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RE: OBJECTION TO THE MID-SWAN LANDSCAPE RESTORATION AND WUI PROJECT

Wilderness Watch submits these comments on the "Mid-Swan Landscape Restoration and WUI Project" pursuant to 36 C.F.R. [sect] 218. These comments are specific to the Wilderness portions of the project, including the 5,887 acres of agency-ignited fire in the Mission Mountains Wilderness, the 1,860 acres of seeding for whitebark pine in the Mission Mountains Wilderness, and similar activities in recommended wilderness. The responsible official for this project is Kurt Steele, Forest Supervisor for the Flathead National Forest where the project will occur.

Wilderness Watch is a national wilderness advocacy organization, headquartered in Missoula, Montana, dedicated to the protection and proper administration of the National Wilderness Preservation System. Wilderness Watch members use and value, and will continue to use and value, the Mission Mountains Wilderness for personal and professional pursuits, including hiking, plant and wildlife viewing, and plant and wildlife study. Wilderness Watch members also value the Mission Mountains Wilderness for its own sake. Wilderness Watch members value knowing that Wilderness is protected as Congress intended[mdash]that it is administered as an untrammeled landscape where natural processes, rather than intentional human interference, dictate conditions[mdash]whether or not they ever set foot inside the Wilderness boundary. As more fully described below, the Forest Service's proposed action would adversely affect Wilderness Watch's organizational interests, as well as its members' use and enjoyment of the Wilderness.

Wilderness Watch's co-objectors also use and value the Mission Mountains Wilderness and will be harmed by the Forest Service's proposed action.

Conservation Congress is a grassroots, 501c3 nonprofit organization that advocates for the protection of native wildlife and their habitat, including aquatic species. It

works to protect established wilderness and roadless areas for use by imperiled species and from further encroachment by humans.

The Flathead-Lolo-Bitterroot Citizen Task Force is a Montana non-profit public interest organization based in Missoula, MT. It works to protect the natural features and primitive aspects of the Northern Rockies.

Friends of the Bitterroot is a grass roots, volunteer, non-profit conservation group located in Hamilton, Montana. Its mission is to preserve wildlands and wildlife and to protect the watersheds of the region as we work for a sustainable relationship with the environment.

Friends of the Clearwater is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Moscow, Idaho. Friends of the Clearwater protects the public wildlands and rivers in and around the Clearwater Basin.

Friends of the Wild Swan is a tax exempt, public-benefit Montana non-profit corporation. Its principal place of business is in Swan Lake, Lake County, Montana. Friends of the Wild Swan is dedicated to protecting and restoring water quality and fish and wildlife habitat in Montana.

Wilderness Watch submits this objection as the lead objector on behalf of the above groups. For ease of reading, objectors will collectively be referred to as "Wilderness Watch." Wilderness Watch previously submitted scoping comments on December 19, 2018 and draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) comments on October 13, 2020 for this project. Our co-objectors have likewise submitted previous comments, and some have submitted objections in addition to the below. Prior scoping and DEIS comments are specifically incorporated by reference in this objection letter, and the discussion below provides further detail on the issues raised in those comments.

WILDERNESS ACT

In the city, in the country, almost everywhere he goes, the American is confronted with an environment dominated by his own technology. This is new, no others before us have experienced it on the scale we experience today. The end result is not certain. For man, with all his ability to adapt, for all his domination of the "lesser" species, still is a child of the sea, the mountains, the very wilderness he is rapidly obliterating. We are a nation bedazzled by technology, and addicted to crash solutions. But there are no instant ecologies; no instant wilderness. And so, in the final analysis, we must devote much more of our attention in the future to assessing each new technological development for its ultimate impact on man's environment. I hope it is never said of this generation, as Stephen Vincent Benet once said of another: "They thought, because they had power, they had wisdom also." We now have the power, literally, to move mountains. The next few years will determine if we have the wisdom to refrain from doing so. ~ Orville Freeman, Secretary of Agriculture, 1967

Statutory Mandate: The Wilderness Act establishes a National Wilderness Preservation System to safeguard our wildest landscapes in their "natural," "untrammeled" condition. 16 U.S.C. [sect] 1131(a). Wilderness is statutorily defined as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man" and an area "retaining its primeval character and influence... which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions...." Id. [sect] 1131(c). Thus, wilderness "shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in

such a manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness...." Id. [sect] 1131(a) (emphasis added). The Act's opening

section "sets forth the Act's broad mandate to protect the forests, waters, and creatures of the wilderness in their natural, untrammeled state" and "show[s] a mandate of preservation for wilderness and the essential need to keep [nonconforming uses] out of it." Wilderness Soc'y v. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Serv., 353 F.3d 1051, 1061-62 (9th Cir. 2003) (en banc).

Federal Agency Guidance: Federal agency guidance states, "Wilderness areas are living ecosystems in a constant state of evolution[,]" and "[i]t is not the intent of wilderness stewardship to arrest this evolution in an attempt to preserve character existing" at some prior time. BLM Manual 1.6(A)(6)(iv). And, "[a] key descriptor of wilderness in the Wilderness Act, untrammeled refers to the freedom of a landscape from the human intent to permanently intervene, alter, control, or manipulate natural conditions or processes." FWS Policy 1.5(DD). And, "[m]aintaining wilderness character requires an attitude of humility and restraint. We preserve wilderness character by [hellip] imposing limits on ourselves." FWS Policy 1.13(D). In Wilderness, we "[p]rovide an environment where the forces of natural selection and survival rather than human actions determine which and what numbers of wildlife species will exist." Forest Service Manual (FSM) 2323.31. Accordingly, "[i]n the context of the Wilderness Act, an untrammeled area is where human influence does not impede the free play of natural forces or interfere with natural processes in the ecosystem." FSM 2320.5(2).

I. The project fundamentally undermines Wilderness preservation and sets a troublingprecedent for future Wilderness administration

The Forest Service's authorization in this project deviates sharply from the goals and mandates of the Wilderness Act as well as agency guidance principles, and it sets a troubling precedent for Wilderness administration in the future. Here, the Forest Service is authorizing trammeling actions to counteract vegetative change and/or manipulate fire regimes with diffuse human influences. The Forest Service explains:

Some would advocate for less action on this landscape given the uncertainties of future effects of climate change; however, I believe less active management to be irresponsible given the existing and expected future conditions for this landscape. Every year we see increased fire activity nationwide, and numerous scientific sources recommend taking an active role in guiding landscape change[hellip] A warming and drier climate, combined with the legacy effects of fire suppression, requires active vegetation management[.]

