Data Submitted (UTC 11): 8/12/2022 7:00:00 AM
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Comments: Submitted via: objections-pacificsouthwest-regional-office@usda.gov

August 12, 2022

Objection Reviewing Officer

Deputy Regional Forester Elizabeth Berger

Acting Deputy Regional Forester, Al Olson

USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region

1323 Club Drive

Vallejo, CA 94592

Subject: Sierra and Sequoia National Forests Plan Revision Objection

Pursuant to 36 C.F.R. Part 218.8, the American Forest Resource Council (AFRC) and California Forestry Association (Calforests) file this objection to the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests Plan Revision. Dean Gould, Forest Supervisor Sierra National Forest; Forest Supervisor Teresa Benson, Sequoia National Forest; and Regional Forester Jennifer Eberlien are the responsible officials.

Calforests consists of private industrial forest owners, managers, and woods operators, as well as sawmills, veneer mills, and several biomass powerplants. Our members are committed to sustainable management of our private forest resources and supporting active forest management of National Forests within California. Much of California's forestry infrastructure is partially dependent on wood supply from the National Forests. Calforests actively promotes sustainable National Forest management providing healthy forests that are resistant to natural disturbances.

AFRC is an Oregon nonprofit corporation that represents the forest products industry throughout Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and California. AFRC represents over 50 forest product businesses and forest landowners. AFRC's mission is to advocate for sustained yield timber harvests on public timberlands throughout the West to enhance forest health and resistance to fire, insects, and disease. We do this by promoting active management to attain productive public forests, protect adjoining private forests, and assure community stability. We work to improve federal and state laws, regulations, policies and decisions regarding access to and management of public forest lands and protection of all forest lands.

Objectors' Designated Representatives

Steven Brink - Lead Objector

Calforests

Jerry Jensen

AFRC

Reasons for the Objection

The content of this objection below is based upon the prior specific written comments submitted by Calforests and AFRC in response to both the scoping notice and Draft EIS which are hereby incorporated by reference.

Calforests and AFRC have six objection points, all specific to the Sierra and Sequoia Forest Plans. The objections are identical for both Forest Plans. The only difference is, in some cases, the page citation in each Forest Plan differs from each other. The Forest Plan page numbers are listed with each objection below.

1. Standard TERR-FW-STD-01(b), listed on page 27 of each Plan, does not contain sufficient justification for removal of trees over 30-inches in diameter.

Excessive fuel loadings have contributed to extreme fire behavior in recent years. Forest managers should have the option of justifying the removal of trees over 30-inches in diameter to address this resource concern. Adding a standard that allows removal of felled trees 30-40[Prime] diameter at breast height (DBH) and downed woody debris sufficient to meet the fuel loading objective of 3-15 tons/acre in accordance with Forest Plan p. 34, Table 3, would afford managers that discretion.

Resolution Requested

Standard TERR-FW-STD-01(b) should be amended to include a provision that addresses fuel loading as outline above.

1. Guideline TERR-CES-GDL 05 is unnecessary to attain the desired end result described. Its inclusion in the Plan will hamper the Forest Service's ability to conduct effective post-fire treatments.

This Guideline requires the retention of 10% of high severity burn on certain sized fires. This retention prohibits salvage on that percentage in order to create "complex early seral habitat." This Guideline is based on a false assumption that complex early seral habitat and post-fire timber salvage are mutually exclusive. Desired Conditions outlined under TIMB-FW-DC notes that salvage of dead and dying trees captures some of the economic value of the wood while retaining key features in quantities that provide for wildlife habitat, soil productivity, and other desired conditions of ecosystems. The key features alluded to here likely include standing snags and down wood. The retention of these "key features" in areas where salvage is conducted will contribute to the establishment of "complex early seral habitat" and as such, renders Guideline TERR-CES-GDL 05 unnecessary.

Most importantly, complex early seral habitat is primarily a function of site preparation and reforestation techniques, not timber salvage. The absence of appropriate site preparation will ensure the abundance of early seral shrub species in addition to trees. Where trees are planted, planting densities, including in some cases use of clumps and gaps, can be adjusted to create growing space for some of those shrub species.

Furthermore, we are unaware of any conclusive research or empirical studies that indicate that complex early seral habitat is a reliable outcome from passive management following wildfire. On the contrary, numerous fires, where post-fire timber salvage, site preparation and reforestation was deferred, has led to type conversion to brushfields with minimal natural regeneration.

Ultimately, complex early seral habitat is a condition that can be mimicked through management techniques with or without timber salvage, and the mere absence of salvage does not increase the likelihood of complex early seral habitat establishing.

Resolution Requested

Remove Guideline TERR-CES-GDL 05 from both Plans as its inclusion will not assist in the development of complex early seral habitat.

1. The Standards and Guidelines listed under FIRE-CWPZ are insufficient at providing firefighter and public safety.

The hazard that dead, dying, and unstable trees pose to the public and firefighters has been well documented. Multiple challenges from special interest groups who prefer to see those hazards remain on the landscape has sent a confusing message to agency field staff on how to proceed with hazard tree removal and to what extent that removal should be. The Sierra and Sequoia National Forests have an opportunity to establish some clarity on these points, particularly on safety, in this Plan Revision. Although specifics on hazard trees are included as Guidelines, the importance of safety should cause the Guideline to be changed to a Standard.

