Many of the ‘reconstructed’ roads are currently undrivable, if not abandoned. There will be construction of up to six miles of new temporary roads, as well as up to 14 miles of roads along streams within 500 feet of listed fish habitat.

Reconstruction of some roads will result in short-term increased risks of sediment delivery to streams, and long-term adverse impacts if these roads are not fully maintained into the foreseeable future. Construction and later decommissioning of temporary roads will result in short-term increased risks of sediment delivery to streams, and much greater risks if they are not fully decommissioned. These actions will certainly not “*reduce road-stream interactions and lower sediment input along those segments*”, but rather they will increase it over the short-term and potentially in some cases over the long-term.

The statement in the response that there will be “*no increase in vulnerability to future storm events is anticipated as a result of project activities*.” is not supported in either the EA or the hydrology specialist report. No increase “*anticipated*”? Based on what logic track and data, modeling, peer reviewed literature? There is insufficient discussion of this, and certainly not adequate information given to make that statement. The revised hydrology specialist report does not provide adequate information to assert that none of the harvest units that may occur within the scores of PIAs across the entire Forest could potentially affect the flow regime, including the magnitude, durations, and recurrence interval of storm events. This is especially a concern in potential rain-on-snow watersheds.

The EA does not adequately assess the effects of the project related to roads, hydrology, and timber. There are also very critical contradictions within the EA and specialist reports. This is a major vegetation management action that would span the entire MBS for 30 years. All these issues are key and all need to be addressed.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

The EA does not currently adequately and consistently depict the proposed action relative to the issues in this objection. It is therefore not compliant with NEPA, and it does not provide enough information to ensure it will be compliant with the mandatory terms and conditions contained in the WWRCZ BOs under ESA.

Suggested Remedy

Break the project into a few site specific EAs and provide the information that is missing and correct the inconsistencies that are noted above. Each EA would span reasonably foreseeable time frames so that data and conditions are sufficient to plan units, assess impacts, and fully mitigate. The current EA contains very little site-specific EA information and defers most of the significant decisions to various times along a 30-year time span while still relying on a very outdated EA. Revise Watershed Analyses in those basins where harvest is before drafting more site specific EAs.

Roads and Hydrology

NCCC commented that missing road data and inadequate hydrological assessments suggests MBS lacks sufficient data to accurately rank road conditions within 300 feet of streams.

MBS response: *"These unclassified/non-system roads will be accounted for during sale implementation and design criteria and best management practice will be applied."*

NCCC objection

The response does not explain what "*unclassified/non-system roads will be accounted for during sale implementation*" actually means, when it will be done, and what disciplines (staff) would do it. This uncertainty makes this issue continue to be concerning.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

It is unclear how the SRI mapping data was or will be used for the PIAs for the FWT Project regarding unclassified/non-system roads. Based on this there are significant risks that the FWT Project could adversely impact streams and riparian habitat. This may result in not meeting Washington State Administrative Codes (WACs): 173-201A-200 (Fresh water designated uses criteria), 173-201A-602 (Table 602-Use designations

for freshwaters by water resources inventory area WRIA), and 173-201A 300, 600 and 602.

In addition, this uncertainty of how unclassified /non-system road will be assessed and treated may result in undisclosed adverse effects to ESA -listed species which could in violation of ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Conservation Zone (WWRCZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk. This could also potentially result in noncompliance with NWFP ACS Objectives (USDA FS & USDI BLM 1994).

Suggested Remedy

Avoid construction of temporary roads in key watersheds and riparian reserves. A hydrologist or soil scientist should survey the proposed locations of all new temporary roads outside or of riparian reserves and key watersheds and ensure that they are not located in, or immediately adjacent to, unstable soil areas as mapped on the SRI (Snyder and Wade 1990). This should also occur for any currently *unclassified/non-system roads* that may be reconstructed.

Watershed Management and Hydrology

NCCC comments requested clarification on implications of the limited 303(d) listings available for the Forest.

MBS response: *“The discussion on 303(d) listings on page 5 of the Hydrology Report has been revised for clarity.”*

NCCC objection

The Hydrology Report on page 4 (Kelly 2026) states “It should be noted that the State of Washington has not yet reviewed most streams on the MBS (WADOE 2025a, 2025b). One such issue for water quality on the MBS includes stream side roads which create instream issues.”

