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Comments: Please refer to the attached Comment Letter (NWFP_Am_Skokomish_Comment.pdf) which is the official Response from the Skokomish Indian Tribe to the Draft NW Forest Plan Amendment Update

March 14, 2025 USDA Forest Service

Attn: Northwest Forest Plan Amendment DEIS Comments 1220 SW 3rd Avenue

Portland, OR 97204

INTRODUCTION

The Skokomish Indian Tribe (Tribe) submits this letter in response to the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) Amendment Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The Tribe is located on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State where our Usual and Accustomed lands closely correspond to the watershed of the Hood Canal, has stewarded these lands since time immemorial. The Olympic National Forests, eastern Olympic rivers (Skokomish, Lilliwaup, Hamma Hamma, Duckabush, Dosewallips, Big and Little Quilcene) and western Kitsap rivers (DeWatto, Tahuya and Union), Mt. Skokomish, Mt. Elinor, Mt. Cruiser, Lightening Peak, Mt. Washington, Mt. Duckabush, Mt. Steel, Mt. Lena, Mt. Stone, The Brothers, Mt. Anderson, Mt. Claywood, Mt. Deception, Mt. Constance, Mt. Townsend, Mt. Jupiter, Green Mountain and Gold Mountain, Lake Cushman, Lake Kokanee, Nahwatzel Lake and the Hood Canal within the NWFP amendment area are an integral part of our ancestral homelands. These lands not only provide tangible goods, sustenance and spiritual grounding, critical to the ecological balance of the region, but are a part of our cultural identity. Our stewardship practices have preserved these ecosystems for millennia, and our continued involvement is essential to ensuring their resilience and ours. The First Foods and medicine that thrive in these forests, such as huckleberry, salmonberry, wild currant, wild cranberry, Golden Chinquapin, hazelnut, white oak, cedar, licorice fern, wild apple, madrone, camas lily, salal, mushroom, truffles, etc., sustain not only our diets, our medicine but are also an integral part of our ceremonial rites and ecological stewardship traditions.

The NWFP amendment represents a welcome opportunity to readdress the ecological, cultural, and social challenges arising from the exploitive practice of even aged, inorganic chemical monocropping that continues to produce an abysmal return on investment (ROI) that the Plan's inception in 1994 sought to remedy.

As stewards of the Twana lands, we have nurtured these ecosystems for millennia, maintaining balance and resilience through our deep connection to the land, water, and First Foods and Medicines that sustain our people.

This process is an opportunity to correct the historical exclusion of indigenous Tribes from the original NWFP, reestablish sustainable high yields of our shared natural resources and to implement meaningful commitments to Tribal sovereignty and co-stewardship. The federal government's trust responsibility, as enshrined in treaties such as the Treaty of Point No Point, Secretarial Order 3403, U.S. Department of Agriculture Departmental Regulation (DR) 1350-002, and the U.S. Forest Service Manual (FSM 1563), obligates the U.S. Forest Service

(USFS) to ensure that Tribes are full partners in managing the lands and resources that are our ancestral inheritance.

Acknowledgment of Collaborative Efforts

We recognize the significant efforts of the Federal Advisory Committee (FAC), whose recommendations to the USFS reflect an important step toward modernizing the NWFP and improving the ROI of public funds in tangible terms of timber and non-timber forest products, recreational activities, sustaining heterozygosity of game and wildlife resources, and ecosystem services. Failure to protect and sustain such rich ecosystems in favor of weak, inbred, high maintenance, monoculture of gene pools has proven scientifically to weaken not only productivity but whole ecosystems making them more prone to disease, invasive pests and reduce the potential success of our future generations. The FAC's focus on Tribal inclusion, fire resilience, care taking the succession of seral stages to climax ecologies for the optimum productivity of usable goods, ecosystem services, community sustainability and development aligns with many of our priorities.

It bears mentioning how state of the art understanding of forestry and ecosystem management has shed light on how traditional worldview understandings and management practices based on Indigenous Knowledge and experience function to augment overall yield of our forest resources. Forest Ecologist Suzane Simard's work identifying the role of "mother trees"¹ in the optimum development of productive forest ecosystems is exactly analogous to nearly universal attitude of Indigenous peoples and management practitioners to identify and address the most successful specimens of any given species as the Grandmothers/Grandfathers of their community. In the case of the Indigenous worldview, ceremonial life

1 Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest, S. Simard, Knopf Publishing, 2021.

and prayer offer a mechanism to interact with All Our Relations which is arguably the origin of the domestication of species and the invention of culture.

