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22 March 2026

Objection Reviewing Officer
Region 6 Regional Forester, Pacific Northwest Region
USDA Forest Service
Attn: 1570/1950 Objections
1220 SW 3rd Ave
Portland, OR 97204

Submitted electronically to <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r06/mbs/projects/68852>

Responsible Official: Erin Uloth, Forest Supervisor
Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

Re: Objection—Forestwide Thinning Treatments Project, PALS #68852

Dear Ms. Uloth and Reviewing Officer,

Pursuant to subparts A and B of 36 C.F.R. Part 218, Pilchuck Audubon Society timely objects to the Final Environmental Assessment, Decision Notice, and Finding of No Significant Impact for the Forestwide Thinning Treatments Project (FWT). We incorporate by reference our previous submitted comments on the Draft EA for this project, as specifically noted below.

Identification of Objector

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Pilchuck Audubon Society (PAS) is a grass-roots environmental organization with members throughout Snohomish County and Camano Island, Washington. The mission of Pilchuck Audubon Society is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems focusing on birds and other wildlife for the benefit of the earth's biological diversity. Education, advocacy, community activism, and community science are the major avenues we use to achieve our goal to protect and enhance the natural environment in Snohomish County, Camano Island and the State of Washington. We serve as a local chapter of the National Audubon Society. PAS is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt, non-profit organization incorporated in the state of Washington.

Previous involvement in the Forestwide Thinning Treatments Project

We submitted comments on the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) electronically on 11 January 2026. No opportunity was provided to the public for participation in the scoping phase of this project.

We have a strong interest in protecting the qualities of these forestlands that will allow them to develop into healthy old growth forests that will support related wildlife, including but not limited to the Northern Spotted Owl and Marbled Murrelet. The Final EA (FEA) does not adequately respond to the concerns that we raised previously.

General Points and Summary of Objections

The Forestwide Thinning Treatments Project Final Environmental Assessment (FEA), Decision Notice (DN), and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) provide insufficient analysis and justification for a project of this scale. Our overarching concern stems from the fact that the Forest Service has planned a massive logging project within multiple protected watersheds with known short-term impacts and speculative long-term benefits, based on hasty environmental analysis and thinly supported scientific justifications. With a project area of 190,000 acres, logging to occur on up to 36,000 acres, and a timeframe of 30 years, the impacts of this proposal will be likely be significant. Short-term, site-specific impacts will be compounded across the large project area, leading to long-term, landscape-level effects. In addition, there is no analysis of the changes in climate or other conditions that are likely to occur over the 30 year timeframe of this project. A project of this scale deserves a much more robust analysis, and thus requires an EIS.

We are also concerned about the logistics of effectively administrating and monitoring such a huge undertaking with the recently reduced Forest Service staff. Because of its large size and long implementation period, many changes in conditions will inevitably occur between now and the ultimate execution of the plan. There is no acknowledgement of these logistical challenges or contingencies if current conditions change.

While the FEA delineates annual review of individual timber sales by various specialists, there is no provision for a formal EA other than this unenforceably vague stipulation in the FEA (Appendix A, p. 64): “If circumstances change, new information emerges, or the plan is otherwise determined to be inconsistent with the proposed action, or if anticipated effects are expected to exceed those analyzed in this EA, the plan will be revised accordingly, or supplemental NEPA analysis will be initiated as appropriate.” The annual 30-day public review period is not an acceptable substitute for timely and thorough environmental assessment, especially considering the public will not have the opportunity to review new information or concerns introduced by FS staff.

Furthermore, since there is no structured requirement for Forest Service staff to evaluate individual projects within the scope of this proposal when work begins years later, there is no site-specific assessment of impacts of this project. This approach puts the onus on private citizens to be aware of which aspects of the project the Forest Service is preparing to undertake, and to find the time to vigilantly monitor the affected areas for changing conditions. Even then, under this project, there is no process to bring new information and community concerns to the Forest Service to ensure that whatever thinning projects it undertakes will in fact improve forest health.

We request that the Forest Service abandon the FWT and plan a true restoration project of

an appropriate size and scope. At the very least, the agency must prepare a full Environmental Impact Statement that fully and fairly addresses the significant environmental consequences of the Project and provide robust opportunities for public involvement. In other words, the Forest Service must complete an environmental analysis that is commensurate with the scale of this project. To that end we offer the following points of objection, along with proposed remedies.