Since Washington Department of Ecology (WADOE) has not reviewed most streams on the MBS, it is unknown what streams on the MBS are not in compliance for one or more variables on the Washington State 303(d) list. Thus, we do not have data about sediment, turbidity, temperature, or dissolved oxygen (along with other State water quality variables) for the vast majority MBS rivers and streams. For example, there are indications that several streams in the Deer Creek and NF Stillaguamish River areas are not meeting water quality standards (USDA FS 1996 and 2000). Also, Finney Creek, an important Skagit River tributary, was listed for temperature in 1998 (USDA FS 1999; Nichols and Ketcheson 2013).

There is at least the risk of local adverse effects from thinning treatment-related activities that are in, or near, RRs, considering the existing high-risk conditions in many of these watersheds due to a combination of factors glacial geology, steep topography, road failures, poor road maintenance, landslides, extensive logging history, significant history of rain-on-snow flood events, combined with expected climate change impacts.

As a result of a forest-wide watershed condition analysis, 19 watersheds were rated as being in an unacceptable condition and 51 in an acceptable condition (Appendix H in the MBS LRMP, USDA FS 1990). Most of these unacceptable watersheds (80%) were found on the more geologically sensitive north end of the MBS (Table 3, Appendix H). These sub-watersheds that were analyzed (Tables 2 & 3), called Allocation Zones in Appendix H, are very similar to the HUC 12s in the PIAs for the FWT Project.

The process used by the MBS to complete its hydrologic cumulative effects analysis consisted of a two-step process: 1) Watershed Sensitivity Analysis looking at watershed condition factors and placed watersheds into three risk categories (I, II and III) by increasing degree of risk and 2) Watershed Condition Analysis, which further examined the stream channel conditions and upslope conditions for each watershed and based on the above conditions, whether category II and III watersheds were in an acceptable or unacceptable condition.

After the watershed sensitivity analysis, it was determined that an additional more site-specific analysis of Category II and II watersheds was necessary and organized individual District ID teams to conduct the watershed condition and method or constraint analysis for Category II and II watersheds. The analysis and discussion separated the upper watershed (1st and 2nd order streams) from the lower watershed (3rd and 4th order streams). They evaluated present and past in-channel stability, streambank stability, status of large woody debris, and channel. The team also looked at upslope conditions by reviewing past harvest rates, road density and condition, presence of landslides, amount of unstable soils, and stability to revegetate and recover.

Appendix (H-38) states as follows:

“Section 208 of the Clean Water Act and Section 319 of the Water Quality Act of 1987 are the legal precedents that most affect forest management because they address nonpoint source pollution. The Region has established some guidelines on how to comply with those water quality requirements.

1. Requirements of the Clean Water Act will be met by applying Best Management Practices. (See FSM 1561.5, R-6 Supplement 48 (8/79), agreement with the State of Washington).

2. Within the concept of Best Management Practices, cumulative effects should be addressed and impacting activities scheduled and dispersed, when water quality might be unacceptably impacted. This is particularly important for high-risk areas where management activities have been or might be concentrated over a short period of time.

3. Within the bounds of the above direction, Forest should address water quality in their analysis in the manner most appropriate given their information base and particular conditions.

Guideline 2 above was of particular concern for the MBS because of the occurrence and frequency of management activities in watersheds having a large amount of unstable soils.

The concern on many of the more sensitive watersheds on the MBS is that dispersing management activities, and state-of-the-art BMPs, are not adequate to avoid unacceptable adverse hydrologic cumulative effects. It appears in some such cases such things as reducing future outputs or foregoing outputs for a period may be necessary.”

Appendix H (H-42) states “It is the intent of the Forest to continue to fine-tune many of the assumptions we made in this programmatic level of analysis.” **It is not apparent that much, if any on-the-ground monitoring, has been done by the MBS since 1990.**

Based on the direction in Appendix H, it appears that as proposed, the FWT Project would not be following these water quality requirements, especially in RRs areas in the PIA, in the 19 watersheds identified in Table 3 that have been identified as being in an unacceptable condition and being high risk.

