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First name: Rocky

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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear Forest Service,

Please accept the attached comments from Rocky Smith et al on the proposed old growth and mature forests plan amendment.

Please acknowledge receipt of this comment letter with a reply to this e-mail.

Thanks,

Rocky Smith

Dear Forest Service,

The following are the comments of Rocky Smith et al on the proposed forest plan amendment addressing old growth and mature forests. Specifically, we are responding to the notice for Land Management Plan Direction for Old-Growth Forest Conditions Across the National Forest System, in the December 20, 2023 Federal Register, 88 Fed Reg 88043 et seq. Page numbers refer to the Federal Register Notice unless otherwise indicated. These comments build on our June 28, 2023 comments on the Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPR, in the April 21, 2023 Fed Reg) for this subject, which we hereby incorporate by reference.

The endorsers of these comments are all individuals and representatives of organizations that have worked and continue to work to protect and conserve old growth ecosystems on national forest lands.

I. INTRODUCTION. We are happy to see the Forest Service propose a forest plan amendment to promote retention of old growth. The proposed action represents a realization of the importance of old growth forest ecosystems and is long overdue.

The Preamble states the following:

The Department believes that reaffirming, at a national scale, the commitment to maintaining and developing old-

growth forests conditions across the National Forest System is prudent and warranted, and best advanced at this time via amendment of land management plans.

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We agree. We also agree with the following:

establish[ing] national intent to maintain and improve amounts and distributions of old-growth forest conditions within national forest ecosystems and watersheds[hellip]

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Old growth will be more important than ever in the face of climate change. These ecosystems are cooler and more moist than most other forest stages. Thus old growth areas may be needed for climate refugia for many species of wildlife and plants. Also, retaining older forests, which usually have the largest trees, will be a critically important element in the battle against climate change, as old growth ecosystems constitute the most efficient carbon storage mechanism available.

The proposed amendment is a good start at protecting ecologically critical old growth ecosystems that currently exist on our national forests. However, the amendment needs to be strengthened, especially to ensure that future old growth will be allowed to develop and be retained as old growth. The amendment needs to stress that the best management of old growth ecosystems is usually to leave them alone. The exception to requirements for old growth protection in Alaska must be deleted from the amendment.

II. MATURE FORESTS MUST ALSO BE PROTECTED TO ENSURE CONTINUED PERSISTENCE OF OLD GROWTH ACROSS LANDSCAPES.

Since change, not stasis, is the norm in ecology, existing old growth will not last forever. Some stands may persist for several more centuries, but others may be significantly altered by fire, insects, disease, blowdown, human manipulation, and/or other change agents. Future old growth will be needed to replace areas where old growth conditions diminish or disappear. Thus at least some existing stands must be allowed to succeed into an old growth condition.

The main thrust of the proposed amendment seems to be retaining existing old growth ecosystems. This is appropriate as far as it goes, but younger forests, particularly those that have reached maturity but are not yet in the old growth condition, must also be managed as potential future old growth.

The following statements in the preamble indicate the agency's desire to have persistent old growth.

The proposed amendment provides a framework for strategic conservation, and proactive stewardship and management, to mitigate risks across a range of forest conditions to both maintain and intentionally develop old-growth forest conditions, where feasible given climate impacts, and within the context of the multiple-use mandate that guides management of the National Forest System.

88043; emphasis added.

Part of the need for change, i. e., to prepare and implement the proposed amendment, is:

to create a consistent set of national plan components and direction for the development of geographically informed adaptive implementation strategies for the long-term persistence, distribution, and recruitment of old-growth forest conditions across the National Forest System[hellip]

88045; emphasis added.

However, the proposed standards for the amendment do not address old growth recruitment. The proposed guideline "is intended to increase amounts and improve distributions and climate resilience of future old-growth forest conditions". 88047. It would apply:

to areas that do not currently meet old-growth definitional conditions but that have been identified in the Adaptive Strategy for Old-Growth Forest Conservation as a priority for the future contribution of the development of those conditions over time.

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This will be insufficient to ensure retention of old growth forest ecosystems across national forest landscapes over time because "creat[ing] or adopt[ing] an Adaptive Strategy for Old-Growth Forest Conservation" (proposed Management Approach 1a) is a management approach, which is not a plan component, nor is it required in plans. Rather it is "optional content". See the Planning Rule at 36 CFR 219.7(f)(2). Units could neglect to develop the strategy and thus not identify any areas for development of future old growth. Units that did not adopt a strategy would probably still comply with the respective forest plan as amended per the proposed action.