- **Objection point 1:** The unprecedented size of the FWT and other factors necessitate the preparation of a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).
- **Objection point 2:** The use of conditions-based management violates NEPA's requirement that federal agencies take a "hard look" at environmental impacts.
- **Objection point 3:** The FWT Final EA, DN, and FONSI violate the National Forest Management Act and the 1994 NW Forest Plan by reopening and rebuilding roads in Tier 1 Key Watersheds, Late Successional Reserves, and Riparian Reserves.
- **Objection point 4:** The FWT Final EA failed to adequately address the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of the Project.
- **Objection point 5:** The FWT Final EA, DN, and FONSI violate the NW Forest Plan by logging extensively in LSR and Riparian Reserves, without adequate proof of benefit.
- **Objection point 6:** The FWT Final EA failed to adequately address Climate Change, in violation of NEPA.
- **Objection point 7:** The FWT Final EA, DN, and FONSI violates the Endangered Species Act by failing to protect listed species.
- **Objection point 8:** The FWT Final EA failed to adequately demonstrate that the FWT will meet the stated Purpose and Need.
- **Objection point 9:** The FEA assumes that the FWT would reduce wildfire risk, when the opposite is true.

Specific Objections

Objection point 1: The unprecedented size of the FWT and other factors necessitate the preparation of a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

a. Reference to prior comments

In our previous comments on the FWT, we requested that a full EIS be prepared in order to adequately examine the environmental impacts of this proposal.

b. Statement of supporting reasons

NEPA requires the agency "to the fullest extent possible" to prepare an EIS for "every . . . major

Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment.” 42 U.S.C. § 4332(C). The EIS requirement is the heart of NEPA. *Dep’t of Transportation v. Public Citizen*, 541 U.S. 752, 757 (2004). An agency may prepare an EA to decide whether the environmental impact of a proposed action is significant enough to warrant preparation of an EIS. If an agency decides not to prepare an EIS, it must provide a detailed statement of reasons explaining why the proposed project’s impacts are insignificant. *Blue Mts. Biodiversity Proj. v. Blackwood*, 161 F.3d 1208, 1212 (9th Cir. 1998). “An EIS must be prepared if substantial questions are raised as to whether a project . . . may cause significant degradation of some human environmental factor.” *Id.* (citations omitted). To prevail on a claim that the agency violated NEPA by failing to prepare an EIS, a Plaintiff need not show that significant effects *will* occur; it is enough to raise “substantial questions” whether a project *may* have a significant effect on the environment. *Id.*

The Forest Service must demonstrate that a logging project of this size and magnitude results in “no significant impact” on the environment. To avoid preparation of an EIS, agency must explain why an action “will *not* have a significant effect on the human environment . . .” (emphasis added). Other than offering conclusory statements, the FEA, FONSI, and DN fail to provide any evidence or justification that this project will not have significant impacts. See *Save the Yaak Comm. v. Block*, 840 F.2d 714, 717 (9th Cir. 1988) (agency must provide a “convincing” statement of reasons to explain why a project’s impacts are insignificant).

“Significant” has long been interpreted by courts to be defined by a project’s “context” and “intensity.”

(a) Context. This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend on the effects in the locale rather than the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant.

This means that quantification of a project’s impacts must be undertaken at multiple spatial scales—including the site-specific scale—which is critically important for a forestwide project such as this one, where there is a risk that site-specific impacts will be marginalized by reference to a large project area. See, e.g., Anderson v. Evans, 314 F.3d 1006, 1019 (9th Cir. 2002) (focus must be on whether the action may significantly affect the environment in the local area).

(b) Intensity. This refers to the severity of impact. Responsible officials must bear in mind that more than one agency may make decisions about partial aspects of a major action. The following should be considered in evaluating intensity:

- (1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

This means that even if the Forest Service assertion that this project will improve old growth characteristics proves true, an EIS is required if this beneficial effect is considered significant. And if it is not, in fact, considered significant, we ask why the project should proceed?

- (2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

As discussed below, this proposal has a very high potential for increasing risk of landslide and mass wasting. Even if such landslides do not directly bury human beings or their properties, they can cause

damming of rivers and the resultant flooding would jeopardize human life and property. Furthermore, this project would increase climate change impacts, accelerating this existential threat to human life and property. It would also increase the risk of wildfire and reduce recreational opportunities, both of which affect public health and safety.