A good recent MBS example is the NF Stillaguamish LA Project (USDA FS 2025), where timber stands to be thinned (variable density thinning) were shown on project area maps. When overlayed with soil stability (Soil Resource Inventory) maps that were provided, many of the units were on, or immediately adjacent, to unstable areas with a Moderate and High risk of instability. A significant amount of unstable soils in the proposed NF Stillaguamish LA Project area have a high risk of failures and damage that could result from the proposed timber stand thinning and road-related activities for the project, especially in the valleys of Deer Creek, Little Deer Creek and Higgins Creek and upper NF Stillaguamish River areas. On the soils maps there is a significant

amount of “Unstable & Very Unstable” (red) and “S8 Soils” (purple) shown in the Deer Creek, Little Deer Creek, Higgins Creek, and middle to upper NF Stillaguamish River portions of the project area, with many located immediately adjacent to potential project stands (commercial & non-commercial).

These areas have a considerable amount of deep, unstable, glacial lake deposits, till and outwash soils and this instability is caused by a combination of steep slopes, fine textured plastic subsoils, and restrictive drainage, where natural deep-seated failures frequently occur, and are greatly accelerated by management activities (Snyder and Wade 1970).

Many of the PIA watersheds (Fig. 1) contain similar areas with deep glacial soils and deep glacial lake-deposit soils (Lacustrine) which are generally highly erosive and unstable as well as deep, unstable soils occurring on steep toe-slope and mid-slope drainages. These concerns should be taken seriously.

Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (MBS LRMP) (USDA FS 1990)

The FWT Project EA and specialist reports do not adequately address MBS LRMP Forest-wide Standards & Guidelines (S&Gs) and is covered below.

Forest-wide Standards & Guidelines (S&Gs)

As planned, the **FWT Project allows treatment activities within the RRs, and no-cut buffers, many of which are within, or adjacent to, naturally unstable soils and unstable banks and may not comply with the following Forest-wide Standards & Guidelines (S&Gs) from MBS LRMP.**

Soil Resource S&G

Numbers 1, 2, 6-8 (Page 4-117)

1. Plan and conduct land management activities so that reductions of soil productivity potentially caused by detrimental compaction, displacement, puddling, and severe burning are minimized. Nutrient capital on the forest and rangelands is to be maintained at acceptable levels as determined by state-of-the-art technology.

2. Plan and conduct land management activities so that **soil loss from surface erosion and mass wasting, caused by these activities, will not result in an unacceptable reduction in soil productivity and water quality** (as stated in FSM R-6 Supp. 45 or as revised).

6. **Areas classified as irreversible soils (S-8)** will generally be considered as unavailable for road construction and timber harvest.

A good recent MBS example is the NF Stillaguamish LA Project (USDA FS 2025), where timber stands to be thinned (variable density thinning) were shown on project area maps. When overlayed with soil stability (Soil Resource Inventory) maps that were provided, many of the units were on, or immediately adjacent, to unstable areas with a Moderate and High risk of instability. A significant amount of unstable soils in the proposed NF Stillaguamish LA Project area have a high risk of failures and damage that could result from the proposed timber stand thinning and road-related activities for the project, especially in the valleys of Deer Creek, Little Deer Creek and Higgins Creek and upper NF Stillaguamish River areas. On the soils maps there is a significant amount of “Unstable & Very Unstable” (red) and “S8 Soils” (purple) shown in the Deer Creek, Little Deer Creek, Higgins Creek, and middle to upper NF Stillaguamish River portions of the project area, with many located immediately adjacent to potential project stands (commercial & non-commercial).

These areas have a considerable amount of deep, unstable, glacial lake deposits, till and outwash soils and this instability is caused by a combination of steep slopes, fine textured plastic subsoils, and restrictive drainage, where natural deep-seated failures frequently occur, and are greatly accelerate by management activities (Snyder and Wade 1970).

Many of the PIA watersheds (Fig. 1) contain similar areas with deep glacial soils and deep glacial lake-deposit soils (Lacustrine) which are generally highly erosive and unstable as well as deep, unstable soils occurring on steep toe-slop and mid-slope drainages. These concerns should be taken seriously.

