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Comments: RE: Northwest Forest Plan Public Comments

To whom it may concern,

The Oakridge Trails Alliance is a 501C3 trails stewardship organization with a mission to develop, enhance, celebrate and protect access to recreational trails in the Middle Fork Ranger District of the Willamette National Forest and the greater Oakridge area. This letter is to inform the USFS amendment process to the Northwest Forest Plan from the perspective that Recreation should be considered as a priority in planning amendments to the current NWFP.

Incorporating the voices of outdoor recreation stakeholders in amending the Northwest Forest Plan ensures a more comprehensive and balanced approach to public land management that considers the needs of both recreation and conservation.

Outdoor recreation enthusiasts are significant stakeholders in public land management. Their input is crucial in ensuring that any amendments to the Northwest Forest Plan consider the diverse needs and interests of users. Outdoor recreation also plays a significant economic development and quality of life role in rural communities. Amendments to the NWFP will have direct and indirect effects on our local communities of Oakridge and Westfir, Oregon, including tourism, outfitters, gear manufacturers, and related industries.

Many outdoor recreation enthusiasts are also advocates for conservation and environmental protection. Their voices can contribute valuable perspectives on how amendments to the Northwest Forest Plan can balance the needs of recreation with the preservation of important ecological values, such as old-growth forests, wildlife habitat, and water quality. Any amendments to the plan will potentially impact the availability and quality of outdoor recreational experiences, including trails, campgrounds, and wildlife habitat. Input from outdoor recreation advocates can help ensure that these resources are managed sustainably for both recreational use and conservation purposes.

Outdoor recreation fosters community engagement and a sense of stewardship among participants. Involving outdoor recreation stakeholders in the amendment process can help build support for the final plan among local communities and outdoor enthusiasts, increasing its effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

The communities of Oakridge and Westfir lie within the unique geographical context of Late Succession Reserves, which, as we understand it, are currently mired in layers of regulation and "survey and manage" protocol. The balance of managing Late Succession Reserves and prioritizing conservation values, can influence the extent and nature of recreational asset development within and outside these important areas while focusing on preserving ecological integrity AND providing opportunities for compatible forms of recreation. Effective planning, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive management are essential for achieving this balance and maximizing the benefits of recreational assets while safeguarding the conservation values of Late Succession Reserves.

We also believe that adaptive management practices are becoming more necessary as climate change becomes a more critical factor in how forests will be managed for optimal watershed health and safety outcomes of surrounding communities.

Recreational trails play a multifaceted role in building climate-resilient communities by promoting sustainable

transportation, enhancing ecosystem services, fostering community cohesion, supporting health and well-being, and providing educational opportunities for climate adaptation and mitigation.

By encouraging active transportation, trails help reduce greenhouse gas emissions associated with traditional vehicle use, thereby mitigating climate change. Additionally, preserving and maintaining trails systems which often pass through natural areas such as forests and wetlands, can contribute to climate resilience by keeping human impact out of sensitive habitats and prioritizing greenspaces that help to mitigate the effects of climate change through carbon sequestration.

Forest Service trails that can be directly accessed from the edges of our communities, could potentially be integrated into green infrastructure systems to help manage stormwater, provide alternative energy reserves, and enhance biodiversity between the "wildland-urban" interface.

Access to recreational trails promotes physical activity and mental well-being, which are important components of community resilience. Healthy and active individuals are better equipped to cope with the physical and psychological stresses associated with climate change, such as extreme weather events and heatwaves.

Because trails provide opportunities for outdoor recreation and social interaction, they help foster community cohesion and resilience. Strong social networks enhance resilience by promoting mutual support, information sharing, and collaborative problem-solving in the face of climate-related challenges.

By leveraging recreational trails as resources for wildfire prevention and firefighting strategies, land managers and firefighting agencies can enhance forest resilience, protect natural resources, and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires in wildland-urban interface areas.