The Skokomish Indian Tribe appreciates the steps taken to incorporate Tribal input through roundtables, consultations, and the DEIS process. We have and will continue to advocate for the responsible management of natural resources for sustainable high yields that guarantee the optimum potential of those resources into an ongoing future. By including Tribal leadership and advancing co-stewardship, the NWFP can fulfill its promise to build resilience, equity, and sustainability for future generations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY AND RIGHTS

Recognition of Tribal Sovereignty

The Skokomish Indian Tribe unequivocally reaffirms our sovereign status and treaty-reserved rights to hunt, fish, gather, and protect resources within our Usual and Accustomed Areas including the NWFP area. These rights, enshrined in the Point No Point Treaty and subsequent Federal court decisions further defining those rights,

represent legal and moral commitments that are integral to the cultural, spiritual, and economic well-being of our people. Federal trust responsibilities, including those reinforced by Secretarial Order 3403, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), demand that the United States prioritize and uphold these rights in all forest management decisions.

Importance of Consultation

Meaningful, government-to-government consultation is not merely a procedural requirement but a cornerstone of federal trust responsibilities and the protection of Tribal sovereignty. Executive Order 13175, Secretarial Order 3403, and U.S. Department of Agriculture Departmental Regulation (DR) 1350- 002 stipulate that consultation must be timely, transparent, and substantive, with the intent to reach mutual understanding and agreement.

[bull] Past Interactions with the USFS:

While the Skokomish Indian Tribe acknowledges both positive and negative experiences with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) regarding consultation, many Tribes in the NWFP area faced similar challenges with inadequate consultation processes, underscoring the need for structural changes to ensure meaningful government-to-government engagement. Our more recent professional relationships with the Olympic FS have been positive, especially around our efforts with the Skokomish Watershed Action Team to collaboratively address flood risk management, soil erosion, wildlife restoration, enhancement, monitoring, and management. This said we would like greater cooperation with stream access for our restoration work on the Skokomish River co[shy] managed with the Mason Conservation District and other agencies. While we do certainly appreciate the Scenic value of our rivers and waterways, Ecological Restoration is a paramount importance for the Skokomish Tribe and its responsible stewardship of natural resources. Without the restoration work the scenic value and level of ecological services will be compromised not only for the Tribe, but also the greater community including the National Forest lands.

[bull] Expectations for Future Consultation:

The NWFP amendment process shall ensure consultation is comprehensive, ongoing, and respectful by:

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* Engaging Tribes at the earliest stages of decision-making and maintaining regular communication throughout all phases of planning, implementation, and monitoring.

* Providing adequate time for Tribal review and feedback on management proposals, respecting Tribal schedules and resource constraints.

* Ensuring consultation outcomes are actionable and enforceable, with commitments formalized through agreements and protocols co-developed with Tribes.

* Accountability in consultation by requiring written records of consultation outcomes, timelines, and actions to ensure accountability.

Key Position Points

To honor Tribal sovereignty and fulfill trust and treaty responsibilities, the NWFP amendment must:

[bull] Formalize Enforceable Co-Stewardship Agreements

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* Implement binding co-management agreements that explicitly provide Tribes with decision-making authority over culturally significant lands, species, and resources. These agreements must recognize Tribal jurisdiction,

incorporate Tribal management plans, and ensure co-stewardship on all lands within the NWFP area.

- * Co-stewardship agreements must include specific provisions for funding, staffing, and capacity-building to support meaningful and sustained Tribal leadership in forest planning, project implementation, and monitoring efforts.

[bull] Protect Tribal Data Sovereignty and Cultural Information

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- * Ensure that all Tribal knowledge, data, and cultural information are protected by robust Tribal data sovereignty protocols, requiring free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) before use.

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- * Ceremonial ritual and prayer must be a fundamental right and access for such activities must be primary.

- * Confidentiality provisions must safeguard sensitive Tribal information and ensure that its use aligns with the principles of Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

[bull] Restore and Protect Treaty-Reserved Resources and Practices

While Tribal culture tends to operate on an economics of giving, the time, skill and labor that practitioners of traditional lifeways apply to cultivating resources is an investment that must be respected even though it may not appear as obvious as plowing and planting.

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- * The NWFP amendment must prioritize the restoration and protection of treaty-reserved resources such as salmon, elk, oysters, huckleberries, and camas, which are critical to Tribal ceremonies, diets, and ecological stewardship. Specific enforceable objectives must ensure the health and abundance of these species.