8. Other soils that are known to be unstable, but which are not sufficiently unstable to be classified as S-8, will require special transportation planning, design, layout, preconstruction, construction, and maintenance techniques. Refer to Forest Supervisor’s 2550 memos of June 10, 1988, and January 2, 1990.

Water Resources and Riparian Areas S&G

Numbers 2-5, 8-10, and 12-13
(Pages 4-118 to 4-120)

2. Meet or exceed Water Quality Regulations for waters of the State (Washington Administrative Code, Chapter 173-201) through application of Best Management

Practices (see Glossary). The key beneficial uses which BMPs are designed to protect are fish and water for domestic use.

3. Use existing process to implement the State Water Quality Management Plan on lands administered by the USFS as described in Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Washington State Department of Ecology and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (7/79), and “Attachment A” referred to in this MOU (Implementation Plan for Water Quality Planning on National Forest lands in the Pacific Northwest 12/78).

4. **Geographical boundaries of riparian areas will be determined by on-site characteristics.** They are lands adjacent to perennial and intermittent streams, lakes, wetlands, ponds, springs (seeps), floodplains, or other wet areas.

5. **Maintain the bank, floodplain, and shore stability** of all wetlands, streams, lakes, and other bodies of water. (This standard applies above the high waterline on reservoirs). Implicit in this standard are actions to prevent all forms of actions that would accelerate soil erosion and soil compaction, and the retention of the live root mat to the maximum practicable extent.

8. **Maintain in-channel and streambank stability** maintained for upper and lower channels in the Forest watersheds in order to provide stable, high-quality habitat for salmon and trout, and provide high quality water for other in-stream beneficial uses.

9. **Maintain pool conditions** in upper and lower channels in the Forest watersheds to: (1) **provide high quality habitat for salmon and trout**, and (2) **provide in-stream flow regulation**.

10. Along perennial streams and fish bearing intermittent streams, **vegetation should be maintained to provide cover and/or root strength so as to maintain streambank stability and fish habitat capability at existing levels.**

12. For class I, II, and fish bearing class III streams, the **maximum daily temperature shall not exceed 65° F.** and **average 7-day maximum temperature shall not exceed 60° F.** Exceptions must be based on scientific rationale and must maintain the existing level of beneficial uses of the water and be approved through NEPA analysis and documentation.

[NOTE: How does the MBS know that this requirement is being met if very little temperature information is available on the MBS?].

13. The Forest **shall inventory and map riparian areas during project design** and enter information and data into Forest-wide data base.

[NOTE: This does not appear to have been completed]

Fish Habitat Management S&G

Numbers 1 and 4 (Page 4-126)

1. Water quality **shall be maintained or enhanced** through application of Best Management Practices. This **meets the requirements of the Clean Water Act and State Water Quality Standards (includes temperature, turbidity, and sediment).**

[NOTE: This does not appear to have been completed]

4. All forest management activities should provide for unobstructed fish passage to accessible fish habitat.

Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Species S&G

Numbers 1-3, 5, 6 and 10 (Pages 4-127 to 4-129)

1. **All proposed management actions** which have the potential to affect habitat of endangered, threatened, or sensitive species will be evaluated to **determine if any of these species are present.**

[NOTE: Surveys appear to have not been conducted to determine the presence or absence of T, E and S fish species have been conducted on most, if not all, the FWT Project area]

2. The Forest will **initiate, support, and cooperate with State** and Federal fish and wildlife agencies in developing recovery plans for Federally listed threatened or endangered species. Where such plans conflict with other Management Area direction, the recovery plans will take precedence.

[NOTE: In reviewing all the MBS projects over the past 10 years, or more, the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife is rarely, if ever consulted or coordinated with on projects, and is often left off the list of agencies consulted in the EAs. It is noted that Appendix C: Changes to EA from comment period, the MBS finally added WA Department of Fish and Wildlife to state agencies consulted.]

3. The Forest and Districts **will cooperate** in **conducting inventories** and keeping records of **essential and/or critical habitat** and its distribution for all T&E and sensitive

species. Occupied habitats of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species will be monitored on a regular basis.

[NOTE: It does not appear that the MBS is cooperating in conducting inventories or keeping records of essential and/or critical habitat and its distribution for threatened or sensitive fish species.]

5. Before project decisions are made, **consult with** Federal, **State**, and other agencies, groups, and individual concerned with the management of T&E and sensitive species.

