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Comments: Comments of Douglas County on Amendments to Land Management Plans to Address Old-Growth Forests Across the National Forest System, Draft Environmental Impact Statement are attached.

September 19, 2024

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Submitted via online portal (<https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=65356>)

Re: Comments of Douglas County on Amendments to Land Management Plans to Address Old- Growth Forests Across the National Forest System, Draft Environmental Impact Statement

On behalf of the Douglas County Board of Commissioners ([ldquo]Douglas County[rdquo]), please accept the following comments on the U.S. Forest Service[rsquo]s Amendments to Land Management Plans to Address Old-Growth Forests Across the National Forest System, Draft Environmental Impact Statement (the [ldquo]proposed Amendment[rdquo]).

The proposed Amendment may be the single-most harmful forest planning modification since the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan ([ldquo]NWFP[rdquo]). The NWFP was a travesty in forest management for rural communities, forest diversity, threatened and endangered species, ecosystem health and resilience, native species, and more. For the past 28 years the forests subject to the NWFP have experienced increased rates of severe wildfire, depleting biodiversity, and significant declines in wildlife populations, including in the species the NWFP was chiefly concerned with protecting. Meanwhile, rural timber-dependent communities have been devastated by the substantial decrease in sustainable timber that has been sourced from the NWFP area. In short, the NWFP exacerbated forest health issues, harmed native species, contributed to declines in threatened species, and has harmed rural communities by heavily limiting the harvest of forest products.

The proposed Amendment exacerbates the harms that have directly flowed from the NWFP, and imposes ill-considered management objectives on every forest plan across the nation. The consequences will be severe. Uncontrollable wildfires will rage with ever-increasing fervor, biological diversity will suffer at the Forest Service[rsquo]s hands, and natural-resource-dependent communities will falter. These consequences are avoidable. Rather than imposing further restrictions on forest management, the proposed Amendment should be redrafted to provide a tool for protecting remaining, unaltered true old growth stands by utilizing sustainable forest practices in surrounding lands. However, in its current form, Douglas County strongly opposes the proposed

Amendment, and for the following reasons urges the Forest Service to reject the proposed Amendment, taking no action instead.

## Background

Douglas County is located in heavily-forested southwestern Oregon with approximately 110,000 residents. The County extends from the Pacific Ocean to 9,182-foot Mt. Thielsen in the Cascade Mountains. The economy of Douglas County is largely dominated by its vast timber resources. Douglas

County contains nearly 2.8 million acres of commercial forest lands, including forests managed by the

U.S. Forest Service ([ldquo]Forest Service[rdquo]), the Bureau of Land Management ([ldquo]BLM[rdquo]), private forest manufacturing and management firms, small landowners, and the County itself. Over 50% of the land area in the County is owned by the federal government and managed by the Forest Service or BLM, including lands owned and managed by the BLM under the Oregon and California Lands Act (O&C lands).

Douglas County has seen the decline of the timber industry in recent decades. Historically, the County received funds from the federal government tied to Forest Service and BLM timber sales. The federal government used a revenue-sharing formula from activities on federal land to partially compensate counties for the presence of untaxable, publicly owned land. However, timber harvest on federal lands has fallen dramatically, from 800 million board feet (mmbf) in 1989 to less than 90 mmbf in 2020, largely as a result of regulatory burdens, such as the listing of endangered and threatened species, designations of critical habitat, wild and scenic river designations, and the Northwest Forest Plan, which limits timber harvest opportunities. The negative, direct economic impacts to the County itself, and the negative socio-economic impacts across all the rural communities within the County, cannot be overstated. The human impacts have been drastic, far-reaching, and long-lasting. Just this year, Douglas County has been hit by mill closures due in large part to a lack of federal timber volume, including the closure of the C&D Lumber Co. mill in Riddle, Oregon, which eliminated 78 jobs, and the closure of the Rosboro Co. mill in Springfield, just north of Douglas County, eliminating 25 jobs.

