

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 1/26/2024 5:00:00 AM

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January 26, 2024

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RE: Comments on 12/20/23 Federal Register Vol 88, No 243 88042-88048

Submitted via email at US Forest Service NEPA Projects Home (usda.gov)

Dear Madam or Sir:

I just completed 16 years of service on the Board of School Directors of the Warren County School District (WCSD), located in the Allegheny National Forest (ANF), in Pennsylvania. The WCSD is a direct beneficiary of the 25% payments due from ANF operations under the Weeks Act (the statute that formed the ANF). I also live immediately adjacent to the ANF, and both the WCSD and my local community are significantly impacted by ANF decisions.

I am writing to oppose the above cited Scoping Notice, which I hereinafter referred to as the "Old Growth Proposal."

The Old Growth Proposal is in direct conflict with the prescription required to return the ANF to good health. The most recent ANF Forest Plan (the 2007 ANF Forest Plan) identified a timber age class distribution, upon the ANF, that was far from what was desired for good health.

The graph below shows, shows that in 2007, the ANF was already dangerously overstocked with

old timber:

2007 Timber Age Class

Distribution

90%

80%

1;; 70%

~ 60%

u.

- 50%

0

C: 40%

<l)

~ 30%

<l)

0.. 20%

10%

0%

-

<50 yrs

51-110 yrs >111 yrs

Age Class

Problems with the unhealthy age imbalance identified in the 2007 Forest Plan included enhanced susceptibility to disease, inadequate ability to stock the forest in the future, and inadequate habitat for wildlife.

The 2007 ANF Forest Plan also set forth the desired age class distribution. That desired distribution was radically different than the unhealthy conditions then prevailing in the ANF. The desired

distribution was as follows:

2007 Forest Plan Desired Condition

40

ao

20

16

10

6

l

0

> 110

61[middot]110 111*1 10

-

Unfortunately, conditions upon the ANF have not substantially improved since the adoption of the 2007 ANF Forest Plan. The ANF Monitoring and Evaluation Report covering years 2008 through 2013 found that: "Presently, approximately 3.4% of the ANF, or less than half of that desired, is in an early structural condition {{less than 20 years old}" and that, in general, the other manifestations of the serious age imbalance had not materially improved.

Recognizing these continuing serious health problems, the ANF leadership convened the Allegheny National Forest Health Collaborative. As a member of the WCSD Board of School Directors I served on that Health Collaborative. Beginning in 2017 the ANF leadership brought together over 70 organizations to address ANF forest health problems. The work continued for over two years and identified top threats and strategies. The summary report begins with the problem of age class imbalance and notes that "the current age class distribution of the ANF is very unbalanced, and the creation of early structural habitat is occurring far too slow. Current condition of Management Area (MA)

3.0: 71% is 80 years of age or older; other MAs are comparable." The summary report characterizes the severity of the problem as "very significant." The report goes on to note that "many of the other threats outlined by the collaborative would benefit from a more balanced age class distribution."

The prescription set out in the Collaborative's summary is the same prescription noted in the 2007 Forest Plan, namely, more timber harvests to remove older trees to make way for the much needed younger forest growth.

IT IS AXIOMATIC THAT THE OLD GROWTH PROPOSAL IS ENTIRELY INCONSISTENT WITH THE WELL THOUGHT OUT PRESCRIPTION NEEDED FOR THE GOOD HEALTH OF THE ALLEGHENY NATIONAL

FOREST. The Old Growth Proposal would be an unmitigated disaster for the health of the ANF. Fostering Old Growth on the ANF is exactly the opposite of what the ANF requires, and the substitution of a "one size-fits-all national policy, fostering old growth, is entirely ill fitting for the specific needs of the ANF.

Those specific needs of the ANF are well studied, documented, and commented upon. Those critical steps are required by law and federal policies. The Old Growth Proposal defies those studies, documents and comments, and steers a blind course to the ruinous health of the ANF.

The Old Growth Proposal results in an outcome that is entirely contrary to the well-considered prescription for the health of the ANF. Not surprisingly, the Old Growth Proposal arises in violation of the statutes and policies that were carefully followed to arrive at the very different prescription for the health of the ANF contained in the current ANF Forest Plan. Among other things, the one-size-fits-all approach, called for in the Old Growth Proposal, violates the USDA's obligations to coordinate with state and local governments, it violates the Administrative Procedures Act, it violates the NFS Land Management Planning regulations, and it violates NEPA.

The violation of the above statutes and policies is a remarkable slap in the face to those who of us who devoted thousands of hours to following the law to arrive at the respect the law and those

2007 Forest Plan. I personally participated in the comments and other steps that resulted in the 2007

Forest Plan. Thereafter, during my tenure on the WCSD Board of School Directors, our Board submitted many comments on ANF projects being scoped. I spent many hours volunteering as a member of the ANF Forest Health Collaborative. All of the above efforts were consistent with the coordination and input required under the statutes and regulations recited in the preceding paragraph. That coordination and input is, in part, designed to take into account the needs of entities like the WCSD as well as the local community in which I live. The Old Growth Proposal does not allow anything like the level of coordination and input called for under the aforementioned statutes and regulations. The Old Growth Proposal is shaped in the shadow of ignorance of the needs of the WCSD and my local community. It must be noted that the WCSD (and the other school districts and townships that exist within the ANF) are the intended beneficiaries of the provisions contained in the Weeks Act (the statute which formed the ANF) and the USDA's obligations to coordinate with local governments. The WCSD and the other townships and school districts are the beneficiaries of the payments due under the Weeks Act and which are made in respect of the fact that the national forest commands control of such a large amount of the acreage in the local communities.

The WCSD, along with the other townships and school districts, are impacted by the health and management of the ANF, both directly and indirectly. In violation of the concepts embedded in the Weeks Act--meaning in violation of the concepts of coordination and interaction embedded in the very statute that formed the ANF--the Old Growth Proposal will cause great harm to the WCSD and the other townships and school districts located within the ANF boundaries.

The statutes and regulations cited above are adopted, in part, to protect the interests of the WCSD, the other school districts, the townships (which receive the Weeks Act road funds) and the citizens of the local communities within the ANF. The Old Growth Proposal demonstrates a callous disregard for school children and citizens, and the proposal's one-size-fits-all approach is a shameful exercise of unlawful authority.

For all of the above reasons I strongly urge the rejection of the Old Growth Proposal.

s4~vj-

Arthur Stewart

ATTACHMENT: Arthur Stewart comment letter 1-26-24.pdf is letter content