The Washington Department of Wildlife (now Department of Fish and Wildlife) **will be consulted** for technical information in development of species management guides, and in determinations of viable population levels of sensitive species.

[NOTE: In reviewing all the MBS projects over the past 10-15 years, the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife was rarely, if ever, consulted or coordinated with regarding fisheries]

10. All habitat improvement projects for Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive species **will be small-scale and experimental in nature** until such time as species responses are better understood. When species response to a specific improvement project can be predicted, projects can be larger in scale and practical in nature.

Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy

It is unclear how the SRI mapping data was or will be used for the PIAs for the FWT Project regarding unclassified/non-system roads. Based on this there are significant risks that the FWT Project could adversely impact streams and riparian habitat. This may result in not meeting Washington State Administrative Codes (WACs): 173-201A-200 (Fresh water designated uses criteria), 173-201A-602 (Table 602-Use designations for freshwaters by water resources inventory area WRIA), and 173-201A 300, 600 and 602.

In addition, this uncertainty of how unclassified /non-system road will be assessed and treated may result in undisclosed adverse effects to ESA -listed species which could in violation of ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation for the Western Washington Restoration Zone (WWRZ) (USDC NMFS 2025; USDI FWS 2025) and could put three ESA-listed Threatened fish species (which numerous fish stocks) at risk. This could also potentially result in noncompliance with NWFP ACS Objectives (USDA FS & USDI BLM 1994).

Suggested Remedy

The water quality status relative to State water quality standards is unknown in the vast majority of water body segments (stream reaches) across the proposed PIAs. Due to this and other issues, the preferred remedy would be to scale down the FWT Project to include only those PIAs that are accessible from existing roads. If any new temporary roads are constructed or existing system roads are reconstructed, verify on the ground that they are not located in, or immediately adjacent to, unstable soil areas as mapped on the SRI (Snyder and Wade 1990) and ensure any roads within 300 feet of streams are accurately assessed and documented well ahead of unit planning.

Wildlife

ESA/NFMA (ESA consultation/MBS Forest Plan/NWFP) violation

MBS EA Comment Response, p. 123: *No activities are being conducted in primary NSO or MAMU habitat. No suitable or highly suitable habitat (as defined by the Pacific Northwest Research Station, Northwest Forest Plan Monitoring assessment and maps (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r6/reo/monitoring/>) exists in areas that will be thinned or in temporary roads associated with them.*

NCCC objection

The Final EA (Appendix D responses, p. 123) claims that no NSO “primary habitat” is present in PIA units and the Wildlife Report states that “Suitable habitat will not be removed or downgraded, except for in very small patches under very limited circumstances.” (p. 19). However, the EA and Wildlife Specialist Report do not present sufficient data to support this claim. NSO habitat maps from the 20-year NSO Monitoring Report cited in the MBS Response above are of such large scale (NSO range-wide) that it is impossible to say whether or not NSO “primary” habitat (presumably identified as “suitable” and “highly suitable” in the Monitoring Report map) may occur in units. As discussed in our comment letter, applying minimum definitions from the WWRCZ BO (USFWS 2025) that are binding on the MBS for NSO dispersal habitat, it is likely all units provide dispersal habitat. And it is possible that older units (60-80 years) may contain enough 30” dbh trees to provide foraging habitat, if of lower quality due to lack of large snags and logs. As noted previously, Table 3 in the EA is the only existing vegetation data presented, but it does not include crucial data including stand age and tree size class distribution to display how many trees may be present over 20” dbh (or 30” dbh with regard to potentially suitable NSO foraging habitat). And the total acreage in the 10 sample units presumably represents only about 0.5% of the 106,375 PIA acres. Also, the variation in stand basal area and other attributes displayed in Table 3

are surprisingly similar, given that the project proposes thinning in stands of substantially different age (40 to 80 years). For example, one would expect substantially larger trees in 60 to 80 year old stands versus much younger 40 year old stands.