Restrictions on forest management have also had a dramatic impact on wildfires. Limited harvest of green timber, as well as the limited salvage of burned timber, has led to an overstocking of the land base and a substantial increase in fuel loads and, consequently, large-scale wildfires. For instance, in the summer of 2013, the Douglas Complex Fire burned 48,679 acres to the north of the city of Glendale. That same summer, the Whiskey Fire burned 17,891 acres of forest in Douglas County in the Umpqua National Forest near the Loafer Timber Sale Project. In the summer of 2015, the Stouts Creek Fire burned 26,452 acres located to the south of the Loafer Timber Sale project. In the summer of 2017, the North Umpqua Complex Fires burned over 64,000 acres. In 2019, the Milepost 97 Fire burned 13,119 acres. During the extraordinary fire season of 2020, the Archie Creek Fire and Thielsen Fire collectively burned 141,517 acres. In 2021, fires in Douglas County burned another 140,000 acres, almost entirely on Federal land. In 2024, over 70,000 acres have burned on national forest land within or adjacent to Douglas County. Throughout Oregon, wildfires in 2024 alone have burned a record-breaking 1.9 million acres.

Smoke from these wildfires impacts public health. These serious health impacts are an environmental justice issue that many rural counties throughout Oregon face because of the federal government's failure, or inability, to responsibly manage forests, due, in large part, to unnecessary and/or unwarranted restrictions that all center around critical habitat and the Northwest Forest Plan. In short, forest-management straying further from harvest opportunities has been nothing short of a complete failure and unmitigated disaster for the economies and social fabric of rural Western Oregon communities, and Douglas County is the epicenter of this catastrophe.

Forest management is a complex issue which has a substantial impact on rural communities. Forest

management includes, but is certainly not limited to the harvest and sale of timber products. Rather, it also includes controlled burns, danger tree removal, timber harvests, fuel reduction projects, road restoration, and more play a crucial role in creating a healthy forest. Therefore, Douglas County is often a proponent of projects which enhance forest resilience and diversity, which often involves the use of commercial harvest to improve stand densities, open up habitat for wildlife, and improve wildfire resilience. Douglas County is of the overarching view that commercial timber harvest is a crucial tool which needs to be utilized to achieve the long-term forest health and sustainability which benefits all persons and species dependent on our national forests. With this context, Douglas County strongly opposes the Forest Service's attempt to create uniform restrictions on the management of "old-growth" forests, or areas with the capability of sustaining future old-growth forests, which will result in ever-worsening wildfire seasons and biological diversity, while causing significant economic harm to forest products industries and inflation across the United States.

#### Comments

##### A. Adopting the Comments of the American Forest Resource Council.

Douglas County hereby joins, adopts, and incorporates by reference the comments of the American Forest Resource Council. As explained in detail in those comments, the proposed Amendment is fundamentally misguided, and would violate law in numerous ways, including but not limited to:

1.

1. the proposed Amendment violates the Forest Service's Planning Rule. The Planning Rule would be violated as the proposed Amendment is a nation-wide amendment, the proposed Amendment and NOI fail to provide sufficient public information to allow meaningful public participation, notice of the proposed Amendment was inadequate, the proposed Amendment does not identify a need for changes to forest plans, and the proposed Amendment reclassifies lands suitable for timber production without including necessary standards or guidelines;

2. the proposed Amendment violates NEPA. Public notice of the proposed Amendment was inadequate, the Forest Service failed to take a hard look at socioeconomic impacts and effects on timber harvest levels, the Forest Service failed to take a hard look at the proposed Amendment's impacts to carbon and climate, the Forest Service failed to consider cumulative impacts, and the Forest Service failed to present and study all reasonable alternatives;

3. the proposed Amendment violates the ESA. The Forest Service has failed to consult with the U.S. Forest

Service and/or National Marine Fisheries Service despite the proposed Amendment affecting millions of acres of national forest lands;

4. finally, the Forest Service has violated EO 12866, as amended by EO 14094, by failing to analyze the significant economic impacts of the proposed Amendment.

