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Organization: Glacier Peak Institute

Title: Executive Director

Comments: Dear NW Forest Plan Committee,

I write this letter recognizing the intent of the Northwest Forest Plan, and the work put in.

I have researched many rural forest communities in the region looking for solutions, and what I write are experiences not represented from the NWFP committees, research, and discussions. The forest in the region have the opportunity to heal both the ecosystems and the economies.

In our community, before Glacier Peak Institute a youth is more likely to die before 30 than

Work for the Forest Service

Work for Forest Service Contractor

Work for a guide company

Raft the Wild and Scenic River flowing through town

Climb Whitehorse Mountain that overlooks our community.

This letter is written to advocate for solutions to save lives and express the deep concerns of rural forest communities, particularly those like Darrington, regarding the ongoing implementation and potential amendments to the NWFP. As stakeholders deeply affected by this plan for over three decades, we urge the committee to seriously consider the detrimental impacts it has had and to adopt meaningful changes that prioritize the well-being of our communities.

The implementation of the NWFP in 1993, while intending to address environmental concerns, has inadvertently left rural forest communities behind. We have witnessed firsthand the economic and social consequences of decisions made without adequate consideration for the people who have historically been stewards of these lands and whose livelihoods are intrinsically linked to them.

A significant flaw in the current structure is the composition of those at the decision-making table. While we commend the recent inclusion of rural Indigenous populations who have their own distinct avenues of influence, the dominant voices consistently come from urban centers. This includes conservation groups, Forest Service personnel in regional hubs, outdoor recreation groups, universities, and even timber interests whose ownership and primary operations are often located far from our struggling towns. This urban-centric perspective fails to grasp the lived realities and unique challenges faced by rural forest communities.

Furthermore, the current system perpetuates a form of economic colonialism. Contracts and resources meant to benefit our forests and communities frequently go to contractors based in distant urban areas. This practice extracts wealth from our region, failing to invest in local expertise, businesses, and the very people who have the deepest connection to the land. Opportunities from the rural forest communities that could help us are instead given to the I5 communities, destroying us from developing.

It is with profound disappointment that we reflect on the stated goals of the NWFP, such as increasing marbled murrelet and spotted owl populations, and salmon numbers. Despite the significant sacrifices made by our

communities - including the loss of jobs and opportunities for our youth - these ecological goals have largely not been met. Our young people have essentially been sacrificed for objectives that have not achieved their intended outcomes. This failure underscores a critical flaw in the plan's assumptions and implementation. And, it means that I watch the funeral processions and mourn the death and struggles of these youth. These tears are only shed in this community.

I have witnessed that the status quo of the NWFP is defended by those who benefit from its existing power structures. This is not due to the plan's success in achieving its stated ecological goals, but rather because it maintains a distribution of power that favors urban-based organizations and interests. It delays action.

The consequences for rural communities like Darrington have been stark and devastating. We have experienced childhood poverty rates three times that of urban areas, drastic cuts to school funding (around one-third), and a significant reduction in local Forest Service personnel (approximately 70%). Moreover, many of the remaining businesses are owned by individuals who do not reside in our community, further draining local resources and decision-making power. These distant business owners do not give back to the community, volunteer at the fire department, school board or food bank. The local business owners and local retired Forest Service personnel are the community members still holding our communities together.

The decline in local people working in the forests has also led to a significant loss of invaluable knowledge and understanding of the landscape. I have witnessed as Forest Service Personnel do not know about local infrastructure, roads or ecosystems. Opportunities in environmental education, outdoor recreation, guiding, restoration, contracting, and even government management jobs are disproportionately awarded to individuals and businesses from distant I-5 corridor communities, further marginalizing those who are deeply connected to the place.

The 1993 NWFP made a promise to never forget the people and economies of this region. Yet, 30 years later, this promise rings hollow. We have watched as our youth are forced to leave to find opportunities elsewhere, or worse, succumb to the struggles of a community left behind. There have been no consequences for the failure to uphold this fundamental commitment.