(3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The project area contains three designated Wild and Scenic Rivers, as well as numerous rivers eligible for such designation. It is also close to ecologically critical areas such as intact native old growth forests and wetlands.

(4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

For the reasons detailed in this objection, this project will indeed be highly controversial. Furthermore, the ability of the proposed action to achieve its stated purpose, to improve old-growth characteristics of the “treated” forest, is controversial as well.

A controversy sufficient to require preparation of an EIS occurs “when substantial questions are raised as to whether a project may cause significant degradation of some human environmental factor, or there is a substantial dispute about the size, nature, or effect of the major Federal action.” *Nat’l Parks & Conservation Ass’n v. Babbitt*, 241 F.3d 722, 736 (9th Cir. 2001).

(5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

*The purported beneficial effects of this project are highly uncertain. The negative impacts of road construction and reconstruction, noise, air and water pollution, biomass removal, and other activities will likely outweigh any supposed benefits related to tree removal. “Preparation of an EIS is mandated . . . where the collection of data may prevent speculation on potential effects.” *Nat’l Parks & Conservation Ass’n v. Babbitt*, 241 F.3d 722, 736 (9th Cir. 2001).*

(6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The Forest Service is likely to use the FWT project as a prototype for other highly damaging, watershed-level endeavors.

(7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.

The surrounding State and privately owned forests have been extensively clearcut and roaded. Furthermore, the cumulative impacts of the various components of this project alone are significant, as discussed later in this letter. An EIS is required to adequately address these cumulative impacts.

(8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

This area has been heavily used throughout human history, both by precolonial Native American populations and after European settlement. An EIS is required to ensure that historical resources related to this use are adequately protected.

(9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The project may adversely affect numerous species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and their habitat, as described below.

(10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

Implementation of this project would violate the National Forest Management Act, through inconsistency provisions of the Northwest Forest Plan regulating activities in Late Successional Reserves and Riparian Reserves (as described in more detail below), and would violate Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (also described more fully below). It would violate the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), as detailed in subsequent sections.

c. Proposed remedy

Withdraw the FEA, DN, and FONSI for the FWT project and prepare a full Environmental Impact Statement.

Objection point 2: The use of conditions-based management (CBM) violates NEPA's requirement that federal agencies take a "hard look" at environmental impacts.

a. Reference to prior comments

We raised concerns that CBM would allow ecosystem-altering activities to occur without site-specific environmental analysis of those effects, nor the opportunity for public involvement, in violation of NEPA. This would allow the Forest Service to manipulate the landscape and waterways without public oversight.

b. Statement of supporting reasons

A "'hard look' requires a consideration of 'all foreseeable direct and indirect impacts' and a full assessment of the cumulative impacts of the proposed action." *Ctr. For Biological Diversity v. Salazar*, 695 F.3d 893, 916–17 (9th Cir. 2012). "To take the required 'hard look' at a proposed project's effects, an agency may not rely on incorrect assumptions or data[.]" *Native Ecosystems Council v. U.S. Forest Service*, 418 F.3d 953, 964 (9th Cir. 2005) (citing 40 C.F.R. § 1500.1(b)) ("Accurate scientific analysis, expert agency comments, and public scrutiny are essential to implementing NEPA.").

Nor is it sufficient to make speculative, conclusory statements about the impact of an action. *Nat'l Parks & Conservation Ass'n v. Babbitt*, 241 F.3d 722, 735 (9th Cir. 2001). The "hard look" applies in the context of EA. *Blackwood*, 161 F. Supp. 3d at 1156 (citing *Conner v. Burford*, 848 F.2d 1441, 1446 (9th Cir. 1988)); *Kleppe v. Sierra Club*, 427 U.S. 390, at 409–410, n. 21 (1976). See also *Marsh v. Or. Nat. Res. Council*, 490 U.S. 360, 371 (1989) ("NEPA emphasizes the importance of coherent and comprehensive up-front environmental analysis to ensure informed decision-making to the end that 'the agency will not act on incomplete information, only to regret its decision after it is too late to correct.'")