ROD at 9. For proposed actions within Wilderness, this is a discussion[mdash]at its core[mdash]about whether we will allow Wilderness to persist into the future.

In this case, there is no discrete, human-caused disruption in Wilderness that can be corrected with a discrete, short-lived intervention. This is not an errant patch of spotted knapweed along a stock trail that can be pulled. Attempting to mitigate over a century of active and ongoing fire suppression (ongoing manipulations) with selective agency-ignited fires (additional manipulations), rather than allowing fire to play its natural role in the

ecosystem, is trammeling to create "desired conditions." Attempting to arrest vegetative succession and adaptation to changing climate conditions or to other influences that cannot be halted (e.g. blister rust and pine beetles) or will not be halted (e.g. fire suppression), is trammeling to create and maintain "desired conditions." And with regard to climate specifically, climate change will continue to cause vast changes in the world as we know it, and we will see more and more attempts to mitigate the effects through ongoing, counterbalancing manipulations. The question will be whether we lose Wilderness in the process.

The trammeling actions in this case, and the helicopter intrusions authorized to implement those actions, present a significant threat to the future of Wilderness administration and are unlawful for the reasons

set forth below.

A. The project relies upon an impermissibly strained reading of the Wilderness Act (See also 10-13-2020 Comment Letter at 2-4)

The project FEIS and decision impermissibly rest on a conflicting reading of the Wilderness Act to justify the project. Both rely on a false tension in the statute:

The summary of effects can best be described by the following: "manipulating an ecosystem to restore it highlights a fundamental tension and dilemma in wilderness stewardship, that is manipulating the ecosystem to protect or restore the natural quality of wilderness by definition compromises the untrammeled quality, while not manipulating (i.e. practicing restraint or hands- off management) preserves the untrammeled quality but may compromise the natural quality of wilderness" (Landres et al. 2020).

FEIS at 320.

As discussed below, the Wilderness Act does not state that there are five qualities of Wilderness nor does it provide conflicting definitions for wilderness qualities. Indeed, the Forest Service has acknowledged in other project analyses that these "qualities are not specifically mentioned in the law," and it has provided complimentary definitions of "untrammeled" (as "areas essentially unhindered and free from human manipulation") and "natural" (as "areas with ecological systems largely separate from direct human influence."). Forest Service, Olympic, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, and Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests, Minimum Requirements Analysis Mountain Goat Removal from Olympic National Forest Wilderness Areas, 2016. These complementary definitions provide a coherent reading of the Wilderness Act where natural conditions generally flow from untrammeled conditions. To the extent that there is an administrative conflict between various uses of wilderness and preservation of wilderness, the statute and the agencies' regulations and management guidance provide direction for resolving those conflicts in favor of wilderness preservation. See, e.g., 16 U.S.C. [sect] 1133(b); 36 C.F.R. [sect] 293.2(c); FSM 2320.6.

The notion of five wilderness qualities came about in Landres' Keeping it Wild protocols[mdash]internal agency guidance documents that have not gone through formal notice and comment rulemaking. These documents are the subject of much disagreement and controversy, largely because they promote[mdash] intentionally or not[mdash]an interpretation of the Wilderness Act that is internally inconsistent and result in management actions that are antithetical to Wilderness preservation. See, e.g. Cole, et. al. 2015. While initially envisioned as a tool to help agencies measure wilderness character, on the ground it has had the unintended consequence of agencies (including the Forest Service here) using the documents to creep back into active management paradigms that are predominant outside of Wilderness.

A prime example of a rapidly growing consequence from Keeping it Wild is the erroneous idea that managers can weigh various components of wilderness character against each other, thereby reducing the Wilderness Act to a point tallying system rather than a substantive law with cohesive goals and stringent prohibitions. This management mindset effectively and unlawfully repeals and rewrites the Wilderness Act.

Much of the problem stems from incorrectly perceived tensions between the terms "natural" and "untrammeled" in the Wilderness Act. Such an interpretation allows agencies to view "natural" as a set of conditions existing at some fixed point in time, and when there is a deviation from those conditions, the agencies feel compelled to actively manipulate conditions (trammel them) to "restore" whatever

prior conditions the agency has deemed "natural" for the area. This is likely a product of a long- ingrained agency history of modifying public lands to achieve "desired conditions," an idea laden with value bias even in the best of times. Measuring natural conditions with a tiny yardstick necessarily shifts the focus to human preference. Throw climate change and all of its uncertainties into the mix, and the increasing urge to actively maintain static conditions becomes all the more problematic.

Further illustrating the problem, oftentimes agency managers don't agree on the past time-point for demonstrating what is "natural" for the area. For example, the Forest Service proposed to (re)introduce mountain goats to Wilderness in Utah stating that "mountain goats will be considered part of the natural conditions present at the time of wilderness designation, but it must be made clear that this does not imply that we believe mountain goats are native." Forest Service, Minimum Requirements Analysis - Bighorn Sheep and Mountain Goat Disease Study, 6 (2017). Yet, in another example, the Forest Service, in conjunction with the National Park Service, is eradicating an "exotic mountain goat population" on the Olympic Peninsula due to "adverse impacts on the natural quality of designated wilderness." National Park Service, Olympic Nat'l Park, Draft Mountain Goat Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement, i, iii (2017); see also National Park Service, Olympic Nat'l Park, Olympic National Park Minimum Requirements Analysis, 2017; Forest Service, Olympic, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, and Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests, Minimum Requirements Analysis Mountain Goat Removal from Olympic National Forest Wilderness Areas, 2016. In the case of the Olympics, mountain goats were introduced in the 1920s[mdash]well before wilderness designations in the 1980s[mdash]but the Park Service and Forest Service do not consider them part of natural wilderness conditions. See Olympic Nat'l Park, Draft Mountain Goat Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement at 2; Olympic, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, and Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests, Minimum Requirements Analysis Mountain Goat Removal from

Olympic National Forest Wilderness Areas at F-6, F-18, F-21.