MBS EA Comment Response, p .119: *The reference is not for the hemlock zone, but for the species itself. It is good practice to use an SDI max for a dominant species in the stand which for this area is typically Western hemlock regardless of zone.*

Additionally, it is still unclear what tree species composition and in what vegetation zones treatment may occur. From the Wildlife and Silviculture (p. 5) reports, it appears that some PIA units occur at higher elevation in the Pacific silver fir zone and that not all units occur in the Western hemlock zone, or in stands where “western hemlock is the dominant species” as stated in the MBS comment response inserted above. Additionally, the Wildlife Report (p. 6-7) correctly states that clearcuts typically were planted with Douglas-fir. Contrary to the MBS response inserted above, it is doubtful that western hemlock “is the dominant species” in these regenerating clearcuts regardless of elevation and forest zone. Tree species composition and elevation information disclosed for the sample stands may have clarified this, at least for the insufficient number of sample stands. Yet the sample unit Table 3 does not show any data on tree species composition or elevation to indicate this and the proposed prescription does not include any variation to account for different species composition in PIAs. Presumably the single universal thinning prescription down to a target of 35% of maximum SDI may need to be varied in the higher elevation silver fir zone. At least there should be discussion and rationale presented why the single thinning prescription is appropriate for a totally different species composition in a different forest zone. Again, the proposed universal thinning target down to 35% max SDI appears excessive and arbitrary and not based on variable conditions existing in potential treatment units of varying age and tree species composition.

MBS EA Comment Response, p .120: *35% of SDI Max is considered by literature to be the upper range of enthusiastic growth when trees fully occupy a site yet still provide adequate growing space to support vigorous growth of individual trees. It is considered a "sweet spot" in terms of thinning. It allows us to maintain appropriate stocking without limiting habitat development.*

Similar to the objection points above, the vegetation data presented is unconvincing that impacts to NSO habitat, especially in LSR units, will not be unnecessarily severe and may result in removing dispersal habitat or even removing or downgrading foraging habitat that may exist in the oldest plantation units. A lighter thinning intensity that still results in increased tree growth rates and that would not create unsuitable NSO habitat

for perhaps decades before canopy cover recovers would be more appropriate. For example, the two images of post-treatment thinning units (EA Figures 3 and 4 post-treatment) are meant to represent what may be expected from this project thinning proposal. Both images show very sparse tree density and open canopy cover from heavy thinning (also partially caused by narrow and thin crowns resulting from the dense stand conditions that regenerated after clearcut and planting). Based on the percent ground visible through the residual trees in Figure 4, post-thinning canopy cover may be less than 40% with a somewhat oblique view that exaggerates individual tree cover of the ground. An aerial image from directly overhead would more accurately reveal the openness of the post-thinning canopy cover and how degraded the stand is for current and future NSO habitat and use or lack of use, potentially for at least a few decades. Additionally, the modeled projections in Figures 2 and 5 of “thinned” areas are so open as to represent more of a shelterwood prescription than an appropriate thinning.

These stands are thinned so heavily that whatever value there was for NSO dispersal habitat (and possibly foraging habitat with older stands) likely will be removed for many years, which will be the likely outcome with the proposed heavy thinning prescription for this project. In comparing trees per acre in the 10 sample stands from EA Table 3 (current stand conditions) to those after treatment (EA Table 4), this will likely be the outcome with the proposed prescription that estimates about 2/3 up to 3/4 of the existing trees per acre would be removed. And this created openness likely does not consider the additional created openings within units that will be void of all trees from the small clearcut “gaps” (up to 10% in LSR units and up to 25% in matrix units), skyline cable yarding corridors, temp road construction and skid trails, and landings.

As noted in our Draft EA comment letter, the proposed single thinning prescription down to a target of 35% maximum SDI is likely substantially heavier than needed to reduce stand density for acceptable growth increases and understory diversity development. Such heavy thinning also will preclude any suppression mortality for many decades, which would result in no snag or log recruitment that are critical habitat components for NSO and late-successional forest associated species. Limited data from only 10 reference stands (EA Table 3, p. 13) indicates that few larger trees need to be removed. The Quadratic Mean Diameter (QMD) of these even-aged stands already are generally below 20” DBH. Additionally, in the Wildlife Report, stands are described as having trees mostly in the 8-20” DBH size range. Retaining a higher post-thinning SDI target would allow for retaining more stems in smaller size classes if desired and of course trees over 20” dbh that are most important for late-successional forest development.