This Court has refused to accept this type of improper analysis for other similar (but smaller) Bureau of Land Management (BLM) logging projects. In *Cascadia I*, Plaintiffs challenged BLM's Thurston Hills logging project. 410 F. Supp. 3d at 1152 In that case, BLM relied on the RMP's fire hazard analysis across a large planning area and concluded that it did not need to analyze the issue in detail at the project level. *Id.* at 1157–59. The Court held that this approach did not constitute the hard look required under NEPA because BLM "did not analyze site-specific geographic conditions or effects on the immediate area." *Id.* at 1158; see *WildEarth Guardians v. Montana Snowmobile Ass'n*, 790 F.3d 920, 926–27 (9th Cir. 2015) (finding generalized map without species specific information violated hard look).

Courts have found that specific analysis is critical for compliance with NEPA. *Or. Nat. Desert Ass'n v. Jewell*, 840 F.3d 562, 569 (9th Cir. 2016) (NEPA analysis must "succinctly describe the environment of the area(s) to be affected by the alternatives under consideration, and insure that environmental information is available to public officials and citizens before decisions are made and before actions are taken."); see also N.M. ex rel. *Richardson v. BLM*, 565 F.3d 683, 718 (10th Cir. 2009) (The important question the court must answer is whether "all reasonably foreseeable impacts" were assessed "at the earliest practicable point . . . before an irretrievable commitment of resources [was] made.").

A recent case out of Montana found that the Forest Service could not rely on CBM because the actual location of the project mattered to bear habitat. See *Ctr. for Biological Diversity v. U.S. Forest Serv.*, 2025 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 256772, *13-14 (D.Ct. Mont). "In the context of grizzly bear secure habitat, the lack of specific road mapping prevents such informed decisionmaking. See *Neighbors of Cuddy Mtn. v. U.S. Forest Serv.*, 137 F.3d 1372, 1380 (9th Cir. 1998) ("NEPA requires consideration of the potential impact of an action *before* the action takes place." (internal quotation marks omitted)). Accordingly, the Forest Service has failed to meet its NEPA mandate."

Further court action has determined that compliance with the Forest Plan must be demonstrated now, not deferred. See, e.g., *Ohio Forestry Ass'n v. Sierra Club*, 523 U.S. 726, 729–30 (1998) (holding that the duty to demonstrate Forest Plan consistency applies at the time of the decision, not at a speculative future date).

Moreover, the changing climate will significantly alter conditions over the thirty-year span of this project, necessitating additional detailed site-specific environmental analysis over time.

c. Proposed remedy

Withdraw the FEA, DN, and FONSI for the FWT project and prepare a full Environmental Impact Statement, removing CBM from the project and replacing it with an in-depth, site-specific analysis including detailed maps and wildlife, hydrology, soils, and other data.

Objection point 3: The FWT Final EA, DN, and FONSI violate the National Forest Management Act (NMFA) and the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) by reopening and rebuilding roads in Tier 1 Key Watersheds, Late Successional Reserves (LSR), and Riparian Reserves.

a. Reference to prior comments

Our Draft EA comment letter raised numerous concerns regarding road construction and reconstruction within Tier 1 Key Watersheds, LSR, and Riparian Reserves in the FWT project. All roads magnify the risk for landslides, sedimentation of streams, wildfire, noxious weed introduction, and human disturbance including toxic waste and other dumping, dispersed camping and off-road travel, anthropogenic wildfire, poaching, and other wildlife harassment. This enormous project will continue for at least 3 decades. It will result in a net increase of road miles for a considerable length of time, even if post-logging decommissioning occurs as planned.

b. Statement of supporting reasons

There are several designated Key Watersheds in the project area. Standards and Guidelines for Key Watersheds include: “Reduce existing system and nonsystem road mileage outside roadless areas. If funding is insufficient to implement reductions, there will be no net increase in the amount of roads in Key Watersheds.”¹ This enormous project will continue for at least 3 decades. Even if all the new roads are decommissioned as planned after completion of logging (something for which funding often seems to come up short), there will be a net increase of road miles for a considerable length of time.

