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Comments: PDF, with far better formatting, is attached below

From: Peggy Johnson

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28 August, 2023

Re: Sandwich Vegetation Management Project Draft Environmental Assessment and Preliminary Finding of No Significant Impact

Attn: Jim Innes, District Ranger

USDA Forest Service Saco Ranger District

33 Kancamagus Highway

Conway NH 03818

To the USFS,

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on your proposal for Vegetation Management in a part of the White Mountain National Forest where I have lived since 1968. In these fifty-five years, I have raised six children. Each has gone forth into the world strongly influenced by their years and upbringing here, in these hilly woods, by these rocky streams. It is literally in their bones: our water is collected from a spring which then flows by gravity to our house. These six children have in turn produced a total of six children, my grandchildren, so you could say that the legacy of that water is filtering out into the world at every moment.

It is not only water that you have considered in your report of July 2023, but many life forms in and features of the 650 fairly remote local woodland acres you propose clearcutting, burning, and otherwise managing - possibly with herbicides. Though I find no specific mention of herbicides in the proposal, I have heard it is often a tool in your management plans.

To my mind, the report raises many (but not enough) important issues, and calmly dismisses them. So, in an effort to be as particular as you require, I will say that on pages 1-47 there is consistent blandishment (dismissive reassurances), with the exception of two-thirds of page 30, which is a list of agencies and persons consulted.

My particular concern, other than the plants and animals who are not mentioned as consequential (possibly because they are numerous and therefore inconsequential?) is water. As you know, we in Wonalancet live at where the northernmost source of the Ossipee Aquifer has been traced.

Everything from here goes downstream through this stratified drift aquifer to all the communities of people, animals, and plants along the way to the Atlantic Ocean. Everything that is or happens atop the aquifer can seep or travel into it. From the ocean, it goes everywhere in the world, sloshing around in the tides, and by transpiration into our atmosphere, from where it can be carried world-wide by increasingly turbulent weather systems. I do not see any compelling reason to add to the acidity (page 24) or the sedimentation of surface waters (page 25), or the seeping of forever chemicals (not mentioned, but not to be overlooked) into this great body of water.

Any argument that everyone else is doing it is also not good enough: as the mother of six, I have heard that before. We need to aim higher. Yes, there are already plenty of roads and towns and dumps and gas stations atop this aquifer. No, they are not good for it, and adding to the burdens of an already busy eco-system of soil-dwelling soldiers and microbes seems silly - unless there is a really compelling reason. Is there a really compelling reason?

"The mission of the Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations."

I haven't discovered your reason, except that it is time to implement the plan (perhaps it is Land Management Consistency, page 19). But cutting the forest is not exactly the same as regular household management: it is more like doing demo than doing dusting. So I wonder at the rationale (I know, it's keeping a lot of folks busy already).

Forestry practices do evolve, and current thinking includes considering the wisdom of the earth as possibly even greater than that of mankind. (Page 5 - this "is not an activity authorized under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, as amended - Public Law 108-148"). And I wonder if there is any profit great enough from harvesting this timber (is it really estimated as 5 million board feet?) on these rocky hills of New Hampshire that is greater than our responsibility to stop roughing up these rugged crags and rocky slopes (erosion and water quality concerns, page 24), which have already spent a long time (tens of years? hundreds? eons?) creating the topsoil and humus such as there is, and which is trying to support the animals and plants currently living there.

So I wish to register objections to your conclusions related to matters of effects of your proposed project on:

Water quality

Sedimentation

Erosion

Acidity

Impact on wildlife

Impact on neighbors

Impact on trails and views

Pollution, including noise, traffic, and inevitable spills during machine use and maintenance

And:

Neglect to mention numerous plants and animals impacted

I do want to report that when I had some sick old beeches cut down to make way for some possibly healthier new hardwoods, what came was not the oak and maple that foresters expected (and you expect, page 16) but birch and, naturally, beech. It came in as thick as the impassible tangles in Sleeping Beauty. To turn that into anything "worthwhile" would require a lot of attention and management (a possibility I don't see mentioned).

And the necessary woods roads and log yards: really? scenic? no impact? (How do these topics go together? But they would have to, were the plan implemented). And the years this would take? And the trucks for hauling? And the noise? The grinding and stumping? Because - those new permanent wildlife areas and the mowing will take some doing! And the beating of Route 113A, a notoriously vulnerable road near a river? There are so many downsides.

At bottom, I wonder if the board feet realized would be worth it. My experience is that while these forests are made of trees, these trees are not prime specimens. And I know that the terrain is rough. Rough, rough, rough. When I owned the woodlot next-door, we didn't call it the woodlot. We called it the Rocky Place.

A sidebar on the USFS website describes you as "a Federal agency in service to the American people." I love that, and appreciate the opportunity as one of those American people to speak for my children and grandchildren and all the generations that might come after us and depend as we do on the water and minerals that are so basic to all life.

Last Saturday I stood in mosses, looking out to those mountains the Forest Service proposes cutting, among family, friends, and neighbors of Claude Wintner. He died last spring, but we celebrated and remembered his life, then watched as his sons set his stone near those of his parents. Claude was almost 85 when he died, a noted organic chemist and teacher. It was his belief that "in wildness is the preservation of the world." If an organic chemist can settle upon that Thoreau quote (from Walking) as a certain truth, you can be sure that every other possibility was considered, and that this was not an opinion, but found to be fundamental, a bedrock truth. In wildness is the preservation of the world. We need more of that.

I know mine is only a partial response but I do wish to register questions about or objections to parts of what you mention on almost every page of this Sandwich vegetation management project draft environmental assessment of July 2023.

And finally, I do appreciate your work and your outreach and the graphics of your report, I really do.

Thank you,

Peggy (Margaret) Johnson