In yet another example, the Park Service relocated wolves to an island in Michigan because "[p]redation on the island has been minimal over the last five years due to the decreasing number of wolves on the island," and the Park Service "has observed changes in the ecosystem as a result of increased herbivory from the growing moose population." Wolves did not exist on the island until the 1950s and many of them were choosing to leave the island when ice bridges formed to the mainland. Nonetheless, the Park Service worried that the increased herbivory could accelerate vegetative changes already occurring as a result of global warming and reasoned that "introducing wolves immediately would re-establish a top- down, predator influenced system, thus decreasing herbivory and allowing forest succession to return to a historic trajectory." National Park Service, Isle Royale National Park Environmental Impact Statement to Address the Presence of Wolves, 67 (2018). It noted that under the no-action alternative, "the island ecosystem functions would continue to change, from the past predator influenced ecosystem, to an ecosystem primarily influenced by physical conditions and vegetation community structure[.]" Id. at 69, 73. It also admitted that "[t]here is debate among scientists as to which is most viable or preferable" and admits "[w]hether this is beneficial or adverse for the system depends on whether there is a preference for an ecosystem more influenced by predation or an ecosystem more influenced by bottom-up controls." Id. (emphasis added).

These issues are illustrative of agency tendency to manage for "desired conditions" and the tendency to conflate "desired conditions" with "natural conditions."

The Wilderness Act sought to remove agency bias and influence from the equation. Put another way:

In contrast to other public land management statutes, which typically authorize agencies to consider and weigh diverse values through exercise of their scientific and policy expertise, the Wilderness Act required certain areas to be managed predominantly for one use: wilderness

preservation....

Unlike all other land-management statutes, the Wilderness Act's basic purpose was not to delegate authority to expert agencies, but rather, to exclude certain lands from the application of the agencies' specialized expertise, to restrain agency flexibility, and to protect (with limited, narrow exceptions) certain lands from the impact of the sort of policy choices land managers typically make.

Sean Kammer, Coming to Terms with Wilderness: The Wilderness Act and the Problem of Wildlife Restoration, 43 ENVTL. L. 83, 100-101 (2013).

That Wildernesses have been affected by intentional human manipulation in the past (e.g. vegetative manipulation, development, fire suppression, etc.) or are affected by unintentional human influence now and will continue to be in the future (e.g. climate change) does not change how they are to be administered once designated as Wilderness. The drafters of the Wilderness Act understood:

[I]t would be impractical and unwise to require that lands be completely untrammeled prior to being designated, but [the drafters] fully expected wilderness areas, once designated, to be untrammeled into the future.

Id. at 106-107.

The statute, when read as a coherent whole, supports this position. The canons of statutory construction dictate that the term "natural conditions" be read in harmony with the term "untrammeled." See United States v. Powell, 6 F.3d 611, 614 (9th Cir. 1993) ("It is a basic rule of statutory construction that one provision should not be interpreted in a way which is internally contradictory or that renders other provisions of the same statute inconsistent or meaningless"); see also Wilderness Society, 353 F.3d at 60 ("a fundamental canon that the words of a statute must be read in their context and with a view to their place in the overall statutory scheme"); Kmart Corp. v. Cartier, Inc., 486 U.S. 281, 291 (1988) ("In ascertaining the plain meaning of [a] statute, the court must look to the particular statutory language at issue, as well as the language and design of the statute as a whole."); United States v. Lewis, 67 F.3d 225, 228-29 (9th Cir. 1995) ("Particular phrases must be construed in light of the overall purpose and structure of the whole statutory scheme."). In other words, a statute should be construed "as a symmetrical and coherent regulatory scheme," Gustafson v. Alloyd Co., 513 U.S. 561, 569 (1995), and a "harmonious whole," Fed. Trade Comm'n v. Mandel Brothers, Inc., 359 U.S. 385, 389 (1959).

The Wilderness Act, read as an internally consistent document as required by law, does not pit the terms "untrammeled" and "natural" against one another. "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape," is statutorily defined as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" and an area "retaining its primeval character and influence, [hellip] which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions[hellip]." 16 U.S.C. [sect] 1131(c). Thus, what is natural for the area necessarily flows from what is untrammeled. Indeed, this is the common meaning of the term "natural." See Black's Law Dictionary 1026 (6th ed. 1990) (natural means wild, formed by nature, and not artificially made or cultivated); see also Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language (1960) (defining "natural" as 1) "Of, from, or by, birth; natural-born;" 5) "In accordance with, or determined by, nature;" and 9) "Not artificial"). It is the result of a process, not a static end point. Otherwise, the default position will always be to trammel Wilderness to comport with a land manager's notion of what is natural, even though various complicated factors[mdash]many of which we do not fully understand and cannot control[mdash]are always necessarily at play in shifting natural conditions.

Here, the Forest Service is conflating "desired conditions" with "natural conditions" in this case and creating a false conflict to justify actions in Wilderness. Ultimately, "whatever 'wilderness character' means, it cannot be

something that depends upon the active manipulations of humans." Sean Kammer, Coming to Terms with Wilderness: The Wilderness Act and the Problem of Wildlife Restoration, 43 ENVTL. L. 83, 86 (2013). Restraint and humility are important values underpinning the Wilderness Act, and "[l]and managers should exercise this same humility in dealing with wilderness areas, lest they lead us down a path to where there are no longer any places that are truly 'wild,' no places beyond the control of human institutions and cultural imperatives." Id.

The Keeping it Wild 2 protocol acknowledges the importance of protecting wilderness character as a process rather than an outcome:

Lucas (1973, p. 151) stated, "If ecological processes operate essentially uncontrolled within the Wilderness frame of reference, the results, whatever they might be, are desirable by definition. The object is not to stop change, nor to recreate conditions as of some arbitrary historical date, nor to strive for favorable change in big game populations or in scenic vistas. The object is to let nature 'roll the dice' and accept the results with interest and scientific curiosity."

Landres et al., Keeping It Wild 2: An Updated Interagency Strategy to Monitor Trends in Wilderness Character Across the National Wilderness Preservation System, 33 (2015).

Accordingly, the Forest Service should not authorize the Wilderness portion of the project because it is incompatible with the purpose of the Wilderness Act.

B. The agency ignited fire is inconsistent with the Wilderness Act (See also 10-13-2020 Comment Letter at 4-5)

The proposed agency-ignited fires here are outside the scope of the special provision for controlling fire in the Wilderness Act. See 16 U.S.C. 1133(d)(1) ("such measures may be taken as may be necessary in the control of fire"). While the status quo may trammel Wilderness via firefighting, Section 1133(d)(1) of the Wilderness Act was written, for better or worse, to address the specific issue of fire suppression itself rather than engaging in trammeling actions like pre-suppression agency ignited fire. Indeed, when Congress felt pre-suppression actions were warranted, it approved those activities in specific legislation. One example is legislation establishing some of the additions to the Ventana Wilderness where undefined but "acceptable" "pre-suppression" activities in Wilderness were specially provided for within the legislation. See Public Law 107-370 [sect] 4(a) (Dec. 19, 2002) (distinguishing between fire "presuppression" and "suppression" activities and providing for both). Agency-ignited fire is something different[mdash]a means to an end, a manipulative tool meant to supplant natural processes and achieve desired conditions.

