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Comments: Please find attached my comments on the Preliminary Draft Plan for the blue mountains forest plan revision.

Public Comment on Preliminary Draft Proposed Forest Plan - Malheur, Umatilla & Wallowa-Whitman National Forests

To: Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision Team

Subject: Public Comment on Preliminary Draft Proposed Forest Plan - Malheur, Umatilla & Wallowa-Whitman National Forests

### 1. Introduction and Background

My name is John George, and I am a lifelong resident of Bates, Oregon. I am submitting this formal comment on the Preliminary Draft Proposed Forest Plan for the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. I also participated in the 2014 Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision process and submitted extensive comments at that time. Many of the issues I raised more than a decade ago remain unresolved, and it is clear that the current plan closely mirrors the withdrawn 2014-2018 draft. As someone whose family has lived and worked in Eastern Oregon for generations, I am deeply concerned that this revision continues to ignore the human environment—the people, livelihoods, and cultural traditions that define our region.

### 2. NEPA and the Duty to Protect the Human Environment

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires the Forest Service to evaluate the effects of federal actions on the human environment. Yet, both the 2014 and 2025 plan drafts treat the human environment as secondary to ecological objectives. The Forest Service has again chosen to emphasize 'restoration thresholds' and modeling systems like Landfire, rather than the social and economic conditions of rural residents. This is contrary to NEPA's statutory purpose, which is to safeguard people and communities from poorly conceived federal decisions—not to protect nature from people.

As I noted in my 2014 comment, this misinterpretation of NEPA distorts the agency's obligations. The Forest Service must undertake a full, transparent assessment of how this plan will affect rural economies, subsistence users, and local governments' ability to protect health, safety, and welfare. Without such analysis, the plan is legally deficient.

### 3. Failure to Protect Motorized Access and Cross-Country Travel

The proposed plan repeats the same structural flaws of the prior 2014-2018 draft by seeking to confine motorized use to designated routes, remove legacy roads, and expand restrictive Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) zones. This would create a de facto closure of large portions of the Blue Mountains to traditional and lawful use.

Motorized access is essential to the way of life for Eastern Oregonians. It supports firewood collection, hunting, subsistence activities, access to water, recreation, and family traditions that have continued for generations. By reducing access through 'designated route' restrictions and Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized ROS designations, the plan eliminates the very fabric of that way of life. These decisions are socially and economically destructive and lack the required NEPA and statutory justification.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo* (2024) eliminated judicial deference to agency interpretations of ambiguous law. The Forest Service can no longer rely on internal discretion or planning policy to justify restrictions on motorized use. Such closures must be explicitly supported by statutory authority and subject to full environmental and socioeconomic analysis.

### 4. Social, Economic, and Cultural Impacts on Rural Communities

The Forest Service has failed to take a hard look at how the proposed plan will affect rural and low-income communities. In 2014, I noted that the Blue Mountains plan treated rural residents as a data point in regional economic models, rather than as real people. That remains true today.

Reducing road access and eliminating cross-country travel disproportionately harms residents who depend on the forest for firewood, meat, and other subsistence uses. These impacts are particularly severe for elderly, disabled, and low-income residents who cannot physically pack supplies from distant trailheads. The plan violates both NEPA and Executive Order 12898 by failing to evaluate or mitigate these disproportionate impacts.

#### 5. Exclusion of Traditional Cultural Knowledge and Local Heritage

The Forest Service continues to disregard the Traditional Cultural Knowledge (TCK) of the non-tribal residents of Eastern Oregon. In my 2014 comments, I noted that the plan dismissed local knowledge as 'anecdotal.' This bias persists in the 2025 plan. The agency recognizes tribal cultural uses but fails to provide equal recognition to non-tribal subsistence traditions, which are equally rooted in history and meet the National Historic Preservation Act's definition of Traditional Cultural Properties.

The Forest Service cannot claim to honor local culture while removing the access that sustains it. A true multiple-use plan must equally protect both tribal and non-tribal cultural practices tied to the land.

#### 6. Reuse of Withdrawn 2014-2018 Plan and Procedural Violations

The current Preliminary Draft Plan is substantially identical to the withdrawn 2014-2018 Blue Mountains plan, which was formally rejected by Forest Service leadership in 2019 due to public opposition and internal recognition that it was unworkable. Recycling this same framework without reevaluation violates the Administrative Procedure Act's prohibition against arbitrary and capricious action.

Moreover, the agency's reliance on the Blue Mountains Intergovernmental Council (BIC) and affiliated organizations such as Wallowa Resources appears to constitute a violation of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). These entities were not publicly chartered or balanced as advisory bodies, yet their materials and input directly influenced the plan's development. The agency must provide a public accounting of all such advisory roles and ensure compliance with federal law.

#### 7. Recommendations and Requested Corrections

Based on the foregoing, I respectfully request that the Forest Service:

- [bull] Withdraw the current Preliminary Draft Plan and issue a revised version that fully addresses the socioeconomic and cultural impacts on rural residents.

- [bull] Protect open motorized access across all three forests, including cross-country travel where it currently occurs.

- [bull] Remove or reclassify all 'Primitive' and 'Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized' ROS designations outside designated Wilderness areas.

- [bull] Recognize non-tribal Traditional Cultural Knowledge and subsistence uses as eligible for protection under the NHPA.

- [bull] Conduct a full NEPA analysis of the effects of access restrictions on the human environment, including low-income and elderly residents.

- [bull] Provide a detailed legal justification for any proposed road closures, consistent with the Supreme Court's Loper Bright decision.

#### 8. Closing Statement

The people of Eastern Oregon have lived and worked within the Blue Mountains for generations. Our roads, trails, and traditions are not obstacles to be removed—they are the living infrastructure of rural life. After more than a decade of participation in this process, I am disheartened to see the same disregard for local voices repeated. However, I remain hopeful that the Forest Service will honor its obligation to serve the people as well as the land, by adopting a plan that protects both.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and for your consideration of these concerns.

Thanks,

John D. George

Bates, Oregon