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First name: Jessica

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Organization: Golden State Power Cooperative

Title: General Manager

Comments: Dear Chief Moore,

Golden State Power Cooperative ("GSPC") respectfully submits these comments in response to the U.S. Forest Service's ("USFS") notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement to amend all land management plans for units of the National Forest System.

GSPC is the trade association representing California's electric cooperatives and rural electric utilities . Electric cooperatives and rural public utilities are focused on providing affordable, reliable, and safe electric service in remote areas. GSPC members maintain over 5,000 miles of power line in California and serve an average of less than 5 customers per mile of infrastructure; compared to 34 customers per mile for Investor-Owned Utilities. Operated on a not-for-profit basis, a cooperative's locally elected board of directors have the cooperative's mission and purpose in mind: to provide safe, affordable, and reliable electric service in rural California.

By nature of our rural service territories, GSPC's utility members obtain federal special use permits, rights-of-way (ROW) authorizations, and other approvals to construct and maintain electric infrastructure on USFS land. The nature of our service territories, and our local, member-driven structure enables us to empower communities, innovate to meet tomorrow's energy demands, and be good stewards of the federal land on which we operate. It is important that the USFS utilizes this process to improve, rather than further hinder the operations of rural utilities, and indeed the long-standing partnership between the electric cooperatives and USFS.

Our national forests are managed under the mandate of multiple uses. Energy infrastructure, such as transmission and distribution powerlines, are one of the many special uses on national forests and grasslands. There are thousands of miles of transmission and distribution powerlines that traverse each national forest. This robust infrastructure contributes to national energy security, delivers power to rural and urban communities alike, and improves the quality of life in the United States. Maintaining reliable, affordable, and safe electric service is the underpinning of economic vitality and wellbeing. It is essential to ensure utility rights-of-way continue unhindered as you develop this rulemaking. Any increases in operating or compliance costs would directly increase rates. Even modest changes to how ROWs are operated or permitted have the potential to increase electricity rates, and could place a disproportionate burden on small utilities serving rural, low-income communities.

GSPC is deeply concerned this action will negatively impact USFS's already strained staff. Even one forest plan amendment process can be time-consuming and work intensive for the agency and stakeholders alike. Amending all 128 forest plans will require the full attention of countless USFS employees - many of which are already being redirected to focus on urgent issues such as mitigating wildfire risk or permitting for clean energy infrastructure projects.

Improved USFS staffing and more timely responses and approvals is a top concern for electric cooperative members across the nation. Delayed USFS processing and approvals for special use authorizations, vegetation management, grid enhancement, expansion, and hardening projects, and other activities on USFS rights-of-way has already delayed the delivery of electricity and broadband service to parts of rural America.

This rulemaking could fundamentally alter how our nation's forests are managed, including how vegetation management is conducted. The proposal states:

Vegetation management in old-growth forest conditions must be for the purpose of proactive stewardship, to promote the composition, structure, pattern, or ecological processes necessary for the old-growth forest conditions to be resilient and adaptable to stressors and likely future environments.

As rural utilities operating in elevated wildfire threat areas of California, we recognize there is an urgent need to address wildfire risk to communities and ecosystems. We have seen the devastating impact of catastrophic wildfire on our communities, our economy, and our forests. Our ability to manage vegetation in national forest ROWs, and to access such ROWs to conduct vegetation management, maintenance, and grid hardening activities, is essential to our ability to provide safe electricity across California. These proposed vegetation management restrictions raise numerous questions and concerns for the electric utility sector. Vegetation management should be considered a "public safety activity," as it is essential to prevent wildfires.

Further, recognizing the increased risk of wildfire, we urge you to consider expanding rights-of-way for public utilities to reduce the potential for tree-to-line contact. ROW expansion would allow broader corridors for vegetation management, which would decrease the risk of standing trees outside our ROWs falling into energized electrical lines.

GSPC encourages USFS to utilize this amendment process to ease, rather than further complicate, the processes by which we manage vegetation and perform maintenance of our electric infrastructure; and to make permitting procedures for those processes more straightforward and efficient. This is particularly critical in California, where threat of wildfire is high, and where utilities are held to strict liability standards.

We emphasize our support for fuels reduction projects to protect our Forests, our communities, and our infrastructure. Forest management to prevent and mitigate the impact of catastrophic wildfires on all forests, including old growth and mature forests, is critical. We strongly caution against management strategies that reverts to the flawed, outdated policies that prohibit fuels reduction and timber removal on national forests, which have led us into this wildfire crisis.

There is broad bipartisan agreement that the environmental review and permitting processes must be significantly accelerated to support the modernization of our nation's electric infrastructure, facilitate clean energy development, utilize infrastructure funding, address increased demand from transportation electrification, and to mitigate the risk of wildfire. The Administration's recent amendments to NEPA that were included in Section 321 of the Fiscal Responsibility Act ("FRA") were a step in the right direction. We hope all forest plan amendments will clearly coordinate with efforts to streamline the process to efficiently reach our collective energy goals.

GSPC encourages the USFS to thoroughly evaluate potential impacts of this amendment on electricity operations, and to prioritize an EIS alternative that mitigates and minimizes negative impacts to reliability and affordability. GSPC appreciates the opportunity to share our comments. GSPC is a member of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association ("NRECA") and endorses their comments, filed separately.

Sincerely,

Golden State Power Cooperative

ATTACHMENT: USFS Amendment for Old Growth.pdf - Commenter also included comments in CARA text box. Coded/completed.