To the extent that agency-ignited fire is an attempt to take the place of natural burns, as Bill Worf, former Forest Supervisor and first Forest Service National Wilderness Program lead, said, "No fire specialist I know is proposing to go out on a hot August afternoon with fire danger at extreme and start setting fires. Yet before humans started suppressing them, lighting fires started under those conditions probably accounted for most of the burned acres." Here, the Forest Service indicates that agency-ignited fire will be used to mimic natural fire,

but it is clear that mid-high intensity fires will not be allowed to burn and lightening-caused fires will continue to be suppressed. See, e.g. FEIS at 326. This is trammeling, and it is fundamentally at odds with Wilderness preservation.

1. Lighting fires with helicopters is not necessary to meet minimum requirements for administration of the Mission Mountains Wilderness (See also 10-13-2020 Comment Letter at 7-8)1

"The agency charged with administering a designated wilderness area is responsible for preserving its wilderness character." High Sierra Hikers Ass'n v. Blackwell, 390 F.3d 630, 646 (9th Cir. 2004) (citing 16 U.S.C. [sect]1133(b)). Congress made the mandate to protect wilderness character paramount over other land-management considerations, see 16 U.S.C. [sect]1133(b), and expressly prohibited certain activities that it determined to be antithetical to wilderness preservation, including "landing of aircraft" and "use of motor vehicles [or] motorized." Id. [sect]1133(c); see also 36 C.F.R. [sect] 261.18(c) (Forest Service regulations prohibiting "[l]anding of aircraft, or dropping or picking up of any material, supplies, or person by means of aircraft, including a helicopter" in National Forest Wilderness); 36 C.F.R. [sect] 293.6 (prohibiting "mechanical transport," "landing of aircraft," and "dropping of materials, supplies, or persons from aircraft" in wilderness except as provided by Wilderness Act). This prohibition is one of the strictest prohibitions in the Act. See Wilderness Watch v. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Serv., 629 F.3d 1024, 1040 (9th Cir. 2010). These uses and activities may be authorized by the Forest Service only where "necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of [the Wilderness Act]." 16 U.S.C. [sect] 1133(c).

"Helicopters carry 'man and his works' and so are antithetical to a wilderness experience. It would be a rare case where machinery as intrusive as a helicopter could pass the test of being 'necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area.'" Wolf Recovery Found. v. U.S. Forest Serv., 692 F. Supp. 2d 1264, 1267-68 (D. Id. 2010); see also Mont. Wilderness Ass'n v. McAllister, 666 F.3d 549, 556 (9th Cir. 2011) (stating that, "from a common-sense perspective," helicopter presence "would plainly degrade ... wilderness character"). Accordingly, under the Wilderness Act, the Forest Service may only approve helicopter activities in the Wilderness if the Forest Service rationally demonstrates agency-ignited fire and whitebark pine planting is necessary to meet minimum requirements for administration of the area for the purpose of the Wilderness Act, and there is no alternative to otherwise-prohibited uses that would achieve that purpose. See 16 U.S.C. [sect] 1133(c).

The Forest Service's authorization violates the Wilderness Act because, as discussed above, the project is not necessary for administering the Mission Mountains Wilderness pursuant to the Wilderness Act. 16

U.S.C. [sect]1133(c). Instead, the project goals and methods are fundamentally at odds with the Wilderness Act's mandate to preserve the Mission Mountain Wilderness's "untrammeled" character and "natural conditions." Id. [sect]1131(c).

Additionally, even if the project could be construed as necessary for preserving the Mission Mountains

1 It is unclear from the FEIS and ROD whether helicopters will be used in Wilderness for activities other than lighting fires, or whether other motorized activities will be authorized in Wilderness. In the "recommended wilderness" discussion, the Forest Service indicates they will use helicopters to haul slingloads of seedlings and use chainsaws. See, e.g. FEIS at 357. If these prohibited activities will also occur in the Mission Mountains Wilderness, the Forest Service must disclose that information and demonstrate a specialized finding of necessity (which includes a determination that prohibited activities are authorized only to the extent necessary). Barring that, the authorizations are unlawful. Similarly, because recommended wilderness is managed as wilderness, the Forest Service is also required to make a specialized finding of necessity for prohibited activities in recommended wilderness. Wilderness Watch's concerns raised throughout this objection also apply to recommended wilderness.

Wilderness, which it cannot, the authorization still violates the Wilderness Act because it is not the

minimum requirement for administering the area pursuant to the Wilderness Act. Wilderness Watch v.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Serv, 629 F.3d at 1037 (an agency authorizing activity generally prohibited by the Wilderness Act must find the action is necessary and implemented only to the extent necessary). "The limitation on the Forest Service's discretion to authorize prohibited activities only to the extent necessary flows directly out of the agency's obligation under the Wilderness Act to protect and preserve wilderness areas." High Sierra Hikers Ass'n v. Blackwell, 390 F.3d at 647.

The analyses in the project documents fall far short of meeting the standards set forth by the Wilderness Act for approving normally prohibited activities in Wilderness. The FEIS very briefly addresses helicopter use in Wilderness, noting only that "[p]rescribed burn activities would negatively affect solitude from low-altitude helicopter disturbance" and "[h]elicopters and crews would cause noise and visual disturbances to visitors in the Mission Mountain Wilderness." FEIS at 325. The Forest Service discounts the impact of helicopter intrusions noting "the duration of these effects on solitude are short- term as the use of helicopters below 2,000 feet over the wilderness for an unknown number of days would have a negative impact to this wilderness quality during operations but after the helicopter use is completed, the effect would be over." Id. Even though the Forest Service is authorizing 15 years of this wilderness-degrading activity, FEIS at 320, this appears to be the entire analysis for helicopter impacts on the Mission Mountains Wilderness in the FEIS, and the ROD is silent on this issue. There is no discussion on the extent of helicopter (or other motorized) activity authorized, no finding on why that extent is necessary, no discussion of cumulative impacts to Wilderness from those intrusions, and no discussion as to why other non-motorized methods in Wilderness could not achieve the Forest Service's goals in whole or in part. See Wolf Recovery Foundation, 692 F.Supp.2d 1264, 1270 (D. Id. 2010) ("[g]iven that [one helicopter] project is allowed to proceed, the next project will be extraordinarily difficult to justify" and "will face a daunting review because it will add to the disruption and intrusion" from prior projects); see also Wilderness Watch v. Vilsack, 229 F.Supp.3d 1170 (D. Id. 2017) (finding a subsequent helicopter project in Wilderness unlawful). Such an incredibly cursory analysis falls fall short of the Wilderness Act's stringent standard for

authorizing normally prohibited uses in Wilderness.