Trails provide access routes for firefighters to reach remote or inaccessible areas of the forest where wildfires may occur. Maintaining and improving trail infrastructure ensures that firefighting personnel can quickly and safely access fire-prone areas, allowing for more efficient fire suppression efforts. Recreational trails can also act as natural firebreaks by creating barriers that can slow or halt the spread of wildfires. Trails that traverse open areas or areas with reduced vegetation, can potentially help firefighters establish containment lines more effectively.

Recreational trails provide opportunities for public education and outreach about wildfire prevention and preparedness. Trailhead kiosks, interpretive signage, and educational programs can inform trail users about fire safety practices, fire restrictions, and the importance of responsible recreation to minimize the risk of human-caused wildfires.

Engaging trail user groups, outdoor recreation organizations, and local communities in collaborative partnerships with land management agencies can enhance wildfire prevention and response efforts. These partnerships can facilitate coordinated actions such as trail maintenance, fire patrols, and community wildfire preparedness initiatives. In fact, trails users often serve as early detection resources for wildfires, reporting signs of smoke or fire to authorities, enabling rapid response and containment before wildfires escalate, and properly managed recreational trails can facilitate fuel reduction efforts in fire-prone forests. Trails that are regularly maintained and cleared of vegetation create defensible space and reduce the accumulation of flammable materials, lowering the risk of wildfires spreading rapidly.

Recreational trails can be integrated into forest management and firefighting strategies as part of broader land management plans. Trails can be strategically located to serve as access points for firefighting equipment, staging areas for personnel, and evacuation routes for nearby communities in the event of wildfires and other emergencies.

To prioritize recreational trails for protection under the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) or develop them within a fire-resilient strategy, several key steps can be taken:

*Conduct a comprehensive assessment of existing recreational trails within the planning area covered by the NWFP. This assessment should include mapping the location, condition, and usage patterns of trails, as well as their proximity to areas at high risk of wildfire.

*Identify priority recreational trails based on their significance for recreation, ecological value, connectivity within trail networks, and their potential role in supporting fire-resilient landscapes. Trails (or potential areas for trails development) that provide critical access for firefighting, evacuation routes for communities, or serve as firebreaks may be prioritized for protection and maintenance.

*Integrate recreational trails into broader landscape planning efforts within the framework of the NWFP, ensuring coordination with other land management objectives, including habitat conservation, watershed protection, and wildfire risk reduction.

*Design and manage recreational trails using fire-resilient principles to minimize their susceptibility to wildfire impacts. This may include strategies such as creating defensible space around trails that also serve as fire breaks, using non-flammable trail materials for infrastructure such as bridges or signage, maintaining trail corridors through regular brushing and clearing efforts, and incorporating fire breaks where appropriate.

*Develop any new, high-use trail projects such as stacked loop systems in areas that have already completed or are targeted for selective thinning of vegetation, removal of ladder fuels, and creating fuel breaks to interrupt the continuity of flammable vegetation adjacent to trails.

*Prioritize regular maintenance and monitoring of recreational trails to ensure they remain accessible, safe, and resilient to wildfire impacts. Conduct routine inspections to identify hazards such as downed trees, erosion, and vegetation encroachment that could impede trail access or pose fire risks.

As a collaboration of several partners, Oakridge Trails Alliance understands that it takes capacity and resources to manage recreation effectively in our forests.

By engaging with trail user groups, local communities, outdoor recreation organizations, and other stakeholders to build support for trail protection and fire-resilient strategies, the Forest Service can continue to expand its network of supporters who can share resources, expertise, and responsibilities for trail management and wildfire preparedness efforts.

We hope this letter has provided some insight around the value of recreational trails as a forest management tool and look forward to continuing to grow a strong partnership with our local Forest Service agency and greater communities of Oakridge, Westfir and Lane County as new amendments are developed to address the current challenges implanting the NWFP.

Sincerely,

Michelle Emmons, Executive Director
Oakridge Trails Alliance