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First name: Pat

Last name: Sweeney

Organization: Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup

Title:

Comments: Greetings

Please accept the attached PDF document as our objection to the Nez Perce-Clearwater NFs Forest Plan Revision and Species of Conservation Concern.

Objection Reviewing Officer January 24, 2024

USDA Forest Service Northern Region

26 Fort Missoula Road

Missoula, MT 59804

Subject: Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest Plan Revision

Dear Objection Reviewing Officer

Objector Pat Sweeney, representing the Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup (NWW), files this objection to the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest (NPC) Land Management Plan. Cheryl Probert, NPC Forest Supervisor, is the Responsible Official. We also object to the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests list of species of conservation concern, Leanne M. Marten, Regional Forester is the Responsible Official.

The Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup is a group of Huson/Ninemile/Alberton residents and other parties committed to promoting knowledge and stewardship of wildlife and habitats within these communities and surrounding public lands. Details about us can be found on our website: <http://www.ninemilewildlife.org/>.

We have sent letters dated January 23, 2018, on the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest alternative development document and August 26, 2014, on the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest Proposed Action for the Forest Plan Revision. Both of those letters expressed concerns for grizzly bears, wolverines, mountain goats, and the potential impacts of human incursions and impacts on their habitats and continued survival. It was pointed out that this is especially important in the Hoodoo Inventoried Roadless Area or the Great Burn Recommended Wilderness.

We object to the NPC's failure to include plan standards and guidelines relevant to wolverine habitat conservation.

The only protection for wolverines is included in FW-DC-WL-01. "The Nez Perce-Clearwater provides habitat conditions for federally listed threatened, endangered, and candidate plant and animal species that contribute to their recovery to the point at which listing is no longer appropriate. Habitat used by federally listed species provides conditions to meet their life history needs."

This desired condition (DC) is broad, non-specific, and difficult to quantify and does not address connectivity. There are no desired conditions, standards, or guidelines specific to wolverines that would contribute to their protection and recovery.

The North American wolverine was officially listed as threatened in the contiguous U.S. DPS of the wolverine by the US Fish and Wildlife Service on January 2, 2024 (USDI, Fish and Wildlife Service, 2023).

This listing's rationale and supporting information was noticed on November 30, 2023. This was after the Biological Assessment (BA) completion date of June 2023, when the wolverine was proposed for listing. The plan and the BA should be revised to incorporate the new information of the notice with the status change of the wolverine to threatened.

Page 387 of the BA states "The Nez Perce-Clearwater does not anticipate substantial changes to wolverine maternal or natal denning habitat over the anticipated life of the plan but, if conditions change in the future, or if research or monitoring indicates there is a need to address specific threats that are within Forest Service authority or capability to manage, the land management plan may be amended or revised in the future if necessary."

This statement does not account for climate change or for reducing the area protected as proposed wilderness in the Great Burn. This was partially acknowledged on page 391 of the BA "Potential for backcountry winter recreation to affect wolverines may increase under climate change if the reduced snowpack concentrates winter recreationists and wolverines in the remaining areas of persistent snow cover."

Page 388 of the BA "The State of Idaho identifies wolverines as a tier 1 species of greatest conservation need in their statewide wildlife action plan (Idaho Department of Fish and Game 2017). The Idaho Fish and Game established a statewide plan for wolverines titled the Management plan for the conservation of wolverines in Idaho.

In that plan they identify wolverine priority conservation areas as a framework for managing wolverines in the State of Idaho. The areas across the state with wolverine habitat were categorized as Tier I, Tier II, or Tier III to prioritize conservation work for wolverines. Nearly all the lands of the Nez Perce-Clearwater were identified as either Tier II or Tier III (moderate to low threats)."

This statement does not acknowledge that the Management plan for the conservation of wolverines in Idaho (included in the BA's Cited References) states on page 30, "Many of the GMUs comprising core wolverine habitat in Idaho were not ranked as Tier 1 (highest threat) PCAs due to permanent protections provided by wilderness and roadless designations, which limit potential threats." Those protections would be eliminated if over-snow vehicles and bicycles were allowed into the Hoodoo Roadless area and 1987 Plan recommended wilderness with the proposed changes under the new forest plan along the Idaho and NPC boundary mostly north of Fish Lake. This could possibly change the threat in this area to tier 1.