Additionally, the Forest Service does not explain why it can't take actions that do not offend the Wilderness Act. The FEIS states, "In the context of the Mid-Swan project, our departure from historical conditions analysis has determined that presence and amount of several vegetation types, with unique cover type and structural stages, have resulted in buildup of unnatural fuels above the historic levels due to previous fire suppression. The potential fire behavior generated by these fuels poses an unacceptable risk of fire escaping outside the wilderness and onto private lands." FEIS at 45. There appears to be little additional explanation as to why agency-ignited fire is necessary in Wilderness. Such an incredibly cursory analysis cannot justify helicopter-assisted trammeling actions in designated Wilderness for 15 years.

The Forest Service does not explain why it can't rely more on lightening-ignited fires to restore natural fire processes to the Wilderness. Forest Service management guidance directs the Forest Service to "not use management ignited fire to achieve wilderness fire management objectives where lightning-caused fires can achieve them." FSM 2324.22(8). The Forest Service gives no indication that it will rely now, or in the future, on natural fire. It merely notes that "[d]ue to past fire suppression and high fuel loads, it is reasonable to think that fire in the Mission Mountains Wilderness would likely continue to be suppressed." FEIS at 326.

There is no discussion regarding actions that can be taken outside of Wilderness to reduce fire risk to private property, even though the science is clear that actions taken closer to structures are more effective at protecting the structures from fire. See discussion below. These measures could be taken,

individually or in concert with allowing natural fire to burn, without authorizing prohibited activities in wilderness.

Much of the cursory analysis on fire in Wilderness is likely because the Forest Service wishes to use fire as a manipulative tool in its whitebark pine planting project, and agency guidance does not allow this in Wilderness. In responding to concerns about effectiveness of agency-ignited fires in reducing wildfire risk, the Forest Service responded that "[f]uel reduction work in and out of the WUI is designed not just for fuel reduction, but also for multiple ecological benefits." FEIS at 45. However, the Forest Service Manual directs the Forest Service to "not use prescribed fire in wilderness to benefit wildlife, maintain vegetative types, improve forage, or enhance other resource values." FSM 2324.22.

If the Forest Service could approve helicopter-assisted burning any time the Forest Service wanted to manipulate vegetative conditions and/or future fire behavior, the statutory prohibition against helicopter use would be meaningless. Additionally, as discussed below, the effectiveness of such activities is contested in the scientific community. Such a vague and speculative statement of possible utility to cannot suffice for the requisite "specialized" finding of necessity. See Wilderness Watch v. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Serv., 629 F.3d at 1036-1039.

2. Trammeling Wilderness with agency-ignited fire is not consistent with the best available science
(See also 10-13-2020 Comment Letter at 4-7)

Prescribed fire in the Wilderness may have unintended negative consequences on the ecology, wildlife, historic fire regime, and natural ecological processes, a problem the Wilderness Act sought to prevent by mandating that administering agencies protect[mdash]above all other agency imperatives[mdash]the Wilderness's untrammeled character. Justifications for this project are based on faulty and scientifically controversial theories regarding: historic fire regimes and stand densities, the effectiveness of fuels reduction to lessen future fire severity, beetle-killed stands and fire risk, threats to Wilderness values due to high-severity fires, and threats to firefighter safety and resources outside of Wilderness. Possible negative impacts to wildlife and habitats due to prescribed fire have not been adequately analyzed in the project documents. Wilderness areas are not appropriate places for a manipulative management experiment.

Our supplemental comments addressed this issue in some detail:

The DEIS suggests the action is important so that fire cycles are not missed. While that premise itself is contrary to the body of scientific evidence, it should also be pointed out that unlogged and unmanipulated areas are much more resilient to the effects of large fire even with supposedly missed fire cycles. Naficy et al. 2010 found a significant distinction between fire-excluded ponderosa pine forests of the northern Rocky Mountains logged prior to 1960 and paired fire- excluded, unlogged counterparts:

We document that fire-excluded ponderosa pine forests of the northern Rocky Mountains logged prior to 1960 have much higher average stand density, greater homogeneity of stand structure, more standing dead trees and increased abundance of fire-intolerant trees than paired fire-excluded, unlogged counterparts. Notably, the magnitude of the interactive effect of fire exclusion and historical logging substantially exceeds the effects of fire exclusion alone. These differences suggest that historically logged sites are more prone to severe wildfires and insect outbreaks than unlogged, fire-excluded forests and should be considered a high priority for fuels reduction treatments. Furthermore, we propose that ponderosa pine forests with these distinct management histories likely

require distinct restoration approaches. We also highlight potential long-term risks of mechanical stand manipulation in unlogged forests and emphasize the need for a long- term view of fuels management.

Further, it is questionable whether fire suppression has had any meaningful effect on the Mission Mountain Wilderness. Its remote nature and history suggest otherwise. According to Wilderness.net, which is the cooperative effort between the federal agencies (including the Aldo Leopold Research Institute and the Carhart Center) and the University of Montana:

The Mission Mountains are a land of ragged peaks with snow on them most of the year, small active glaciers, alpine lakes, meadows, clear streams that run icy cold, slab-like boulders, vertical cliff faces, and talus slopes. The average elevation is 7,000 feet. In the northern portion you'll find the terrain less severe and more heavily timbered. The southern portion, however, receives more visitors, primarily around the alpine lakes (most of which do not thaw until mid-June). The dense forest includes pine, fir, larch, and western red cedar. In summer high basins are painted with a sea of wildflowers. The Flathead and Pend Oreille Indians once hunted, fished, gathered berries, and sought visions (they would go into the Wilderness alone, often depriving themselves of food and water, in hopes of seeing a vision) in the rough and broken Mission Mountains. The first organized exploration of this area did not occur until 1922, after which part of the region was set aside as the Mission Mountains Primitive Area in 1931 and then expanded in 1939. The Wilderness you see today stretches for about 30 miles and varies from two to six miles in width. Wildlife lives in abundant numbers in the Missions: elk and deer, black bears and grizzly bears, mountain goats and mountain lions, a few gray wolves, and a wealth of smaller furbearing animals. Approximately 50 species of birds have been identified, including bald eagles. A small population of fish is generally confined to the lakes. About 45 miles of maintained trails are used almost exclusively by backpackers, the terrain being generally unsuitable for horses. Few of the trails are easy, and many are tremendously steep. There is no overnight camping at Glacier, Upper or Lower Cold Lakes. The area shares its entire western and southern boundaries with the Flathead Indian Reservation. A permit must be obtained from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes to enter the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness.