Resolution Requested

Move the Guideline under FIRE-CWPZ-GDL 01(b) to a Standard under FIRE-CWPZ-STD 02.

1. The Standard listed under TIMB-FW-STD-05 is insufficient at addressing the threat of catastrophic wildfire.

TIMB-FW-STD-05 states that "[t]he quantity of timber sold per decade must be less than or equal to the sustained yield limit of 48.7 million cubic feet per year (or about 25 mmbf/year), with the following exceptions: salvage or sanitation harvesting of timber stands that are substantially damaged by fire, windthrow, or other catastrophe, or that are in imminent danger from insect or disease attack. In these situations, trees may be harvested over and above the sustained yield limit, consistent with the desired conditions for terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems."

This Standard appropriately permits timber harvest at levels that exceed the sustained-yield limit in response to disturbance events that are unforeseen at the present time. It also allows such timber harvest when done to mitigate the risk of disturbance related to insect or disease. However, the Standard omits mitigative treatments to avoid the risk of disturbance related to wildfire. If managers are afforded flexibility to address insect and disease risk, they should also be afforded the same flexibility to address the risk of wildfire.

Resolution Requested

Modify Standard TIMB-FW-STD-05 to read as follows with the proposed change in italics: The quantity of timber sold per decade must be less than or equal to the sustained yield limit of 48.7 million cubic feet per year (or about 25 mmbf/year), with the following exceptions: salvage or sanitation harvesting of timber stands that are substantially damaged by fire, windthrow, or other catastrophe, or that are in imminent danger from insect or disease attack or that pose a wildfire threat. In these situations, trees may be harvested over and above the sustained yield limit, consistent with the desired conditions for terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

1. The Standard that applies to Eligible, Suitable, or Recommenced Wild and Scenic Rivers should reflect the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and direction from applicable Forest Service Handbooks.

Section 4(d) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act provides:

The boundaries of any river proposed in section 1276(a) of this title for potential addition to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System shall generally comprise that area measured within one-quarter mile from the ordinary high water mark on each side of the river. In the case of any designated river, prior to publication of boundaries pursuant to section 1274(b) of this title, the boundaries also shall comprise the same area. This subsection shall not be construed to limit the possible scope of the study report to address areas which may lie more than one-quarter mile from the ordinary high water mark on each side of the river.

16 U.S.C. [sect] 1275(d).

Plan Standards should accurately reflect the statute it is complying with.

Resolution Requested

Modify MA-EWSR-STD to read as follows with additions in italics: "Manage eligible, suitable, or recommended rivers, to protect free-flow and outstandingly remarkable values and maintain preliminary classification in the river corridor [frac14] mile each side of the river (Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Section 4(d))."

1. Standards applicable to the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCT) do not adequately address safety of users.

In addition to posing a threat to forest system roads and infrastructure, dead and dying trees also pose a threat to recreators, including those using the PCT. As written, MA-PCTW-STD does not address this safety risk appropriately.

Resolution Requested

Amend MA-PCTW-STD to add 02 as follows: trees posing a hazard to the Trail as determined by the Forest Service shall be felled. Disposal of felled trees is at the discretion of the Forest Service. This amendment should also be added to MA-PCT-STD in the Sequoia Plan as 09.

This Objection was included in AFRC Comments (September 26, 2019) on p. 22 and Calforests/AFRC Comments (August 22, 2019) on p. 26, where it states: "A Desired Condition #15 (Sierra Plan p. 73) (Sequoia Plan p. 74) should be added that all system trails will have dead trees within reach of the trail felled for user safety."

Calforests and AFRC could not find any direction for maintenance of Forest Service system trails in the Sierra or Sequoia Forest Plans. If direction exists, our Objection regarding adding a STD for Safety should apply to all Forest Service system trails as well.

Request for Resolution Meeting

Pursuant to 36 C.F.R. [sect] 218.11, the objectors request to meet with the reviewing officer to discuss the issues raised in this objection and potential resolution. In the event multiple objections are filed on this decision, Calforests and AFRC respectfully request that the resolution meeting be held with all objectors present. Calforests and AFRC believe that having all objectors together at one time, though perhaps making for a longer meeting, in the long run will be a more expeditious process to either resolve appeal issues or move the process along. As you know, 36 C.F.R. [sect] 218.11 gives the Reviewing Officer considerable discretion as to the form of resolution meetings. With that in mind, Calforests and AFRC request to participate to the maximum extent practicable, and specifically request to be able to comment on points made by other objectors in the course of the objection resolution meeting.

Thank you for your efforts on this project and your consideration of this objection. Calforests and AFRC look forward to our initial resolution meeting. Please contact our representatives, Steve Brink and Jerry Jenson, at the addresses and phone numbers shown above, to arrange a date for the resolution meeting.

Sincerely,

Steven A. Brink Travis Joseph

Vice President - Public Resources President/CEO

Calforests AFRC