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First name: Andre

Last name: Sanchez

Organization: CalWild

Title: Community Engagement & Conservation Policy Manager

Comments: Chief Randy Moore

U.S. Forest Service

201 14th Street SW

Washington, DC 20250-1124

September 20, 2024

RE: Comments on National Old Growth Amendment DEIS #65356

Dear Chief Moore and Planning Team:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the National Old Growth Amendment (NOGA) that your agency, the U.S. Forest Service (FS or Agency), worked to provide for public comment. At CalWild, our mission is to advocate for, protect, and restore public lands for all throughout the beautiful state of California. To fulfill our mission, we are an active partner with federal land management agencies including the USFS and have had the pleasure of working with several USFS staff ranging from recreation technicians to regional office staff on a variety of activities including National Forest Plans, River Management plans, and more.

We recognize the need to provide action to meet the goals called out in President Biden's Executive Order 14072 (EO 14072), as well as the need to balance promoting public safety, particularly along forest roads that may lead to recreation access points. However, the achievement of public safety and active management goals must be balanced with the protection of the sensitive resources that are the Mature and Old-Growth forests (MOG), as is intended by EO 14072. With this in mind, we offer the following feedback on the DEIS:

* We thank the FS for:

- o Including Indigenous Knowledge as Best Available Science Information that will inform the management decisions under the NOGA.

- o All the work leading up to this point which included the agency working in an urgent manner to "define, identify, and complete an inventory of old-growth and mature forests on Federal lands", as requested by EO 14072.

- o Including the considerations for use of beneficial fire (where appropriate to use in adapted landscapes) as it will be a needed part of successfully implementing the NOGA and ensuring MOG is healthy.

* While we appreciate the aforementioned elements of the NOGA planning effort, we strongly urge the FS to take

the following into consideration when drafting the Final EIS (FEIS) for the NOGA:

o First and foremost, we believe that none of the proposed alternatives within NOGA DEIS are adequate. The NOGA currently contains a long list of exceptions to its core requirements around old growth conservation. These exceptions are too broad to protect MOG over time. Please act decisively to develop and select an alternative in the Final NOGA EIS that prohibits the cutting of all remaining old-growth trees except for in cases that might address safety concerns and for other such very limited purposes. Additionally, the NOGA currently allows for cutting old growth trees in instances where it would be incidental to implementing other activities, including recreation infrastructure projects like trails-an exception that needs be refined and ensures that the biggest and oldest trees are protected.

o While we acknowledge that the mature and old-growth definitions and inventory report points out that "Mature forests have not previously been ecologically defined in a consistent way at a national scale", this should not lead the agency to dismiss the inclusion of Mature Forests within the NOGA. Furthermore, in the threats analysis report, the FS itself states "that two-thirds of mature forests and just over half of old-growth forests are vulnerable to these threats." Given this high level of vulnerability and the fact that EO 14072 calls to "conserve America's mature and old-growth forests on Federal lands", Mature Forests should be included within the Final EIS for the NOGA. Adding to that, through Executive Order 14008, President Biden previously set the conservation goal of 30x30 via the Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful initiative. This latter EO set the stage for the administration and management agencies to be held accountable in stewarding our natural landscapes in a better manner, particularly as the nation and world combat against the climate crisis.

o While we acknowledge the agency's argument that not all Mature Forests would become Old Growth Forests, Mature Forests should be included in the NOGA FEIS. The decision power to determine which Mature Forests are most likely to become Old Growth may be granted to the local forest units if it seems appropriate. Regardless at what level the Agency determines this choice should be made, we urge that Mature Forest should be included in the final Amendment for all the same reasons stated in the above bullet point.

o Mature forests and trees - future old growth - must also be considered within the final policy. Specific protection measurements should be included in the final policy to help identify and protect mature trees and forests from the threat of commercial logging and clear-cutting practices. We recommend that a certain number of trees with a diameter at breast height (DBH) greater than 30" be maintained per acre, and that the DBH limit change with elevation (the higher the elevation, the lower the DBH). Within mature forests, forestry operations must include clearly mapped management plans with accompanying documentation that specifies the number of trees that can be harvested per acre and the frequency at which this can occur, based on the growth and regeneration rates of the species found in the ecosystem. Sustainable forestry practices which mimic natural patterns of disturbance and regeneration should be included in the management and logging of mature forests. This is important to help recover old growth loss due to decades of mismanagement and clear-cutting practices. Protection of mature forests can be accomplished in a manner that is consistent with addressing the threat of fire.

o We believe that "Proactive stewardship" is a catch-all term used to describe restoration actions like fuel treatments or wildlife habitat projects that enhance the quality or resilience of MOG. In some forests, particularly dry fire-adapted forests in places like California's Sierra Nevada, proactive stewardship actions like prescribed fire can be essential for ensuring the long-term resilience of MOG. In other places, such as the wetter forests of the Pacific Northwest, these same actions may not be clearly ecologically justified. NOGA should make clear that in some cases, a passive, hands-off management approach is needed for old growth conservation and should ensure that that "proactive stewardship" projects (which would appear to allow the cutting of the oldest and most fire resilient trees) do not degrade MOG characteristics.

o In the rare circumstances where larger trees within MOG must be cut, we understand that the Agency may have an option to utilize these trees as part of their forest products production, though we highly caution the need

to do so. If trees cannot be sold as desirable forest products, we recommend that the trees be felled and laid perpendicular to the slope to aid in erosion control and keep the stored carbon on the landscape rather than in the atmosphere. In moist forests, no logging of any trees should occur in old-growth stands. In dry forests that are adapted to frequent fire, such as here in California, ecologically appropriate restoration is beneficial, but such should never be used as an excuse to fell and commercially exchange an old-growth tree or reduce a forest's old-growth status.

o As the agency states in the DIES, biennial reporting is part of the goal, we want to ensure that these monitoring reports are abided by in a timely manner, that accountability measures are identified, and that detailed mapping is included as much as possible. All in all, these actions will highlight the success that the Agency is having in protecting and furthering Mature and Old Growth forests.

This concludes our comments toward the National Old Growth Amendment DEIS. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Andr[eacute] Sanchez

Community Engagement & Conservation Policy Manager

CalWild (previously going by California Wilderness Coalition)

asanchez@calwild.org

559-975-5097

ATTACHMENT: NOGA_DEIS_CommentLetter_CalWild_Sept-2024.pdf - this is the same content that is coded in text box, it was also included as an attachment