

Erin Uloth, Forest Supervisor, Responsible Official
Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest
1000 SE Everett Mall Way, Ste 410
Everett, WA 98208

Re: "2025 Mt. Baker Geothermal Consent to Lease"

Dear Supervisor Uloth,

On behalf of the Nooksack Indian Tribe, I respectfully submit these objections and proposed remedy to certain aspects of the Mount Baker Geothermal Consent to Lease Environmental Assessment (EA). As a sovereign nation with a long history of use of the forest lands and waterways affected by this project, we have a strong interest in seeing responsible development and management of our natural resources. We have appreciated working closely with the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest on a range of issues related to the management of our Treaty resources.

As you are aware, the Nooksack Tribe and Whatcom Public Utilities District (PUD) #1, with funding from the Washington State Legislature, have led the recent effort to assess the pre-feasibility of geothermal project development around Mount Baker. This effort built on decades of research and exploration by the State of Washington, the Federal Government, research institutions and private companies to identify focus areas for geothermal energy development. Since this work was largely focused on hydrothermal resources, there was an interest in the areas around Baker Lake where there are known hot springs. Based on this previous research, the State of Washington's geothermal energy collaborative process identified three focus areas in the state for investment in feasibility assessment, including the area around Mount Baker. In 2025, the Nooksack Tribe and PUD #1 gathered the existing information about geothermal resources, conducted additional seismic studies and summarized this information in a "pre-feasibility" assessment for the state legislature.

This effort and investment was informed by previously approved leases around Mount Baker and a Consent to Lease EA from 2015 that showed substantial areas of Allowed Surface Occupancy for geothermal exploration in the Baker River and Nooksack River watersheds. The Nooksack Tribe requested consultation on the 2026 Draft EA and was told that there was likely to be little change in the leasing area from 2015 and that the additional analysis was triggered by the nomination of additional lands outside of the 2015 area. Based on this assurance, we continued exploring project feasibility around Mount Baker. When the 2026 EA was released for comment, there had been a substantial change, with the majority of the Allowable Occupancy area, including all of the Baker River Watershed, removed from the Consent to Lease.

It is unclear to us why the updated analysis led to such a drastic change. The 2015 EA included similar Stipulations, particularly related to cultural resources protections, but did not remove the entire Baker River watershed from consideration. It is particularly difficult to understand the 2026 EA, because the areas were removed without analysis of where exploration activities could potentially impact resources. As a Tribe, we understand the importance of natural and cultural resource protection and take this very seriously. Given the long history of land and water development in the Baker Lake watershed and how it has affected our resources, a thorough assessment of potential impacts is critical to evaluating any

project. That analysis appears to have happened in the Nooksack Watershed, where the 2026 EA looks similar to the 2015 EA, but does not appear to have happened in the Baker River Watershed. We would like to better understand why the same analysis led to such a different outcome for that portion of the analysis area.

We also feel that the Forest did not adequately consult with us on the constraints to a geothermal project that the restricted Allowed Occupancy area presents. Because there has not been a complete assessment of the potential geothermal resource around Mount Baker, we do not know what a carbon-free energy project would look like at this point. The 2026 EA essentially skips an assessment of project feasibility and assumes an impact. We believe that the appropriate time to evaluate the impacts of a proposal is when there is an understanding of the specific location and nature of the proposal. An appropriate remedy is a thoughtful application of the Stipulations similar to the approach that was used in the 2015 EA that identifies specific areas that are of concern to the Forest. This approach would still allow consultation on future exploration and site-specific identification of areas that that should not be allowable for surface occupancy.

We would like to consult with the Forest on this decision and better understand how this affects the future of geothermal projects in the Nooksack Tribe's Traditional areas. We look forward to continuing to work with the Forest on moving forward carbon-free energy projects that can help offset the impacts of future greenhouse gas emissions and benefit native sovereign nations.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ross Cline Sr". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the "Sr" written in a smaller, more compact style at the end.

Ross Cline, Sr.

Chairman, Nooksack Tribe

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