If the Adaptive Strategy will be the basis for each unit's program for development of future old growth, preparing and approving the Strategy must be required, i. e., it must be a standard[1]. The amendment should further direct units to "manage" at least some areas of mature forest to become old growth. (But see section III below.)

The proposed guideline's provisions are:

For the purposes of fostering an increasing trend in the amount, representativeness, redundancy, and connectivity of old-growth forest conditions such that future conditions will be resilient and adaptable to stressors and likely future environments, [hellip]

88048. The guideline's substantive provisions ((a) through (g)) are generally good (but see below) and should be retained. However, a standard is needed to ensure that units will manage lands for future old growth development and retention.

The guideline states that "landscape-level proactive stewardship activities" should be used to develop future old growth. But as with conserving existing old growth, the best way to allow future old growth conditions to develop is usually to leave them alone and let nature accomplish the transition to old growth. (See section III below.)

Part of the proposed guideline directs that activities should be undertaken:

to enhance landscape and patch connectivity in forest conditions between old-growth condition patches where connectivity is poor or old-growth patches are isolated.

Proposed Guideline 1c, 88048. Old growth forested ecosystems provide habitat for numerous species. Where once these ecosystems covered large areas, they are now, after years of human manipulation, often limited to smaller patches, at least in areas outside designated wilderness or other legally protected areas. National forests

need to be managed to conserve connections between these patches, or for them to develop in the future.

Guideline 1c is an important element of old growth conservation and needs to be retained.

To have old growth persist on the landscape, some stands will have to be allowed to develop into old growth. Otherwise, existing old growth stands could slowly disappear over time, leaving national forest units with insufficient amounts and distribution of old growth. The amendment needs stronger direction to ensure that old growth is maintained across the landscape of each national forest unit over time by allowing areas not yet in an old growth condition to ecologically succeed to that condition.

III. "MANAGEMENT" OF OLD GROWTH SHOULD USUALLY MEAN LEAVING IT ALONE. We are pleased to see the following desired condition:

The amount and distribution of old-growth forest conditions are maintained and improved relative to the existing condition over time, [hellip]

Proposed desired condition 1, 88047.

The language of the proposed amendments and Preamble indicate a preference toward managing forests to become or remain old growth. The term "proactive stewardship" is frequently used. This term is not defined in the amendment or elsewhere, but its name strongly suggests a desire for the agency to actively manage forests, as indicated by the following from the preamble:

The proposed action also recognizes the importance of strategic conservation and proactive stewardship for wildfire resilience efforts, including science-based vegetation treatments and restoring prescribed fire in fire-adapted ecosystems, for the long-term retention and future recruitment of old-growth forest conditions.

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The proposed monitoring questions, which would be added to each unit's monitoring program, clearly anticipate active management, especially proposed question b:

b. Question: Are vegetation management activities within old-growth forest promoting the desired composition, structure, pattern, and ecological conditions?

i. Indicator: Changes in composition, structure, and patterns related to desired ecological conditions in areas affected by vegetation management.

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However, the best management of old growth forest ecosystems is usually to leave them alone. In contrast to young forests, which can easily be created by management (assuming tree regeneration is successful), old growth can only be created by nature over a long time period, sometimes centuries. Indeed, proposed standard 2a lists 11 elements which "proactive stewardship activities shall promote"; it is hard to imagine any of them needing much if any active management. Rather, all of them can develop over time in the absence of manipulative management. See section IV below where we discuss some narrow exceptions to our desired non-treatment of old-growth ecosystems.

Manipulation of old growth is likely to reduce old growth character by removing or damaging ecological elements, like old trees (targets for removal to feed the timber industry); natural soils (they are compacted by heavy equipment used in logging); understory trees and plants (often destroyed by logging equipment or deliberately removed or burned during fuel reduction activities); and introducing non-native plant species which can displace native species. Even prescribed burning, if applied incorrectly or too frequently, would damage or destroy understories of trees and other vegetation, which are an important characteristic of old growth ecosystems.

Tree cutting is now considered a "relatively minor" threat to old growth. However, the agency admits that past practices have "contributed to current vulnerabilities in the distribution, abundance, and resilience of old-growth forest characteristics". 88043. Implementation of the agency's Wildfire Crisis Implementation Plan will mean treating many stands to reduce fuels; some of these stands may contain old growth ecosystems or would become old growth in the future if not treated. The Forest Service can expect, for the next several years at least, to have large amounts of money from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act to implement fuel reduction management. See more detailed discussion on pp. 1-2 of our ANPR comments and below.