These numerous and fundamental issues of law have resulted in a proposed Amendment that is so fundamentally and egregiously misguided that it will harm the very [ldquo]old-growth[rdquo] forests that it is seeking to preserve. Douglas County therefore urges that the Forest Service opt for the [ldquo]no action[rdquo] alternative of the DEIS, rejecting the proposed Amendment in its current form.

#### B. The Proposed Amendment Will Exacerbate Wildfire Risks, the Leading Cause of Old-Growth Decline in Western Forests.

The prevalence and scope of severe wildfire in the western Cascades, particularly in Douglas County, has been cataclysmic over the past 20 years. A snapshot of the fires which have devastated the Umpqua National Forest and O&C Lands in eastern Douglas County during this time period best tells the story:

[Figure showing fires in the area - see pdf]

Since the turn of the century, hundreds of thousands of acres, if not millions of acres, have burned on the western slope of the cascades in Douglas County.<sup>1</sup> The above image paints a dreary picture of the

environmental catastrophes Douglas County has dealt with in recent years. Unfortunately, the reality is much worse. Residents of Roseburg and the Umpqua Valley, Douglas County[rsquo]s most populous region, have become accustomed to seeing the summer sun clouded with smoke and the Valley[rsquo]s rolling hills cloaked in a dense haze. Air quality for much of the summer sits at hazardous levels while the County[rsquo]s economy and infrastructure suffers from years of declining revenues. Within the Umpqua National Forest firefighting has become as big of a business as actual forest management, and wood products processors scramble to buy up available logs to keep their mills running.

The Threat Assessment for the proposed Amendment concluded that wildfires, like those which have ravaged Douglas County, are the leading cause of old-growth forest loss over the past 20 years.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, old-growth forest loss is greatest in areas reserved from timber harvest. Nevertheless, the proposed Amendment would serve as an additional barrier against forest management across much of the national forest system. This is the exact opposite approach that needs to be taken to preserve existing [ldquo]old- growth[rdquo] stands. Rather, any meaningful effort to preserve old-growth stands must involve an increase in forest management prescriptions, including commercial harvest, to reduce overstocking across the landscape. Currently, overstocked forests provide the perfect breeding grounds for insects, and the perfect fuels for explosive fire growth. Reducing overstocking at the landscape scale must be a central focus of any plan that hopes to preserve forests with old-growth characteristics. Studies have shown that mechanical thinning alone can alleviate wildfire risks, and when paired with other management strategies, such as post-thinning controlled burns, can dramatically improve wildfire resilience. See Johnston, James et al., Mechanical thinning without prescribed fire moderates wildfire behavior in an Eastern Oregon, USA ponderosa pine forest, *Forest Ecology and Management* (Dec. 1, 2021); Graham, Russell et al., *Effects of Thinning and Similar Stand Treatments on Fire Behavior in Western Forests in Western Forests*, Utah State University (1999).

The proposed Amendment rejects that approach, instead creating another layer of restrictions on forest management strategies that will only serve to exacerbate wildfire risks. The Forest Service should therefore opt to take [ldquo]no action[rdquo] instead of adopting the proposed Amendment, focusing on future efforts to reduce wildfire risks through aggressive forest management campaigns that will create generate real benefits on federal forests.

A. Commercial Harvest is Critical for Ecosystem Diversity.

One of the most damning fallacies in Northwest forests is the notion that old-growth forests alone are sufficient to provide habitat and biological diversity for the range of native species existing on the landscape. Forest management policies solely-focused on preserving and creating mature and old-growth forests have caused the elimination of natural forest characteristics that are crucial for numerous species, including iconic species like deer, elk, mountain lion, bear, and wolves.