The NWFP provides that “Road construction in LSR generally is not recommended for silvicultural, salvage, and other activities *unless potential benefits exceed the costs of habitat impairment*. [emphasis added] If new roads are necessary to implement a practice that is otherwise in accordance with these guidelines, they will be kept to a minimum, be routed through non-late-successional habitat where possible, and be designed to minimize adverse impacts. Alternative access methods, such as aerial logging, should be considered to provide access for activities in reserves.”² The Forest Service has not sufficiently demonstrated that the benefits of this project will outweigh the harm caused by both the road construction activities and their continued existence and use for the life of the project, as well as by the act of road decommissioning.

c. Proposed remedy

Withdraw the FEA, DN, and FONSI for the FWT project and prepare a full Environmental Impact Statement that includes an alternative with no new (including “temporary”) road construction, and provides for decommissioning of existing roads as part of the project. It should also incorporate detailed maps, mileage, and current condition/driveability data for all existing roads.

Objection point 4: The FWT Final EA failed to adequately address the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of the Project.

a. Reference to prior comments

¹ NWFP Standards and Guidelines (S&G) B-19

² NWFP S&G C-16

In our previous Draft EA comments, we raised concerns about the unprecedented, vast scale of the FWT project. This alone necessitates the evaluation of cumulative impacts across watersheds and diverse ecosystems with the project area itself. We discussed the many problems caused by roads, which would have cumulative effects over the large timeframe and distance span of the project. In fact, all of the issues we mentioned in our previous comments would be magnified by the project scale.

b. Statement of supporting reasons

The Forest Service cannot simply pretend that effects will be limited to each individual timber sale in a given year within this vast project. Each sale will have wider and longer term effects on the environment, the type of impacts courts defined as “cumulative” and held to be a necessary part of any NEPA review in order to fully capture the impacts of a project. “Cumulative impacts of multiple projects can be significant in different ways . . . Sometimes the total impact from a set of actions may be greater than the sum of the parts. For example, the addition of a small amount of sediment to a creek may have only a limited impact on salmon survival, or perhaps no impact at all. But the addition of a small amount here, a small amount there, and still more at another point could add up to something with a much greater impact, until there comes a point where even a marginal increase will mean that *no* salmon survive. *Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Ctr. v. BLM*, 387 F.3d 989, 994 (9th Cir. 2004).

The long-term impact of road reconstruction will necessarily increase sediment as more road miles are added every year, without the previous year’s “temporary roads” becoming hydrologically recovered. This process will be exacerbated by the increasing frequency and severity of storms that are occurring as a result of climate change. The EA never mentions the impact of **all** the aggregated road miles – 6 miles a year for 30 years leads to 180 miles of temp roads. And though they may be decommissioned, it takes a long time for them to recover. This also does not meet the Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objective (ACSO) directive to “maintain and restore the sediment regime”³.

c. Proposed remedy

Withdraw the FEA, DN, and FONSI for the FWT project and prepare an EIS that includes a robust evaluation of the cumulative impacts of the FWT project.

Objection point 5: The FWT Final EA, DN, and FONSI violate the NW Forest Plan by logging extensively in LSR and Riparian Reserves (RR), without adequate proof of benefit that would outweigh harms.

a. Reference to prior comments

Our comments on the Draft EA raised concerns about the ability of the Forest Service to truly protect and enhance conditions of late-successional and old growth forest ecosystems by implementing the FWT project. We also asserted that logging in Riparian Reserves would fail to meet the ACSOs as required by the NW Forest Plan.

b. Statement of supporting reasons

³ NWFP S&G B-11

The thinning prescribed in the FWT EA may impede late-successional habitat development. The NWFP provides that “Thinning (precommercial and commercial) may occur in stands up to 80 years old regardless of the origin of the stands (e.g., plantations planted after logging or stands naturally regenerated after fire or blowdown). The purpose of these silvicultural treatments is to *benefit the creation and maintenance of late-successional forest conditions*.”⁴ (emphasis added) The EA suggests that all the prescriptions will bring the stand Relative Density (RD) down to 35%. It does not correlate this decrease in RD with canopy cover, which is the primary means to determine habitat effectiveness for northern spotted owls. There is a complete lack of information supporting the Forest Service’s claim that the thinning actually will benefit late-successional forests.

There is evidence to suggest that logging forest stands down to 35% relative density will actually *delay* their becoming spotted owl nesting-roosting habitat. The Forest Service’s complete lack of specificity about baseline or prescription, or use of any models to compare action and no action, does nothing to dispel this interpretation.