Under the proposed amendment, an exception to the requirement for vegetation management activities to conserve old growth would be allowed for fire hazard reduction:

to reduce fuel hazards on National Forest System land within the wildland-urban interface to protect a community or infrastructure from wildfire[hellip]

Proposed standard 2(b)(i). For "wildland-urban interface", the agency uses the definition in the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, which includes any land within a community wildfire protection plan (CWPP), or in the absence of a CWPP, land that is up to 1.5 miles from at-risk communities. See 16 U. S. C. 6511 (16). "At-risk community" is also defined in HFRA (see id. at (1)) by referencing a very long list of such communities at 66 Fed Reg 753 et seq, January 4, 2001.

To significantly reduce fuels in stands containing mature and older trees, a sizable amount of wood, in some cases including both standing and down dead pieces, must be removed. Tree spacing after treatment must be sufficiently wide to reduce the chances of a running crown fire, where if one tree fully ignites, adjacent trees would also ignite. Smaller trees would also be removed to prevent them serving as fire ladders to bring a ground fire into the crowns of the taller trees. But most old growth ecosystems feature variable tree spacing, often including dense clumps, with two or more age classes of trees, and the presence of snags (standing dead trees) and down dead wood in various stages of decay. These are all features that would be significantly damaged, or even eliminated, where fuel reduction activities are implemented in old growth ecosystems.

Finally, to make logging more attractive to industry, the Forest Service frequently includes large trees in the timber offered from fuel reduction and other vegetation management projects. These are the very trees most in need of retention to conserve old growth.

It is thus highly unlikely that an old growth ecosystem could be treated to significantly reduce fuels without also significantly degrading its old growth character.

In short, the proposed standard 2(b)(i) would allow a large area of national forest land to be treated for fuel reduction, which could easily involve some old growth ecosystems. We therefore disagree that tree cutting and removal is only a minor threat to old growth. Strong language is needed in the amendment to ensure that old growth ecosystems will not be treated unless immediately next to communities and infrastructure. Fuel reduction treatment to reduce the threat to communities in any ecotype should focus on the structures themselves and the home ignition zone, an area of about 30 meters surrounding structures. See Cohen, 1999 and 2008.

Proposed Guideline 1b directs that "landscape-level proactive stewardship activities should[hellip]be developed":

to retain and promote the development of resilient old-growth conditions adjacent to existing old-growth forest conditions, including for the purposes of reducing fire hazard, altering potential fire spread or fire severity, or

reducing potential insect or disease outbreak that may spread to adjacent old-growth forest.

This again suggests manipulation to make stands more resistant to fire. The fact that old growth forests could be hit by fire, insects, or disease is not a reason to manipulate them, as these change agents are always present in forested ecosystems. Old growth stands are less likely to burn because they retain more moisture. Manipulating them to make them more fire resistant will almost certainly degrade their old growth characteristics, as is discussed above. See section III (pp. 3-5) of our comments on the ANPR for a more detailed discussion of this issue.

The plan amendment must reflect the need for minimal to no human management of old growth ecosystems. Currently, the emphasis in the proposed amendment appears to be on vegetation treatment, including "proactive stewardship" and "ecologically appropriate harvest". Proposed standard 3, 88047.

Proposed Standard 1 would require any vegetation management to protect old growth forest conditions:

Vegetation management activities must not degrade or impair the composition, structure, or ecological processes in a manner that prevents the long-term persistence of old-growth forest conditions within the plan area.

This is a good measure and should be retained. However, language should be added to this standard stating that existing and most developing old growth ecosystems generally need no active management. In other words, the default should be no management. If the responsible official (usually the district ranger or forest supervisor) believes that treatment of any kind is needed, s/he should be required to conduct an analysis that shows why such treatment is believed to be needed and how it would benefit, or at least not harm, old growth ecosystem character. This analysis can be part of the NEPA documentation for a project where old growth ecosystems might be treated.