Those with power through the NWFP often seek to dismiss our experience. Let us be clear: Darrington's plight is not an anomaly. Look at Concrete, Oak Ridge, Trout Lake, Packwood, Morton - the pattern of neglect in rural forest communities near urban centers within the NWFP region is undeniable and demands attention.

To address these critical issues and foster a more equitable and effective approach to forest management, we advocate for the following solutions:

**Increase the Voice of Local Communities:** Meaningful engagement and integration of local community perspectives in all stages of planning and implementation are essential. This will lead to better environmental and economic outcomes, as those with firsthand knowledge and a vested interest in the region are empowered to contribute.

**Increase Tracking of Rural Forest Community Well-being:** The NWFP should mandate the regular tracking and public reporting of key socio-economic indicators in rural forest communities like Darrington. This should include statistics such as median household income, childhood poverty rates, the total number of businesses, and the percentage of businesses owned locally. This transparency will prevent reviewers from distant communities from ignoring the real-world impacts of the plan.

**Increase Support for Rural Forest Communities:** Implement policies that prioritize contracts and permits for local

contractors, businesses, and schools. This targeted support will help rebuild local economies and ensure that the benefits of forest management directly contribute to the well-being of these communities.

#### Local Direct

**Relocate Forest Service Personnel:** With the rise of remote work, consider relocating a greater number of Forest Service employees currently based in urban headquarters to rural forest communities. This would increase local knowledge of the landscape and provide much-needed economic benefits to these areas.

**Empower Locally Based Ranger Districts:** The current structure of the Forest Service centralizes power in Washington D.C. The NWFP should advocate for empowering locally based ranger districts to make more decisions and get work done on the ground, fostering greater responsiveness to local needs and conditions.

**Invest in Local Workforce Development Programs:** Dedicate specific funding and resources to develop and support workforce training programs within rural forest communities. These programs should focus on skills relevant to modern forestry, ecological restoration, sustainable tourism, and other economic opportunities that align with both environmental stewardship and community prosperity. This will ensure local residents have the skills needed to participate in the evolving forest economy and create pathways for youth to stay and thrive in their communities.

**Accountability:** The stark lesson of the past 30 years is that promises to rural forest communities are meaningless without recourse. The revised NWFP must incorporate consequences for broken promises to rural forest communities, creating real 'skin in the game' for those responsible for its implementation and outcome.

**Reform Funding Systems to Benefit Communities:** Restructure the allocation of funding systems such as Secure Rural Schools (SRS) funding to ensure that a substantial majority is directly distributed to the rural forest communities most impacted by federal land management policies. This will rectify the current imbalance where significant portions of these funds are diverted to urban centers along the I-5 corridor, failing to provide meaningful support to the intended beneficiaries and their critical needs, such as adequately funding schools in communities like ours. In 2017, the Darrington School District only received \$900 for the entire school with \$100Ks more going to urban schools despite us having the highest poverty rates.. RAC grant funds largely go to pay organizations on distant I5 corridors to work in our communities. For the rural forest communities to succeed, this needs to change.

The current trajectory is unsustainable and unjust, and you have the ability to change it. The Northwest Forest Plan must evolve to truly reflect its initial promise to both protect the environment and support the people who call these forest regions home. We urge the committee to take these concerns and proposed solutions seriously and to work towards a future where rural forest communities are not left behind but are instead integral partners in the stewardship of these vital ecosystems.

At Glacier Peak Institute, we have success in implementing our impact into the community. We have watched as our programs for youth from struggling backgrounds change courses to go on to earn degrees, pursue outdoor careers, and impress us for their care for community, self and ecosystems. It took the 2014 Oso Slide killing 43 members of our community for us to get support to create Glacier Peak Institute to heal and also address the 100s more that we have mourned over the years since the decline of the 90s. What we need; what they need; and what the NWFP needs for success is opportunity and inclusion. Together we can.

Sincerely,

Oak Rankin

Executive Director

ATTACHMENT-LETTER TEXT: Glacier Peak Institute NWFP letter.pdf; this is the same content that is coded in text box; it was also included as an attachment