There is little scientific support for assuming that ecosystems can be restored or continuously maintained by such manipulative actions. Biologist Roger Payne states the following:

One often hears that because humanity's impact has become so great, the rest of life on this planet now relies on us for its succession and that we are going to have to get used to managing natural systems in the future[mdash]the idea being that since we now threaten everything on earth we must take responsibility for holding the fate of everything in our hands. This bespeaks a form of unreality that takes my breath away[hellip] The cost of just finding out enough about the environment to become proper stewards of it[mdash]to say nothing of the costs of acting in such a way as to ameliorate serious problems we already understand, as well as problems about which we haven't a clue[mdash]is utterly prohibitive.

And the fact that monitoring must proceed indefinitely means that on economic grounds alone the only possible way to proceed is to face the fact that by far the cheapest means of continuing life on earth as we know it is to curb ourselves instead of trying to take on the proper management of the ecosystems we have so entirely disrupted.

(Payne 1995). Weather conditions such as drought and wind are the primary drivers of fire

behavior, and generally override on-the-ground forest conditions. Large wildfires are not generally influenced by previous fuels reduction measures. Similarly, research suggests most fires are not unhealthy (and most forests are not out of whack just because of fire suppression) as stand-replacing fires are normal in many forest types, including ponderosa pine forests2. See for example, Lydersen et al. 2014, Noss et al 2006, Baker and Williams 2015, Williams and Baker 2014, Baker et al. 2007, Baker 2015, Pierce et al. 2004, Baker and Ehle 2001, Sherriff

et al.

2014, Odion et al 2014, and Schoennagel et al. 2004.

We also refer you to the following books: Fire Ecology in Rocky Mountain Landscapes by William Baker, 2009,which is used as a text for fire ecology courses3; The Ecological Importance of Mixed-Severity Fires: Nature's Phoenix, edited by PhD ecologists Dominick DellaSala and Chad Hanson, which synthesizes published, peer-reviewed science investigating the value of mixed- and high-severity fires for biodiversity, and Wildfire: A Century of Failed Policy, edited by George Wuerthner. These along with the citation above provide a counterpoint to the narrative in the DEIS. In fact the science cited in the DEIS itself does not make the case for the heavy-handed manipulation of the Mission Mountains Wilderness.

The Mission Mountains Wilderness is not at increased risk of high severity fire. In fact, wilderness burns with lower severity than forests that have been logged. See Bradley et al. 2016 and the ICEBMP science reports. As such, the stated reason in the DEIS for the wilderness burning is baseless.

Similarly, the DEIS does not indicate how often the agency perceives burning would need to be redone. The 13,500 plus acres would be burned during a 15 year-time frame, but we don't know how long the trammeling would occur in the future. The DEIS admits that fire suppression would continue under alternative B (pages 295 and 296), though it may be reduced in the future by an unknown amount. Aside from the inadequate analysis of future impacts, it seems obvious that regardless of whether the agency ignites fire on over 13,500 acres, the Forest Service may not allow natural fire to play its role in the Mission Mountains Wilderness at all. Research (see Baker and Rhodes 2008, and Rhodes 2007) show that it is unlikely that these treatments would occur where a fire might strike anyway. Thus, the project is not the minimum necessary for the purpose of the Act.

The FEIS notes a "study in the Mission Mountains Wilderness found a variety of moderate to low frequency mixed and stand replacing historical fire regimes (Barrett, 2008)." The Wilderness Act gives direction to protect natural processes. Allowing higher intensity wildfires in the wilderness is necessary for proper ecological functions in these forests. Wildfire should be allowed to burn in the Wilderness.

2 There is also a difference between pulse and press disturbances. Forests and watersheds have evolved with stand- replacing pulse disturbances, which provide watershed benefits.

3 A review of Dr. Baker's book, written by a Forest Service researcher and listed on the Forest Service research website (Yaussy 2010) notes that, "Baker contends, with documented support, that frequent low-intensity fires have had little effect on shaping the ecosystems that exist, now or in the past, within the Rocky Mountains. Large, infrequent, high- severity fires are the only events which covered enough landscape area to be influential in his opinion." It continues, "To support the conclusion of infrequent, high-severity fires, the author relies on his expertise in fire history research.

Misinterpretation of fire history statistics is a bone of contention for the author, and Baker devotes a chapter to informing his readers what, exactly, the different metrics mean, and how they should be interpreted, while giving examples of errors in the literature. Later in the book, it is revealed how some of these misinterpretations have carried over into the fire behavior software which is relied upon by fire management teams."

Prescribed fire is a human management tool that attempts to mimic natural processes, but is not a natural process and is subject to flawed assumptions and applications. Flawed assumptions in this FEIS are used to justify this proposal to artificially manipulate and alter the natural Wilderness environment, including:

[middot] Studies repeatedly show that fuels treatments do not affect the size or intensity of wildfire. Rather, climate and weather conditions are the primary drivers of fire behavior.

[middot] Fire regimes (including size and frequency) and forest densities are well within natural and historic regimes and conditions. Fire return intervals in the Wilderness are relatively long, and have not been altered by modern suppression efforts.

[middot] This proposed human intervention in the Wilderness using prescribed fire management is based on faulty and incomplete assumptions, and may create unintended negative effects. For example, it may produce larger percentages of unburned or low or moderate intensity or severity burns compared to compared to historic norms. Effects of artificially managing the Wilderness using prescribed fire may potentially cause forests to be outside of actual historic range of variability. Scientific studies showing controversy about historic forest density and fire regimes, particularly in higher elevation areas, were either not disclosed or adequately analyzed.

[middot] Current policies of fire fighting policies are putting firefighters at risk. The actions in this proposal are not needed to change current policies. Indeed, rationales and justifications used to argue that this project is necessary were flawed.

[middot] Based on scientific realities regarding fire regimes and behavior, fire risk, and forest density, the justifications for this management proposal in the Wilderness are invalid and do not meet any criteria for human intervention, assuming they exist, described in the Wilderness Act or in associated regulations.