- * Provide Tribes with unfettered access to sacred sites, traditional cultural properties, and gathering areas, with management practices explicitly designed to avoid harm to these spaces.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS ON THE DEIS

The Skokomish Indian Tribe has carefully reviewed the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and identified several areas where it does not adequately address Tribal concerns. Below are our specific comments and recommendations:

Tribal Inclusion

The Skokomish Indian Tribe acknowledges and appreciates that the DEIS highlights "Incorporation of Indigenous Knowledge and Increased Tribal Inclusion" as a priority issue and dedicates a section to it (Chapter 3, p. 3-1 to 3-14). We also recognize that the Proposed Action/Alternative B, as well as the other action alternatives, include a robust suite of Tribal Inclusion plan components-Desired Conditions, Goals, Objectives, Standards, Guidelines, and Potential Management Approaches (Appendix AI).

Collectively, these components represent critical steps toward fostering meaningful government-to-tribe government collaboration and ensuring that Tribal interests, rights, and knowledge are embedded in forest management practices.

However, we are deeply concerned that the analysis in the DEIS focuses almost entirely on the proposed Objectives and provides insufficient discussion of the other Tribal Inclusion plan components. These additional components collectively form the necessary framework for advancing Tribal access and gathering, preserving biodiversity, facilitating co-stewardship, incorporating Indigenous Knowledge, honoring treaty and protected

Tribal rights, fostering workforce development, and improving interagency coordination. Furthermore, the DEIS should explicitly highlight the major differences between the No Action Alternative and Alternative B regarding Tribal Inclusion, as this comparison is essential for understanding how the Proposed Action would advance the federal Trust responsibility and support Tribal sovereignty.

We understand that while the Northwest Forest Plan amendment will establish Standards, Guidelines, and other management parameters, it cannot commit the Forest Service to specific allocations of funding or staffing. However, we also recognize that the amendment can prioritize efforts and establish Objectives to support Tribes in identifying and securing resources. This approach is vital to enable Tribes to participate fully in co-stewardship initiatives and strengthen their capacity for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Environmental Impacts

* Ecological Concerns: The DEIS insufficiently addresses the potential ecological impacts on Tribal lands and resources as well as National Forest System lands. For example, changes in water quality can degrade habitats critical for culturally significant species such as salmon, lamprey and shellfish. Specific concerns include:

* Water Quality: Riparian areas essential to traditional fisheries and water sources face threats from sedimentation and improper management activities. The DEIS should include enforceable measures to restore and protect these areas under Tribal co[shy] management.

* Wildlife Habitat: Habitat loss for keystone species such as salmon and lamprey is inadequately addressed. The NWFP must prioritize Tribal-led initiatives to monitor and restore these populations with specific habitat recovery targets.

* Culturally Significant Plants: The DEIS does not allocate sufficient attention to the restoration and sustainability of culturally significant plant species. Tribal cultural burning practices must be included as a core strategy to ensure the health of these species.

* Cultural Fire Practices: Expand the use of cultural burns, multi-function firebreaks and creating fire signals in the ecosystem as critical ecosystem management and mitigation tools.

Cultural and Archaeological Resources

* Protection of Sacred Sites: Sacred sites, cultural landscapes, and archaeological resources within the NWFP area are vital to our culture, traditional ways of life, identity, and history. However, the DEIS lacks enforceable protection for these areas. Specific recommendations include:

* Develop protocols requiring formal Tribal consultation before any management activities that may impact sacred sites or Traditional Cultural Properties.

* Mandate avoidance of disturbance in identified culturally historical and sacred areas, supported by enforceable standards for their long-term protection.

* Sustainable Forestry: Indigenous Knowledge is indispensable for informed and sustainable forest management. The DEIS fails to provide clear mechanisms for its integration. Examples of Indigenous Knowledge applications include:

* Wildlife Management: Use Indigenous Knowledge to inform salmon, shellfish and lamprey restoration and enhancement projects by aligning strategies with seasonal and ecological knowledge held by Tribal practitioners.

- * Forest Health: Incorporate Indigenous Knowledge to design restoration practices, such as thinning, clearing and prescribed burns, that emulate natural processes and ensure ecosystem resilience. Understand, respect and facilitate the role of elder successful specimens (Grandfathers/Grandmothers) within species communities.
- * Cultural Continuity: Use Indigenous Knowledge and cultural patterns to maintain the availability of First Foods, fostering ecological stewardship and cultural preservation. This should include agroforestry techniques like those promoted as Forest Gardening² to support not only food sovereignty for tribal members but also food for wildlife that are essential to the symbiotic interdependency of healthy woodland ecology.