The Management plan for the conservation of wolverines in Idaho on page 21 contains a map titled Wolverine Predicted Dispersal Corridors. This map shows the predicted high use corridors almost perfectly match the state border between Idaho and Montana. This state-line area is also mapped as R1 primary and maternal habitats on pages 954 and 955 of the FEIS. There are no desired conditions, standards or guidelines specific to wolverines that would protect this corridor and primary habitat from human disturbance if mountain bikes and especially over-snow vehicles are allowed to use these areas.

Page 83728 (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service 2023) states "New research indicates that areas characterized by persistent spring snow are likely important for wolverine survival (e.g., caching food) in addition to denning and

reproduction." Page 83762 "Increased human development, infrastructure, and associated anthropogenic disturbance are expected to have direct and indirect effects to wolverine populations in the contiguous United States, including reducing the number of wolverines that can be supported by available habitat, reducing the ability of wolverines to travel between patches of suitable habitat[hellip]" Page 83771 "Therefore, due to the current lack of data sufficient to perform required analyses, we conclude that the designation of critical habitat for the DPS is not determinable at this time in accordance with 50 CFR 424.12(a)(2)(i). The Act allows the Service an additional year to publish a critical habitat designation that is not determinable at the time of listing (16 U.S.C. 1533(b)(6)(C)(ii))." As discussed above, the Great Burn habitat is both R1 primary wolverine habitat and a predicted high use corridor making it likely that the Great Burn will be designated as wolverine critical habitat within the year. All of the existing Great Burn recommended wilderness should be carried forward to promote wolverine recovery.

The plan and the BA should be revised to incorporate the new information that is included in the Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Threatened Species Status With Section 4(d) Rule for North American Wolverine published in the Federal Register on November 30, 2023.

Our preferred resolution would be to protect wolverine maternal or natal denning habitat by including those habitats in recommended wilderness designations which would keep them off-limits to over-snow vehicles.

Another resolution would be to adopt the following plan components to help promote the recovery of wolverine on the NPC:

? Desired condition. Wolverines persist and thrive on the NPC and conditions favor wolverine connectivity to ensure genetic interchange with neighboring populations that promote recovery of the species.

? Standard. Over-snow vehicle use is prohibited in wolverine maternal denning habitat from February 15th to May 15th.

We object to the NPC's failure to include plan standards and guidelines relevant to grizzly bear conservation.

Grizzly bears are listed as a threatened species in the contiguous U.S. The Bitterroot Ecosystem is a large habitat located primarily on the NPC and is one of the six identified grizzly bear recovery zones. It is one of the largest contiguous blocks of protected federal land remaining in the lower 48 states and it provides the best potential for grizzly bear recovery due to its expansive size and its location between several other recovery zones. Although individual grizzly bears have been documented in the Bitterroot Ecosystem, no established population [mdash] defined as having two or more breeding females or one female with two consecutive litters [mdash] are currently known to exist in this recovery zone. Grizzly bear populations are expanding and will likely soon naturally disperse to and become established in the Bitterroot Ecosystem. This would benefit grizzly bear recovery as potential genetic exchange between populations would be improved.

It is good that the Forest Plan has three desired conditions specific to supporting grizzly bears, but they could be improved. Specifically, FW-DC-WL-08. "Within occupied grizzly bear habitat, developed recreation sites, administrative sites, and dispersed recreation sites where garbage disposal services are provided, facilities are equipped with necessary infrastructure so that food, garbage, and other attractants can be made inaccessible to grizzly bears to reduce the potential of human-bear conflict." This desired condition will only take place in occupied grizzly bear habitat. Securing attractants benefits human safety and reduces conflicts with not only grizzly bears but also other wildlife such as black bears and raccoons.