Post-fire appearance is different in prescribed fires compared to wildfires. The benefits and risks of wildfire and prescribed fire should not be conflated, even though they may partly overlap. The USFS acknowledges that the project will negatively affect the untrammeled component of wilderness character. This is a certainty if the project moves forward. However, the possible long-term negative impacts of the project (degradation of scenic values and recreation, decreases in snags and dead wood and other wildlife habitats (Pilliod et al. 2006), artificially manipulated forest stands that may develop outside of normal and historic trajectories, etc. is not adequately disclosed or considered. The USFS offers no convincing rationale to suggest that the project will not cause long-

term impacts. Also, it is highly unlikely that this project will lessen the perceived need for "repeated, future trammeling actions through fire suppression", or that the project will return the Wilderness to a supposed more natural balance.

Noss et al. (2006) notes that:

Above all, a guiding principle of forest management should be a precautionary approach that avoids ecological harm.

Wilderness is not the place for experimental large-scale manipulative management based on uncertain and/or flawed assumptions. Experimental large-scale manipulative management is not in line with the spirit or directives of the Wilderness Act.

We are extremely concerned that the use of prescribed fire in the Wilderness will open the door to increased manipulation in this and other Wilderness areas. We are very concerned that active management in Wilderness will become more common, widespread, and invasive due to the precedent this project will set if it is implemented. We are very concerned about increased human intervention in

Wilderness areas, which seem to be proposed despite a veritable mountain of scientific evidence showing that Wilderness areas are, due to their least-managed conditions, providing the most high- quality and important core habitats and connectivity for wildlife across the landscape. Also despite evidence that these areas have not departed from HRV for vegetation or fire regime parameters, and that fuels reduction efforts are unlikely to be effective or make economic sense, and in the face of increased pressure from climate change, among other issues. Active management in the Wilderness sets a bad precedent that risks increased artificial manipulation in the last remaining areas that have been comparatively free of human intervention and management, and which as a direct result of their relatively unmanaged state are providing absolutely crucial habitat and disproportionately supporting the viability of many sensitive and at-risk species.

Weather conditions such as drought and wind are the primary drivers of fire behavior, and generally override on-the-ground forest conditions. Large wildfires are not generally influenced by previous fuels reduction measures. For example, Lydersen et al. (2014) state:

Our results suggest that wildfire burning under extreme weather conditions, as is often the case with fires that escape initial attack, can produce large areas of high-severity fire even in fuels-reduced forests with restored fire regimes.

Our study suggests that even fire-restored forests may not be resistant to high-intensity wildfire that escapes suppression during extreme weather conditions.

Our supplemental comments also raised the issue that stand-replacing fires are normal in these ecosystems and we provided more citations for that conclusion.

The short-term and temporary nature of the perceived fuels reduction benefits from this project are not likely to result in meaningful changes to fire intensity, size, or severity. If the estimated effectiveness is only approximately 20 years, then the justification for this project is even more tenuous. Rhodes and Baker (2008) found that:

[u]sing extensive fire records for western US Forest Service lands, we estimate fuel treatments have a mean probability of 2.0-7.9% of encountering moderate-or high-severity fire during an assumed 20-year period of reduced fuels.

In sum, the controversy surrounding the efficacy and unintended consequences of agency-ignited fire, particularly when combined with ongoing natural fire suppression, further militates against these trammeling actions in Wilderness.

C. Planting selectively bred trees is inconsistent with the Wilderness Act (See also 10-13-2020 Comment Letter at 8-9)

The Forest Service's whitebark pine planting goals and methods are also at odds with the administration of "area[s] where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man," 16 U.S.C. [sect] 1131(c), and Forest Service direction to "[m]aintain wilderness in such a manner that ecosystems are unaffected by human manipulation and influences so that plants and animals develop and respond to natural forces." FSM 2320.2. As Howard Zahniser (the primary drafter of the Wilderness Act) said, wilderness stewards must be "guardians, not gardeners."

Wilderness Watch appreciates the concern for long-term viability of whitebark pine, however the project materials fail to recognize that this species lives, in part, in an endangered landscape. The project

activities authorized here, and what they project for the future of Wilderness administration, squarely puts the long-term viability of Wilderness in the cross-hairs. But much like the terms "natural" and "untrammeled," the perceived conflict between Wilderness preservation and whitebark pine preservation is a false one. Neither Wilderness nor whitebark pines will be served by an experiment that destroys Wilderness in an attempt to propagate whitebark pine. The unintended consequences emanating from the gardening approach could be

more harmful to whitebark pine in the long run than allowing evolution to play out in Wilderness, as the Wilderness Act requires. And gardening will clearly be more harmful to Wilderness than letting untrammeled processes play the cards that have been dealt.

Across its range, roughly 29 percent of whitebark pine habitat is in Wilderness. Proposed Rule: Threatened Species Status for Pinus albicaulis (Whitebark Pine) with Section 4(d) Rule, 85 Fed Reg. 77408, 77417 (Dec. 2, 2020). Given the variables and unintended consequences inherent in manipulations, that 29 percent should be set aside as an important baseline for comparison to our tinkerings elsewhere. Further, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acknowledges "a high degree of uncertainty inherent in any predictions of species responses to a variety of climate change scenarios. This is particularly true for whitebark pine given it is very long lived, has a widespread distribution, has complex interactions with other competitor tree species, relies on Clark's nutcracker for both distribution and regeneration, and has significant threats present from disease, predation, and fire." U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Species Status Assessment Report for the Whitebark Pine, Pinus albicaulis, 54 (2018).

The Fish and Wildlife Service also acknowledges "[t]here is no known way to control, reduce, or eliminate either mountain pine beetle or white pine blister rust[hellip]particularly at the landscape scale needed to effectively conserve this species." Id. at 108. In fact, "the vast scale at which planting rust- resistant trees would need to occur, long timeframes in which restoration efficacy could be assessed, and limited funding and resources, will make it challenging to restore whitebark pine throughout its range.

One estimate indicates that if planting continues at its current pace, it would take over 5000 years to cover just 5 percent of the range of whitebark pine[.]" Id. at 41. Blister rust, like climate change, acid- rain deposition, even light or sound pollution, is an unintended human introduction, not an overt, intentional trammeling of Wilderness that can be corrected with minimal intrusion.