Economic Impact

* Sustainable Economic Opportunities:

Tribal communities must benefit from sustainable economic initiatives that align with our values. The DEIS inadequately explores these opportunities. Specific suggestions include:

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- * Expand Tribal participation in restoration contracts and stewardship agreements to support economic self-determination.

2 Strategies for sustainable high yielding forest production integrating many Tribal Practices that have shaped the American landscape. Edible Forest Gardens Volumes 1 & 2, Dave Jacke, Chelsea Green, 2005.

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- * Prioritize Tribal led enterprises in initiatives such as riparian restoration, cultural burning, and habitat monitoring, ensuring economic opportunities align with traditional practices.
- * Collaboration on identifying non-timber yields of our forest systems including ecosystem services to better understand the total yield of sustainably managed forestry.
- * Consideration of agroforestry strategies including Forest Garden³ strategies based on traditional American (Indigenous Knowledge) forest management practices for high overall sustainable yield. Ideally such applications should begin as small-scale trial applications with identifiable benefits like establishing a high value firebreak/access corridor that could be managed for wildlife habitat and cultural harvesting. Evaluation over time should produce assessment of ROI in tangible terms of indirect support for timber production, wildlife enhancement, non-timber production (fuel, fiber, medicine, forage, food and recreation), and ecosystem services.

[bull] Job Creation and Economic Development:

Job creation is essential for building capacity within Tribal communities while addressing forest management needs. Recommendations include:

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- * Provide funding for workforce development programs, including the Indian Youth Service Corps, to train Tribal members in restoration, fire management, and ecological monitoring.
- * Support Tribal-specific infrastructure projects, such as nurseries for culturally significant plant species and facilities for fish habitat restoration.

Health and Well-being

* Community Health Implications:

The DEIS does not adequately address the disproportionate health impacts of water quality degradation, and loss of traditional foods on Tribal communities. Specific concerns include:

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* Water resource degradation threatens the health of Tribal fisheries and drinking water supplies. Specific Tribal-led monitoring and restoration programs must be funded to address these issues.

* Creating livelihoods that bring our community members out into the landscape is an essential element to our individual and collective health and well-being. A major part of

3 Edible Forest Gardens Volumes 1 & 2, Dave Jacke, Chelsea Green, 2005.

this is being able to maintain a diet of traditional foods and medicines, healthy recreational and ceremonial activities and sustaining wildlife as a community resource.

[bull] Public Health Recommendations:

To protect Tribal health, the DEIS must incorporate the following measures:

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* Include mandatory standards for riparian restoration to improve water quality for fisheries and drinking water sources.

* Enhance access to traditional foods and medicines by funding programs to restore habitats and cultural practices for First Foods and Medicines and ensuring their accessibility to Tribal members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the shortcomings in the DEIS and ensure the NWFP amendment aligns with Tribal priorities and responsibilities, the following recommendations are provided:

1. Formalize Enforceable Co-Stewardship Agreements:

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* Establish binding co-stewardship agreements with Tribes that include decision-making authority, measurable outcomes, and guaranteed funding. These agreements must provide Tribes with management authority over culturally significant lands and resources, as outlined in Secretarial Order 3403.

* Develop co-stewardship agreements within two years for all lands of cultural significance to Tribes within the NWFP area, incorporating Tribal management standards and guidelines. For the Skokomish Tribe this would suggest a co-stewardship plan for the USFS lands in the Hood Canal watershed which closely matches our traditional Usual and Accustomed resources. More specifically the forest lands in the Skokomish, Hamma Hamma, Duckabush and Dosewallips, watersheds are areas that have been managed almost exclusively by the Skokomish up to the signing of the Point No Point Treaty. On this note we will gladly develop co-Stewardship

proposals and recommendations as a part of our next Skokomish Forest Plan Update.

2. Protect Sacred Sites and Cultural Landscapes:

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* Prioritize Tribal Access over Recreational Access especially where access is for ceremonial and/or cultural purposes.

* Mandate consultation with Tribes prior to any management activity near sacred sites, Traditional Cultural Properties, and burial grounds.

* Develop enforceable standards to prevent disturbance in identified sacred areas, supported by funding for long-term site protection and monitoring programs.

3. Restore and Protect Culturally Significant Species and Habitats:

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* Expand the Survey and Manage program to include culturally significant species, such as salmon, lamprey, oysters, salmonberries, huckleberries, and camas, with specific objectives for habitat restoration and species population recovery.

* Fund Tribal-led restoration projects with clear annual targets, such as the restoration of 5,000 acres of riparian and upland habitats critical to culturally significant species.