Within the Northwest, the 2020 Bioregional Assessment acknowledges that a loss of ecosystem diversity has been a consequence of the one-size-fits-all management strategies piloted by the NWFP. Douglas County agrees. The NWFP[rsquo]s singular focus on creating forests which were purported to benefit spotted owls and other [ldquo]old growth dependent[rdquo] species had the opposite effect by increasing wildfire risks (discussed above) and eliminating the diverse ecosystems which are critical to healthy forests. The proposed Amendment would do much of the same. Rather than recognize the importance of diverse forests, with a variety of seral stages, the proposed Amendment places singular emphasis on forests with [ldquo]old growth[rdquo] characteristics. This will ultimately harm ecosystem diversity.

The loss of ecosystem diversity was foreseeable under the NWFP. The near-exclusion of commercial timber harvest from the plan area, and the complete exclusion of regeneration harvest methods, eliminated forest openings crucial to wildflowers, insects, birds, and megafauna, such as deer, elk, mountain lions, and wolves. See, e.g., Rowland, Mary et al., Modeling Elk Nutrition and Habitat Use in Western Oregon and Washington, Wildlife Monographs (Oct. 23, 2018) (explaining that Roosevelt elk across the NWFP area are limited by nutrition availability, and that forage within Forest Service lands has decreased substantially due to a lack of timber harvest, causing declines in elk habitat quality); Roosevelt elk population estimate and herd composition in Oregon, 2018 - 2023, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife,

[https://www.dfw.state.or.us/resources/hunting/big\\_game/controlled\\_hunts/docs/hunt\\_statistics/23/Roosevelt%20Elk%20Population%20Estimates%20and%20Herd%20Composition%202018%20-%202023.pdf](https://www.dfw.state.or.us/resources/hunting/big_game/controlled_hunts/docs/hunt_statistics/23/Roosevelt%20Elk%20Population%20Estimates%20and%20Herd%20Composition%202018%20-%202023.pdf) (recording downward trends in Roosevelt elk populations, especially in hunting units containing substantial amounts of land managed under the NWFP. For instance, in the Santiam, McKenzie, Indigo, and Dixon units of Oregon[rsquo]s western cascades, elk populations are in continuous decline and far under management objectives). This lack of diversity contributes to a loss of overall ecosystem function, wherein even the old growth dependent species are harmed when management strategies focused on [ldquo]creating[rdquo] old growth result in the depletion of other plant and animal species.

The DEIS for the proposed Amendment turns a blind eye to the importance of creating early-seral forests. In conclusory manner the DEIS states that early seral forests could be created by wildfire, and that the proposed Amendment would not change management of other seral stages. The creation of early-seral forests by wildfire can have beneficial impacts on wildlife. But, as already discussed herein, reliance on wildfire as a mechanism for creating early-seral forests is contrary to the core purpose of the proposed Amendment, as wildfire is the leading risk for mature and old-growth forests. Furthermore, it is not

sufficient that early-seral forests be [ldquo]maintained.[rdquo] In forests under the NWFP there has been a significant loss of early-seral forests. Moving forward, it is crucial that more early-seral forests be created, not merely [ldquo]maintained.[rdquo] Finally, by requiring the creation of old-growth conditions the proposed Amendment would cause a loss of early seral forests, unless offset by catastrophic wildfire. Ultimately, the DEIS fails to adequately consider these very real, and very serve impacts of the proposed Amendment. For that reason, Douglas County strongly urges the Forest Service to opt for and adopt the [ldquo]no action[rdquo] alternative of the DEIS.

B. Economic Harm Has Not Been Adequately Evaluated.

The proposed Amendment would compound the ongoing ruinous economic harms that have been felt from the NWFP. There can be little question that the NWFP resulted in significant, lasting economic harm to rural communities. Communities which once thrived from the utilization of federal timber, and the payments in lieu of taxes that were paid back into the community, have now been suffering from a 30- year depression of federal timber harvest. Even in 2024 the NWFP is a significant contributing (if not leading) factor in the recent closures of numerous mills, eliminating over a hundred jobs in Douglas and neighboring counties.

