



Submitted via: <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=68983>

Erica Taecker
District Ranger
600 Sherbourne St.
Leavenworth, WA 98826

Dear Erica:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Eagle Creek Project. As you well know, Hampton Lumber is a family-owned organization with deep ties to many of the smaller communities around the state of Washington where our manufacturing facilities are located. We believe ensuring a vibrant future for our federal forests, the local wood products sector, and the communities where we live and work requires dialogue, understanding, and trust among a wide array of stakeholders. We are committed to collaborating with National Forest land managers and other stakeholders to strike a balance between ecological restoration, wildlife habitat protection, wildfire risk reduction, community protection, and consistent, reliable timber production.

Restoring the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest (OWNF) is an operational challenge that requires more than just a plan, it requires a stable forest products industry. Hampton's mills in Darrington and Randle act as the critical infrastructure for the forest's skilled woods workforce. The family-wage employment we provide along with the indirect employment provided by the presence of our manufacturing facilities benefits schools, businesses, and the overall economic wellbeing of the greater region.

Since the 1990s, federal timber harvest volume in the Pacific Northwest has declined by more than 90 percent, leading to mill closures and community decline. Our ability to support the communities in which we operate is increasingly dependent on the availability of raw material from the OWNF timber sale program. When timber harvest volumes are reliable, we can sustain the specialized logging contractors and haulers who perform the actual, boots-on-the-ground work of fuel reduction and forest thinning. Without a predictable sale program, this essential stewardship capacity disappears, leaving both forest health and community economic well-being fundamentally at risk.

We commend the District for utilizing the Emergency Situation Determination (ESD) authorized under Section 40807 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). Given the extreme wildfire risks and forest health crisis in the planning area, representing some of the highest-risk areas in Eastern Washington, the use of this authority is a vital and appropriate response. Current conditions exacerbate vulnerability to insects, disease, and drought. Furthermore, projected warming over the next 20–40 years is expected to shift these currently moist forests toward a much drier state, risking a total conversion of low-elevation forests to shrub-steppe. By treating these overcrowded forests now, the District can restore ecological health, return the landscape to

a more resilient state, and create a critical buffer to protect the homes and structures within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

While this focused approach accelerates short-term fuels reduction, Hampton emphasizes that long-term resilience requires a management paradigm that includes sustained-yield timber production. As such, we must express that we do not support thinning for the sole purpose of promoting large-diameter trees on matrix lands. We are concerned that by prioritizing the transition of all Young Forest Multistory (YFMS) to Stem Exclusion Open Canopy (SEOC) conditions will, over time, preclude future harvests and jeopardize the predictable supply of wood products our rural economies depend on. This effectively treats matrix lands as de facto reserves, contradicting their designation under the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) as the primary land base for commercial timber production.

It is vital that matrix lands are managed not only to reduce hazardous fuels today, but to ensure regeneration and timber production for the future. This is especially critical in higher-elevation stands, where active reforestation and the establishment of climate-resilient species are necessary to prevent the loss of forest cover. As climate conditions shift, simply thinning existing stands is not enough; we must proactively manage for the next generation of the forest. Therefore, we urge the District to include a clearly stated desired condition for matrix lands that maintains a sustainable supply of timber. Specifically, we propose the following addition to the final EA:

Matrix stands within the project area shall be managed based on the principles of even-aged sustainable timber production, utilizing a combination of regeneration harvest, intermediate thinning, and active reforestation in higher elevations to support local economies and ensure long-term forest cover.

We also strongly encourage you to include a need for forest products via a sustainable timber supply that will help maintain operational stability and contribute valuable resources to the economy on a predictable and long-term basis. By shifting from simple commercial thinning to regeneration harvests and committed reforestation, where appropriate, the District can ensure these “priority landscapes” remain both ecologically resilient and economically productive for decades to come.

Additionally, in this high-risk watershed, we want to amplify our whole-hearted support for protecting human life. Hampton supports creating fuels breaks (regardless of land allocation) along project area access roads to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire on adjacent communities, provide for safe ingress and egress, and as wildfire suppression anchor points.

We appreciate your thoughtful consideration of our comments.

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