This project has many similarities to the BLM’s Integrated Vegetation Management for Resilient Lands Program (“IVM”), which the Oregon District Court recently found violated the RMP’s 20-year standard. See *Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Ctr. v. United States BLM*, 2024 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 105741 (“KS Wild”). In that case, to test whether certain LSR logging prescriptions would delay the development of nesting-roosting habitat compared to “no actions”, BLM selected three sample stands and modeled the stand-level inventory plot data in ORGANON, a tree growth and yield simulator. Growth for each representative stand was modeled through time under a no treatment scenario and three treatment scenarios based on the proposed action with relative density (“RD”) targets of 30 percent, 40 percent, and 45 percent. *Id.*

In his opinion, Judge Clarke found that the IVM Program would lead to “massive canopy reductions” and couldn’t possibly maintain the canopy cover necessary to avoid delay of habitat development and thus comply with the 20-year standard. See KS Wild at *11, 12 (“The sheer results of the modeling exhibited that the treated stands could not return to the minimum threshold levels for canopy cover and basal area that is required for functional habitat even after 50 years.”).

The Riparian Reserve logging in the FWT project will impede the attainment of the nine Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives (ASCO) that the NWFP requires be met by any management activities within this land designation.⁵ It will increase sedimentation and remove trees that aid in shading streams, resulting in increased water temperatures. Commercial logging also will remove biomass that is needed for soil and water nutrients as well as in-stream wood and other biological debris.

The Forest Service must avoid degradation that leads to the non-attainment of ACSOs, evaluated at both the short-term, localized scale and the long-term, watershed scale. *Pac. Coast Fed’n of Fishermen’s Ass’ns v. NMFS*, 265 F.3d 1028, 1037 (9th Cir. 2001). To make a finding that the logging “meets” or “does not prevent attainment” of the ACSOs, the NWFP requires the Forest Service to explain how the proposed logging maintains or restores conditions of the watershed.

The ACS system was established to “restore and maintain the ecological health of watersheds and aquatic ecosystems.” *Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Ctr. v. U.S. Forest Serv.*, 373 F. Supp. 2d 1069, 1092 (E.D. Cal. 2004). Timber harvest in Riparian Reserves generally is prohibited, except when needed to “acquire desired

⁴ NWFP S&G C-12

⁵ NWFP B-11

vegetation characteristics needed to attain Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives.” NWFP, C-31. Thus, the question: is commercial logging necessary to acquire the vegetation needed to meet the ACSOs? To answer that, one must consider whether the objectives could be met without commercial logging. The EA asserts that logging is needed in Riparian Reserves because they are overstocked plantations, with relatively uniform tree size and distribution, low to moderate amounts of small diameter coarse woody debris, lack understory development, etc. The Forest Service does not provide enough information for the public to groundtruth this area and confirm that either this description is accurate or is a drastic oversimplification of the site conditions. Even if the Forest Service’s characterization of the riparian areas as overstocked is accurate, this doesn’t explain how logging and road building in Riparian Reserves is *needed* to attain ACSOs. Indeed, many, if not most, ACSOs would be better met through the “no action” alternative.

Logging in RR would also violate the 1990 Forest Plan, which states: “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.”⁶

Pollock and Beechie looked at the use by various vertebrates of different sizes of live and dead trees and how riparian thinning affected the long-term development of both large diameter live trees and deadwood. They found that:

Species that utilize large diameter live trees will benefit most from heavy thinning, whereas species that utilize large diameter deadwood will benefit most from light or no thinning. Because far more vertebrate species utilize large deadwood rather than large live trees, allowing riparian forests to naturally develop may result in the most rapid and sustained development of structural features important to most terrestrial and aquatic vertebrates.⁷

c. Proposed remedy

Withdraw the FEA, DN, and FONSI for the FWT project and prepare an EIS that includes adequate data and analysis to rigorously demonstrate that any logging in LSR and RR will truly benefit the development of late-successional habitat and the attainment of ACSOs.

Objection point 6: The FWT Final EA failed to adequately address Climate Change, in violation of NEPA.

a. Reference to prior comments

In our Draft EA comments discussing wildfire risk, we raised the point that commercial logging of medium to large sized trees releases significant amounts of carbon; more, in fact, than would be released by the burning of those same trees. We also expressed concerns about hydrological impacts from changing climatic conditions.

b. Statement of supporting reasons.

⁶ 1990 Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Plan, p. 4-119

⁷ Pollock, Michael M. and Timothy J. Beechie, 2014. Does Riparian Forest Restoration Thinning Enhance Biodiversity? The Ecological Importance of Large Wood. *Journal of the American Water Resources Association* (JAWRA) 50(3): 543-559.