Overall, the NWFP caused, or was the leading contributor, to the loss of 30,000 direct timber industry jobs since 1990. [ldquo]40 percent of the communities within 5 miles of [Forest Service] or BLM- managed lands had decreases in socioeconomic well-being between 1990 and 2000.[rdquo] Charnley, Susan, et al., Northwest Forest Plan[mdash]The First 10 Years (1994[ndash]2003): Socioeconomic Monitoring Results, General Technical Report PNW-GTR-649 Vol. I April 2006, <https://research.fs.usda.gov/treesearch/22374>. The economic impact of the NWFP can be measured in the billions of dollars, and rural resource-dependent communities have felt the bulk of that impact. These impacts are also national, as reductions in timber volume place inflationary pressures on all industries using forest products, including but not limited to housing. See Steve Courtney, Are You Planning For The Reduction In Northwest Timber Supply?, ResourceWise (March 10, 2022) <https://www.forest2market.com/blog/are-you-planning-for-the-reduction-in-northwest-timber-supply>.

The DEIS admits that the proposed Amendment [ldquo]would prohibit vegetation management within old-growth forest conditions when the purpose is to grow, tend, harvest, or regenerate trees for economic reasons.[rdquo] Nevertheless, the DEIS also concludes that [ldquo]the timber industry is unlikely to be impacted by the amendment, although regional impacts may occur,[rdquo] and [ldquo]no effects are expected on traditional timber industry jobs in logging, wood product manufacturing, and pulp production.[rdquo] This finding cannot be reconciled with a complete prohibition on commercial forest utilization in areas with old-growth forest conditions.

The proposed Amendment would cause the same economic harms that were seen in the wake of the NWFP. The west coast forest products industry is still suffering from the NWFP. Mill closures remain a constant reality, and the mills that remain open struggle daily to locate enough wood to keep operating. The proposed Amendment would be one more burden on an already-struggling industry. In rural

communities like Douglas County, which is heavily dependent on the forest products sector, the proposed Amendment will cause untold devastation. The DEIS cannot brush off these economic harms. Given the substantial harm that will flow from the proposed Amendment, and the failure to analyze economic impacts in the DEIS, Douglas County strongly urges the Forest Service to follow the [ldquo]no action[rdquo] alternative, rejecting the proposed Amendment.

#### Conclusion

Douglas County appreciates the opportunity to submit these comments for the agency[rsquo]s consideration, and strongly urges the Forest Service not to move forward with the proposed Amendment.

Sincerely,

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1 The earliest fire depicted in the above map is from 2015, and this map omits numerous other fires, including some measuring in the thousands-of-acres, that have burned in the past 20 years. Many more acres burned between 2000 and 2015. Some of these other fire scars are easily seen on the map. Altogether, this paints a grim picture of the Umpqua National Forest. It will take hundreds of years for these fire scars

to regain [ldquo]old-growth[rdquo] characteristics, and in many instances the prevalence of re-burns is ensuring that old-growth characteristics will never return absent a fundamental change in forest management policies within the National Forest system.

2 This has had a disastrous effect on threatened and endangered species. Increased wildfire activity due to the near-elimination of forest management, including commercial harvest, has been viewed as one of the two leading risk factors for northern spotted owls. See Range-wide declines of northern spotted owl populations in the Pacific Northwest: A meta-analysis, Elsevier (July 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2021.109168>; Northern Spotted Owl Still Fights for Survival, U.S. Geological Survey (Oct. 6, 2021) <https://www.usgs.gov/news/featured-story/northern-spotted-owl-still-fights-survival>; See Jones et. al., Megafire causes persistent loss of an old-forest species, ZSL (May 9, 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1111/acv.12697>.

ATTACHMENT: Douglas County Old Growth Comments.pdf - this is the same content that is coded in text box; it was also included as an attachment