Our supplemental comments stated:

To our knowledge, a white bark pine program like this has never been done in Wilderness in Region I. As such, it is precedential. The obvious question is why can't this be done outside of Wilderness, as required by Forest Service policy? The DEIS admits direct seeding has very spotty results, from 8 to 45 percent. DEIS at 120. As such, it is an experiment that must be tried outside of Wilderness, if at all, before the agency even considers going into Wilderness. See FSM 2324.42. The DEIS cites to Keane et al., but fails to follow its guidance, which requires that areas outside of Wilderness be prioritized, whether significant improvement in survival will occur, and the impacts on Wilderness. Thus, the DEIS does not adequately evaluate the impacts to Wilderness.

The Manual direction is clear; this kind of activity is to only occur in extremely rare circumstances. The proper citations are not referenced and were apparently ignored (see FSM 2323.52 and 2323.54). In addition, the reforestation referred to seems directed at an unnatural event that prevented any trees from growing back. Natural reforestation is occurring even if the percentages of some species, like white bark pine, are much less than it was historically.

Similarly, the other purported benefits would be well beyond the time horizon of this project, including benefits to grizzlies. The question that needs to be answered is whether planting seeds

now will result in 80 plus years, a viable white bark pine forest? This is not considered at all. Indeed, it will take decades to determine if this experiment, for that is what it is, will even work. There is no analysis of the amount or viability of white bark pine stands in the project area or Mission Mountain Wilderness. Simply put, it has nothing to do with a legitimate recovery plan for a species and everything to do with manipulating wilderness. Finally, showing restraint is how we honor and respect Wilderness.

Regarding blister rust, nature is slowly healing the destruction wrought by humans through natural selection of resistant trees and seedlings. This natural process will provide the most durable and effective resistance to one of the pests (rust). In host-pathogen interactions, when a virulent pathogen first meets its host, it usually kills it quickly. However, this is neither advantageous to the host nor the pathogen. Thus, the relationship evolves over time, and eventually the pathogen does less and less damage to the host, until eventually the relationship may become mutualistic or symbiotic. Meddling in this natural process by artificially increasing the numbers of some resistant genotypes, is likely to select for virulence in the pathogen and extend the process, or even short circuit it.

The related white pine issue provides an interesting lesson. With the resistant white pine breeding program, ratios of resistant to susceptible F2 progeny are very close to the 3:1 ratio expected with a single dominant resistance gene (Fins et al. 2001). The ability of pathogens to quickly mutate at avirulence loci to overcome resistance genes is well documented in many plant-pathogen interactions. In plants which are re-planted each year, this problem can be managed by monitoring the pathogen genotypes in the field, and then selecting host genotypes for the next year which are resistant to the current pathogen genotypes. Obviously, this is not possible with trees. Apparently, mutation to overcome white pine blister rust resistance has

already occurred in California and Oregon (Fins et al. 2001). It is likely that this has also already occurred in Idaho locations where up to two thirds of the genetically resistant trees have been killed by rust (Fins et al. 2001).

In any case, in the light of global warming this may all be for naught. Global warming could allow a native species, mountain pine beetle, to increase their elevation range as has occurred in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the Southern end of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Pine beetles are as effective and even quicker at killing white bark pines as blister rust.

There is no statutory authority to allow gardening in the Mission Mountains Wilderness. Even the FEIS recognizes that:

Although wilderness areas should allow for natural processes and disturbances, including from the effects of disease (MA1a-DC-02), the decline of whitebark pine from this non-native disease could be considered less than

"natural".

FEIS at 13. Again, the Wilderness Act is about natural conditions, resulting from an untrammeled landscape, not whether we think some unintended consequence of what happened 100 years ago in British Columbia makes the Mission Mountains less natural. It is about allowing natural processes, even if we think the dice are loaded, to operate rather than our actions. Natural conditions, as contemplated by the Wilderness Act, flow from an untrammeled environment. Demonstrating agency inconsistencies over what is considered natural and not, the FEIS states that blister rust, "has naturally spread from British Columbia where it was introduced from Asia, into the western United States since 1910." FEIS at 326. At the very least, Wilderness can teach us how nature deals with an invasive species over a length of time much greater than any human's life span.

The Wilderness Act militates against the manipulations authorized by this project[mdash]including agency-ignited fire and the planting of genetically-selected seedlings --regardless of how well-intended they may be.

Remedy For Item I and subparts

Drop the Wilderness and recommended Wilderness portions of the proposal.

II. The project violates NEPA and its implementing regulations (See also 10-13-2020 Comment Letter at 1-2)

For the reasons stated above, the project documents fail to provide a hard look at the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts to Wilderness and fully explore reasonable alternatives that would eliminate or lessen impacts to wilderness character from agency-burning, planting, and associated motorized intrusions.

Our comments stated:

According to the DEIS at 5, the purpose and need are "to restore and maintain terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity in light of a changing climate, and to reduce fire behavior in the WUI and in areas that have influence on fire behavior within the WUI." Wilderness is not mentioned in this purpose and need in spite of the fact over 13,500 acres of burning and nearly 2000 acres of planting are proposed in the DEIS. Indeed, Wilderness seems to be an inappropriate add on that is outside the purpose and need. Wilderness was not mentioned in the scoping letter and it appears there is no dedicated agency wilderness person listed on DEIS page 362 (there is a recreation planner, but no dedicated wilderness specialist). In any case, the actions proposed in the DEIS would seriously harm the Mission Mountains Wilderness and are contrary to the Wilderness Act. The wilderness analysis is deeply flawed for reasons detailed below including the rejection of the primary attribute of Wilderness[mdash]its wildness or untrammeled nature.

The purpose and need for the proposal deals with a massive landscape. Wilderness is not the focus of the overall purpose and need and it is not mentioned in part 1.3 of the FEIS (see pages 6 and 7). The later parts of

this Chapter 1 go on to propose a whole grab bag of ideas that are hardly a succinct purpose and need. The only place where Wilderness is mentioned substantively is in the fire history and the whitebark pine sections of Chapter 1.

The incorporation of the Mission Mountains Wilderness into this proposal seems to be an afterthought and thus mentioned in only a cursory manner. Given the highly protected status of designated wilderness and the known impacts to wilderness character over a long period of time (15 years) from the proposed activities, such a cursory review is not sufficient under the Wilderness Act or NEPA.

Remedy For Item II and subparts

Rescind the ROD and FEIS and, if this project is to go forward, come up with a succinct and focused purpose and need and an adequate evaluation of Wilderness in a supplemental EIS.

Alternatively, drop all activities in the Mission Mountains Wilderness and recommended Wilderness.

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