Additionally, different thinning intensities would be appropriate to match the substantially different stand characteristics that would be present in stands that vary in age from 40 to 80 years. The variation inherent in older stands (e.g., 60 to 80 year old stands) would include much larger trees and fewer stems/acre. Given the high productivity of western WA Cascades forests, stands within this age range very likely could presently meet minimum NSO foraging habitat definition attributes with presence of some >30" dbh trees, in addition to potential large legacy trees and snags that may be present in some stands. Therefore, a lighter thinning would be more appropriate than the proposed prescription that would likely result in degradation of stand characteristics so that it would not provide dispersal or foraging habitat post-treatment. As described, the proposed project would represent a removal of NSO dispersal and possibly foraging habitat, in violation of MBS and NWFP standards and objectives to manage LSRs for maintenance and development of late-successional habitat for NSO and other late-successional forest associated species.

The proposed project also would violate the WWRCZ BO that states commercial thinning would occur only in NSO dispersal habitat and commercial thinning would not occur in foraging habitat. This heavy thinning intensity combined with openings that will be created by proposed gaps (small clearcuts), skyline yarding and skid trail corridors, and landings likely will result in most or all stands having less than 40% canopy cover post-treatment, thereby removing NSO dispersal habitat in all treated units likely for many years. If potential foraging habitat (>60% canopy cover and presence of 30" dbh trees) is present in older PIA stands, the proposed treatment would remove it as well. However, the sample stand data presented is insufficient to determine if it may be present (i.e., no data presented on tree size class distribution) and apparently there has been no ground truthing for such an assessment.

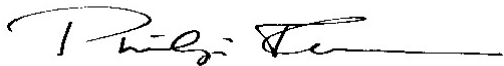
Violation of Law, Regulation or Policy:

As indicated in our Draft EA comments and reiterated above, we feel that the proposed heavy thinning and treatment would likely remove suitable NSO dispersal habitat and potentially foraging habitat that may be present in older PIA stands and the presented minimal sample stand data is incomplete and insufficient to be able to determine this. This represents an NFMA violation of MBS Forest Plan and NWFP direction to manage LSR habitat toward late-successional conditions. In our assessment, the proposed project likely would substantially degrade and remove suitable NSO dispersal and possibly foraging habitat for many years. The project also represents an ESA violation because the consultation for the WWRCZ BO (USFWS 2025) stated that commercial thinning projects would not occur in foraging habitat and that thinning would maintain suitable NSO dispersal habitat conditions. Although the Wildlife Report concludes that

no foraging habitat is present in the PIA stands (106,375 acres), we find the scant stand information is insufficient to confidently draw such a conclusion.

Suggested Remedy: Apply a lighter and variable thinning intensity prescription based on existing stand conditions, including retention of all trees over 20" dbh at the time of treatment, that should be determined during smaller site-specific EAs. Also, the openness and growing space resulting from the created gaps, skyline yarding corridors and skid trails, and landings need to be accounted for in the thinning prescription. These created openings result in reduced canopy cover and create more growing space within units. Consequently, the thinning prescription should be a lower intensity (e.g., 50% max SDI or greater) than proposed to account for this additional growing space. We also would encourage treatments to focus on the younger stands because older stands (e.g., 60-80 years old) might already be on a desired developmental path that may only need lighter thinning. ESA consultation needs to be conducted on these smaller site-specific EAs prior to implementation. The proposed post-decision annual ESA review process with USFWS through the "WWRCZ BO programmatic consistency notifications and worksheets" is inadequate as part of this proposed project decision.

SIGNED,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Philip Fenner", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Philip Fenner, President
North Cascades Conservation Council
philf@northcascades.org