4. Foster Sustainable Economic Opportunities for Tribes:

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* Allocate at least 30% of all restoration and stewardship contracts under the NWFP to Tribal entities, prioritizing culturally and ecologically aligned projects.

* Expand funding for programs like the Indian Youth Service Corps and Good Neighbor Authority to support Tribal workforce development, natural resource management skills, GIS mapping skills, and create long-term employment opportunities.

5. Support Tribal Workforce Development:

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* Establish dedicated funding streams for Tribal training programs in restoration, natural resource management, fire management, ecological monitoring, and climate adaptation.

* Create internships and apprenticeships within the Forest Service for Tribal members, ensuring Tribal representation in management decision-making roles.

6. Protect Tribal Community Health and Well-Being:

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* Establish mandatory water quality standards to protect Tribal fisheries and drinking water sources, with funding for Tribal-led monitoring and restoration.

* Support programs that enhance access to and cultivation of First Foods, Medicines and other non-timber resources including funding for habitat restoration and removal of access barriers for Tribal gatherers and practitioners.

7. Advance Adaptive Management and Flexibility:

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* Enable Tribes to implement their own land management standards and guidelines, with provisions allowing these standards to supersede NWFP components where necessary to fulfill treaty rights and cultural obligations.

* Allow Tribal-led adaptive management practices, including experimental projects such as culturally guided thinning, wildlife monitoring and enhancement including establishing edible forest garden areas for wildlife forage and human food gathering, beaver reintroduction, and ecological engineering of riparian systems.

In addition to the recommendations outlined above, we urge the Forest Service to include specific plan components that commit to working in partnership with Tribes to identify and secure funding sources. This should include strategies for supporting Tribal capacity-building efforts to participate in interdisciplinary planning and implementation processes, ensuring meaningful co-stewardship opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The Skokomish Indian Tribe acknowledges the intent of Alternative B to improve the resilience and sustainability of the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP). The Alternative A does not serve the public interest whether indigenous or not. The lack of active management and cumulative results of even aged monoculture practices are arguably responsible for extreme loss of return on public investment with very high liabilities being seen now in terms of invasive pest species directly related to even-aged monoculture practices and extreme wildfire events again often associated with those same practices.

The DEIS must go further to fully align with science based sustainable forestry and Tribal priorities and obligations under federal trust responsibilities. Specifically, the NWFP amendment must:

- * Formalize co-stewardship agreements that recognize Tribal decision-making authority over culturally significant lands and resources.
- * Protect sacred sites, treaty-reserved resources, and culturally significant species through enforceable measures and mandatory consultation protocols.
- * Prioritize Tribal-led restoration, sustainable forestry practices and economic development initiatives that align with our cultural values and traditional practices.
- * Prioritize Tribal Access for ceremonial and cultural practices over Recreational Access.

The issues outlined in this letter - ranging from managing seral stages of succession towards climax ecologies and ecological restoration to the protection of Tribal sovereignty and sacred landscapes - are critical to sustaining the shared ecosystems of the Pacific Northwest for future generations. Addressing these concerns is a legal obligation and a moral imperative to honor the federal government's trust responsibility.

Call to Action

The Skokomish Indian Tribe urges the U.S. Forest Service to take the following actions:

1. Revise the DEIS to incorporate the recommendations outlined in this letter, ensuring that Tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, and co-stewardship are central to the final NWFP amendment.
2. Enhance consultation processes by implementing comprehensive, government-to-government protocols that ensure early and continuous engagement with Tribes throughout all stages of planning, implementation, and monitoring.

1. Schedule a meeting with our Tribal Council by April 31, to discuss these recommendations in detail and establish a roadmap for addressing our concerns in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS).

We respectfully request a written response from the USFS within 30 days acknowledging receipt of this letter and outlining next steps for addressing the issues raised.

Closing Statement

The Skokomish Indian Tribe thanks the U.S. Forest Service for the opportunity to participate in this critical process. We decisively accept the invitation to Co-Stewardship and the opportunity to promote our traditional cultural practices in the Twana lands. We appreciate your attention to our concerns and your willingness to collaborate to protect and sustain the lands and resources that are our ancestral inheritance.

As stewards of these sacred landscapes, we remain committed to ensuring their health and vitality for generations to come. We look forward to working together to create a Northwest Forest Plan that reflects our shared values and responsibilities.

Sincerely,

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Natural Resources Director Skokomish Indian Tribe

Skokomish Nation, WA 98584

ATTACHMENT-LETTER TEXT: NWFP_Am_Skokomish_Comment.pdf; This is the same content that is coded in text box; it was originally included as an attachment