The FEA admitted that soil disturbance associated with logging would cause carbon loss from soils, but did not consider this effect upon climate. Nor did it examine the climate effects of removing such a large mass of living trees and the emissions released by equipment in the process.

It has been predicted for many decades and is now obvious to even the most casual observer that global warming is increasing ocean temperatures and affecting our weather patterns. The frequency and intensity of so-called “atmospheric rivers” and other storms is increasing dramatically. Intact forests can and do ameliorate the destruction caused by these sudden, huge influxes of water. A single mature Douglas fir tree can hold up to 5,000 gallons of water. That’s water that doesn’t run down the mountain to flood river valleys and communities; nor loosen and remove soil, leading to landslides and fish-killing siltation of streams and rivers. Instead, the water held by intact forests is released slowly, causing less destruction, and limiting periods of drought.

Removing or reducing forest canopy also increases rain on snow effect, which was a major contributing factor in the recent catastrophic and widespread December 2025 floods. Current snow-dominated and highland zones are rapidly warming, and rain on snow events will only continue to increase with climate change. While the FEA did acknowledge that rain on snow events would increase due to logging, it did not include the additive effect of climate change on that increase in its assessment.

Climate change effects will lead to changing conditions over the 30-year timespan of this proposal. None of these impacts were adequately explored in the FWT EA.

c. Proposed remedy

Withdraw the FEA, DN, and FONSI for the FWT project and prepare an EIS that includes a rigorous evaluation of climate impacts from the project, as well as the impacts of climate change *on* the project itself.

Objection point 7: The FWT Final EA, DN, and FONSI violates the Endangered Species Act by failing to protect listed species.

a. Reference to prior comments

We raised concerns about the US Fish and Wildlife Service determination that the FWT project may adversely affect numerous ESA-listed species and their habitats.

b. Statement of supporting reasons

The Biological Opinions for this project determine that it may adversely affect the following ESA-listed species:

- Puget Sound (PS) Spring Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) and its designated Critical Habitat
- PS steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) and its designated Critical Habitat
- PS bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and its designated Critical Habitat
- Marbled Murrelet and Marbled Murrelet Critical Habitat
- Northern Spotted Owl and Northern Spotted Owl Critical Habitat

As discussed in our Draft EA comments, logging and roadbuilding, particularly over such a large area, will have adverse impacts on water quality and fish habitat by increasing sediment and elevating stream temperatures. Conducting these activities in Riparian Reserves will intensify these effects and prevent the attainment of Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives.

The FWT FEA asserts that since primary habitat for Marbled Murrelets (MM) and Northern Spotted Owls (NSO) will not be logged, adverse effects will be insignificant. This belies the FEA's PDC A-15, which allows suitable nesting habitat to be destroyed for three specific activities related to project implementation. It also fails to acknowledge that nesting (old-growth) habitat for these species exists throughout the adjacent areas.

Thinning and road-building in stands adjacent to MM and NSO nesting habitat will have negative impacts on birds occupying them, by causing noise disturbance, air pollution, and increased edge effect, which encourages corvids that prey on MM chicks and eggs. Furthermore, NSO are known to use mature second-growth forests such as those within the project as dispersal and foraging habitat.

The FWT Project may also exacerbate barred owl effects on NSO, as described by biologist Dominick DellaSalla:

Decades of research on spotted owls and prey shows that logging is not as short-lived an impact as some might hope. This is because the owls roost and nest in closed-canopy, dense forests and so do many of the species' prey. Opening up forests may encourage barred owls, a more aggressive competitor of spotted owls, thereby negating efforts by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to contain this invading owl.⁸

The minimum canopy cover that will remain after completion of this project could hardly be called "dense." In addition, thinning will adversely impact owl prey (e.g. flying squirrels).

The FWT FEA fails to provide adequate protection of Grizzly bear habitat because it will result in a net increase in road densities. The project does not require decommissioning of an equivalent number of road mileage to offset the construction of new so-called "temporary" roads and reconstruction of closed roads that have "returned to nature."

c. Proposed remedy

Withdraw the FEA, DN, and FONSI for the FWT project and prepare an EIS for a project that will not adversely impact ESA-listed fish and wildlife species.