References Cited

- Alliance for the Wild Rockies v. US Forest Service (Colville NF). Dist. Court, ED Washington, September 16, 2025, Sxwuytn-Kanisku Connections Trail Project.
- Center for Biological Diversity v. US Forest Service (Custer-Gallatin NF), Dist. Court Montana, December 11, 2025, South Plateau Landscape Area Treatment Project.
- Kelley, J. B. 2026. Forest wide Thinning EA. Hydrology Resource Report. Watershed Program Manager USDA Forest Service, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. February 2026. 82pp.
- Lindenmayer, D., D. A. DellaSala, E. Bowd, B. E. Law, P. J. Burton, C. T. Hanson, P. Zylstra, and W. J. Ripple. 2026. (Lindenmayer et al. 2026). Ecological trade-offs of mechanical thinning in temperate forests. *Biological Conservation* 316 (111748). 11pp.
- National Research Council. 2008. Public participation in environmental assessment and decision making. Washington, DC. The National Academic Press.
- Nichols, R.A, and G.L. Ketcheson. 2013. A two-decade watershed analysis approach to stream restoration log jam design and stream recovery monitoring: Finney Creek, Washington. *Journal of the American Water Resources Association (JAWRA)*. 1-18.
- Palardy, C. 2026. Forestwide Thinning EA. Soil Report. Forest Soil Scientist. USDA Forest Service, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. February 2026. 22pp.
- Southeast Alaska Conservation Council v. US Forest Service (Tongass NF), March and June 2020 court decisions, Prince of Wales Landscape Project.
- Snyder, R. V., and J.M. Wade. 1970. Mt. Baker National Forest Soil Resource Inventory. USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, Portland, OR. September 1970. 278pp.
- Thibeault, S. 2026. Forestwide Thinning EA. Silviculture Report. Silviculturist. USDA Forest Service, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. February 2026. 20 pp.
- USDA Forest Service (USDA FS) 1990. Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and FEIS. (Including Appendix H). US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Seattle, WA.
- USDA Forest Service (USDA FS) 1995. Ecosystem analysis at the watershed scale. Federal guide for watershed analysis. Revised Aug. 1995. Version 2.2. Regional Interagency Executive Committee and Intergovernmental Advisory Committee representing many federal and state agencies and tribal councils. Regional Ecosystem Office, Portland, OR. 29pp.

USDA Forest Service (USDA FS) 1995. Canyon Creek Watershed Analysis. 1995. Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Seattle, WA.

USDA Forest Service (USDA FS) 1996. Deer Creek Watershed Analysis. May 1996. Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Seattle, WA. 410pp.

USDA Forest Service (USDA FS) 1999. Watershed Analysis Finney Creek/Lower Skagit River. Mt. Baker Ranger District, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Sedro Woolley, WA.

USDA Forest Service (USDA FS) 2002. North Fork Nooksack Vegetation Management Project Revised EA. April 2022. Mt. Baker Ranger District, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Sedro Woolley, WA.

USDA Forest Service (USDA FS) 2017. South Fork Stillaguamish Vegetation Management Project EA. Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, Darrington Ranger District. 241pp.

USDA Forest Service (USDA FS) 2000. North Fork Stillaguamish Watershed Analysis. March 2000. Pacific Northwest Region, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, Darrington Ranger District. 454pp.

USDA Forest Service (USDA FS) 2019. Pacific Northwest Region Project Environmental Assessment. Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region, Portland, OR. June 2019. 113 pp.

USDA Forest Service and USDI Bureau of Land Management (USDA FS & USDI BLM). 1994. Record of Decision for Amendments to the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Planning Documents within the range of the Northern Spotted Owl. Portland, OR.

USDA Forest Service (USDA FS). 2025. North Fork Stillaguamish Landscape Analysis Project EA. April 2025. Pacific Northwest Region, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, Darrington and Mt. Baker Ranger Districts, Skagit and Snohomish Counties, WA. 93pp.

USDA Forest Service (USDA FS). 2026. Forestwide Thinning Treatments Project, Draft EA. February 2026. USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, WA. Pub. #68852. 130 pp.

USDC NMFS. 2025. Endangered Species Act (ESA) Section 7(a)(2) Biological Opinion, Conference Opinion and Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Consultation for Timber and Routine Activities on the

Western Washington Restoration Collaboration Zone. July 23, 2025. WCRO-2023-00999. 359pp.

USDI Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). 2025. Biological Opinion: Timber and Routine Activities on the Western Washington Restoration Collaboration Zone. March 19, 2025. FWS/R1/2023-0096058. 791pp.

Vacirca, R. 2026. Forest-wide Thinning EA. Fisheries Resource Report. February 2026. Forest Fisheries Program Manager. USDA Forest Service, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. December 2025. 53pp.