FW-DC-WL-08 should be implemented forest wide rather than only in occupied grizzly bear habitat to reduce wildlife conflicts and promote human safety. An additional desired condition that should be adopted is within the Bitterroot Ecosystem grizzly bear recovery zone, food/wildlife attractant storage special order(s) shall apply to

NFS lands similar to the Food/Wildlife Attractant Storage Order Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Area (USDA, U.S. Forest Service. 2023).

Desired condition "FW-DC-WL-09. Wide-ranging species are free to move across and between habitats, allowing for dispersal, migration, genetic interaction, and species recruitment." While this DC seems to cover all the threatened carnivores, it is too broad and non-specific to grizzly bears. The location of the NPC is key to connecting the recovery zones. The Ninemile Demographic Connectivity Area (DCA), designed to support occupancy by female grizzly bears and allow movement to the Bitterroot Ecosystem from the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, is approximately 15 miles south of the Hoodoo Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA). The plan should enhance this potential linkage to the south as well as promoting linkage to the west toward the Yellowstone Ecosystem.

We object to the NPC's failure to include the mountain goat as a species of conservation concern and that there are no plan standards to promote mountain goat conservation.

Mountain Goat (*Oreamnos americanus*) an iconic species that best symbolize our wild alpine places, is listed on Idaho's State Wildlife Action Plan as a species of greatest conservation need in the Idaho State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP, IDFG 2017). Mountain Goats naturally occur at relatively low densities, in part due to Alpine habitat, sparse forage resources, interspecific competition, and patchy habitat. Most populations exhibit low productivity because females do not reproduce until age 3-4, females typically give birth to 1 kid (rarely twins), and juveniles and yearlings have low survival, with falls being one cause. Herds on the NPC are native and not introduced like many mountain goats east of the Continental Divide. Many of the populations are small and isolated demographically and genetically. Alpine habitat is limited and could become scarcer in the face of changing temperature and precipitation patterns and will likely affect the conservation of this species. Human encroachment into Mountain Goat habitat is a threat, particularly from road development, backcountry recreation, especially snowmobiles, and aircraft. It is possible that disease could also be impacting populations.

The rationale for omitting the mountain goat from the Nez-Clear SCC list contradicts the rationale for including the mountain goat on the SCC list for the adjacent Lolo National Forest with shared habitat and mountain goat populations. 6

The mountain goat should be included on the NPC SCC list as it is on the Lolo SCC list to resolve our objection. Standards protecting bighorn sheep should be modified to include mountain goats. The following two standards reflect the proposed changes underlined and in bold font.

FW-STD-WL-02. To prevent disease transmission between wild sheep and domestic sheep and goats, domestic sheep and goat grazing (excluding pack goats) shall not be authorized in or within 16 miles of bighorn sheep and mountain goat occupied core herd home ranges.

FW-STD-WL-03. New authorizations and permit reauthorizations for domestic goat packing shall follow best management practices and include provisions to prevent disease transmission between domestic goats and bighorn sheep and mountain goats.

We would also like to see the following desired condition and standard adopted:

* DC--Existing mountain goat populations persist and thrive through habitat protection and freedom from human disturbance during critical periods.

* Standard--Recreational over-snow vehicle use is prohibited in mountain goat winter range.

We object to the lack of protection of the Hoodoo IRA

We object to reducing the acreage of the important high elevation habitat important to the federally threatened wolverine, Canada lynx, grizzly bear, whitebark pine and the Idaho imperiled mountain goat. The area roughly south of Lolo Pass to just past Fish Lake is Inventoried Roadless and was recommended wilderness in the 1987 Forest Plan.

This high elevation alpine habitat includes cliffs, talus, connectivity, security, denning habitat, and the deep snow necessary for the life history of these and other species. The potential for lessened snow abundance and duration due to climate change makes it important to protect these limited areas that best produce the conditions favorable for denning grizzly bears and wolverine and allow Canada lynx to prosper. Changing the proposed plan to protect all the high elevation habitat from Lolo Pass to Granite Pass (all the 1987 recommended wilderness) by keeping it in recommended wilderness would eliminate some of the notable risks that these species would face from human disturbance. 7

Sincerely,

Pat Sweeney

Board Chair

Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup

22775 Nine Mile Road

Huson, MT 59846

406 626-1610