Objection point 8: The FWT Final EA failed to adequately demonstrate that the FWT will meet the stated Purpose and Need.

a. Reference to prior comments

Our Draft EA comments disputed the allegation that the net effect of the FWT project would in fact improve habitat for late-successional dependent species.

⁸DellaSalla, Dominick, commentary in The Oregonian, 8-3-2012, https://www.oregonlive.com/opinion/2012/08/benefit_of_thinning_forests_fo.html

b. Statement of supporting reasons

Scientific consensus does not exist regarding the effects of thinning on forest structure. We do not know whether trees that grow large faster are actually healthier. In fact, when we remove trees based on our own biases, we may be removing the most disease-resistant and otherwise well-adapted genetics from the landscape. The Forest Service has provided no data otherwise.

While it is generally agreed that thinning allows the remaining trees to grow faster, the Forest Service has provided no evidence that these remaining trees will be healthier or will in fact survive hundreds of years to provide late-successional habitat. Furthermore, removing the thinned trees rather than leaving them on the ground eliminates valuable wildlife habitat and soil enrichment provided by fallen logs.

Because “[i]nformed public participation in reviewing environmental impacts is essential to the proper functioning of NEPA,” *League of Wilderness Defenders/Blue Mtns. Biodiversity Project v. Connaughton*, 752 F.3d 755, 761 (9th Cir. 2014), NEPA requires agencies to provide the public with high quality information. Accurate scientific information, expert agency comments, and public scrutiny are an essential component of NEPA. 40 C.F.R. § 1500.1. “NEPA’s public comment procedures are at the heart of the NEPA process To effectuate this aim NEPA requires not merely public notice, but public participation in the evaluation of the environmental consequences of a major federal action.” *California v. Block*, 690 F.2d 753, 770–771 (9th Cir. 1982); 40 C.F.R. § 1500.1(b) (under NEPA public scrutiny is “essential”).

Here, however, the Forest Service failed to provide adequate support for its conclusions, and failed to provide the public with underlying scientific evidence.

A component of adequate scientific support for the FWT project should include thorough evaluation of an alternative with no commercial logging. If this project is truly intended to further the goals of increased stand diversity and providing habitat for late-successional dependent species, we need to understand whether cutting trees and leaving them on the ground to contribute to soil fertility and essential wildlife habitat, as would happen in a naturally thinned forest, would achieve that objective as well or better than the sole action alternative presented in the FWT EA.

c. Proposed remedy

Withdraw the FEA, DN, and FONSI for the FWT project and prepare an EIS that provides adequate scientific support for the premise that logging, with its attendant road construction and other disturbances, will improve habitat for late-successional dependent species, and includes an action alternative without commercial logging.

Objection point 9: The FEA assumes that the FWT would reduce wildfire risk, when the opposite is true.

a. Reference to prior comments

In our Draft EA comments, we discussed how logging increases fire risks in many ways, while doing nothing to protect communities from wildfire.

b. Statement of supporting reasons

Logging operations leave behind debris that becomes tinder dry in open clearcuts. They cause changes in forest composition and microclimate that favor fires. Opening the canopy and increasing crown spacing allows more solar radiation and wind to dry surface fuels, making them more likely to burn. Most human-caused fires begin on roads, so building and reopening roads for this project will increase the risk of wildfire ignition.

Chainsaws and other logging equipment generate sparks and start fires. The Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project Report, issued in 1996 by the federal government, found that “timber harvest, through its effects on forest structure, local microclimate and fuel accumulation, has increased fire severity more than any other recent human activity.”

The Forest Service has not described how any fire risk might be changed due to climate change induced weather patterns that will likely lead to more precipitation on the west side of the Cascades.

Furthermore, thinning forests in the backcountry does not protect communities from fire. The best available science suggests that thinning forests far away from where people live is ineffective at preventing conflicts between people and fire.

c. Proposed remedy

Withdraw the FEA, DN, and FONSI for the FWT project and prepare an EIS that incorporates a thorough evaluation of fire risk using the best available science.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this proposal. We hope that you will carefully consider our proposed remedies, and we look forward to discussing possibilities for meaningful mitigation of adverse effects from the Forestwide Thinning Treatments Project.

Correspondence about this project may be directed to our Forest Practices Chair, Kathy Johnson, at forest@pilchuckaudubon.org.

Sincerely,

William E. Derry, President