IV. EXCEPTIONS TO THE PROHIBITION ON TREATING OLD GROWTH ECOSYSTEMS

There can be a few exceptions to the need to leave old growth forests alone:

- 1) Lower elevation ponderosa pine habitat type forests in Colorado that historically had a frequent, low intensity fire regime. Here in the northern Colorado Front Range portion of the Rocky Mountain Region, such forests are usually below 7200 feet elevation^[2] and are dominated by ponderosa pine. In areas where such forests have

had at least several decades of fire suppression and tree density exceeds what likely occurred before European-descendant settlement, or natural species composition has been significantly altered, existing and future old growth might benefit from careful removal of some, but not all, smaller trees and/or application of prescribed fire.

2) To remove non-native species, when such species are a potential threat to ecosystem integrity. The latter could occur when a rapidly-spreading non-native plant species or exotic wildlife or fish species threatens to displace or already has displaced native plant or wildlife/fish species. However, chemical use to combat weeds or non-native fish should be prohibited or strictly limited to conserve native plants and avoid poisoning the environment.

3) Actions for public safety, such as removal of hazard trees that could block a road or interfere with other infrastructure such as power lines, campgrounds, etc. Any such actions shall be the minimum necessary to resolve any safety hazard, and should generally be infrequent.

4) To remove roads and rehabilitate roadbeds. Roads are very detrimental to old growth ecological characteristics such as wildlife habitat effectiveness, soil quality, and watershed integrity, and may facilitate too much human use. Removing unneeded roads in old growth ecosystems should be a priority.

5) Regulating human use. Recreation, either from high-impact activities and/or large numbers of people engaging in any activity, can damage old growth ecosystem functioning by adversely affecting water quality, wildlife habitat and effectiveness, and soil quality. Human use should be regulated as needed to ensure that old growth ecosystems still function well.

These activities can likely be conducted without degrading old growth character.

V. THERE MUST BE NO EXCEPTION FOR PROTECTION OF OLD GROWTH IN ALASKA.

The following exception to standards in the proposed amendment must be deleted:

4. Exceptions to standards 2 and 3 may be granted by the Regional Forester in Alaska if necessary to allow for implementation of the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy and the rationale must be included in a decision document.

The Tongass National Forest in Alaska has been heavily cut in some areas over the past decades, but it still likely contains sizable areas of intact rain forest. It is a remnant of the once vast area of such forests in the Pacific Northwest in the U. S. and Canada. Old growth in this region is at least as important as it is anywhere else, and it must be protected.

Cutting old growth cannot be "sustainable", as it would take centuries for treated areas to return to old growth if it even can occur at all. If implementation of the Sustainability Strategy requires cutting of old growth, then the Strategy itself is inappropriate and must be modified or rescinded.

There must be no exceptions to protection for old growth in Alaska.

VI. MONITORING. The proposed amendments would add to the monitoring program for each unit by requiring units to update their monitoring programs to address old growth. It would also require the Chief to establish a "National Old-Growth Monitoring Network". The proposed monitoring questions and indicators that would be added to each unit's monitoring program would help determine the state and trend of old growth on the unit. They would also provide data that could be used for the National Network.

CONCLUSION

We appreciate the effort here to protect existing and future forested old growth ecosystems and retain them across the landscapes of the national forest system. However, the proposed amendment must reflect the ecological reality that old growth, existing and future, is best left alone to be retained as, or develop into, old growth. The proposed amendment must have standards that will ensure mature stands will be protected and allowed to become old growth so that old growth will persist on the landscape. The exception for Alaska must be deleted from the proposed amendment.

Sincerely,

[1] Under the Planning Rule, standards are required plan components defined as follows:

A standard is a mandatory constraint on project and activity decisionmaking, established to help achieve or maintain the desired condition or conditions, to avoid or mitigate undesirable effects, or to meet applicable legal

requirements.

36 CFR 219.7(e)(1)(iii).

[2] See Sherriff and Veblen, 2006.

REFERENCES

Cohen, Jack D., 2008. The Wildland Urban Interface Fire Problem A Consequence Of The Fire Exclusion Paradigm. *Forest History Today*, Fall 2008.

Cohen, Jack D., 1999. Reducing the Wildland Fire Threat to Homes: Where and How Much? In: *Proceedings of the Symposium on Fire Economics, Planning, and Policy: Bottom Lines*. April 5-9, 1999, San Diego, CA. USDA Forest Service General Technical Report PSW-GTR-173.

Sherriff, Rosemary, and Thomas T. Veblen, 2006. Ecological effects of changes in fire regimes in *Pinus ponderosa* ecosystems in the Colorado Front Range. *Journal of Vegetation Science*. 17: 705-718, 2006.

ATTACHMENT: OG amend comm 1-24 RS.docx is letter content.