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Title:

Comments: Submitted To: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r01/kootenai/projects/55001> Attn: Chadwick Benson, Forest Supervisor Nathan Gassmann, Libby District Ranger Kootenai National Forest Dear Supervisor Benson and District Ranger Gassmann, The Kootenai Tribe of Idaho (Kootenai Tribe) offers the following comments on the Kootenai National Forest's supplemental environmental documents for the Ripley Project. Among other things, the Ripley Project is intended to promote resilient forest conditions and reduce the potential for high-intensity wildfire that poses a threat to natural resources on the Kootenai National Forest (KNF). Kootenai Tribe elders pass down the history of the beginning ohime, which tells that the Kootenai people were created by Kwi+qa Nupika, the Supreme Being, and placed on earth to keep the Creator Spirit's Covenant - to guard and keep the land forever. The Kootenai have never lost sight of their original purpose as guardians of the land. Bands of the Kootenai or Ktunaxa Nation have inhabited Ktunaxa Territory, including portions of Idaho, Montana, Washington, British Columbia, and Alberta, since time immemorial. The Kootenai Tribe is one of two bands in the United States. The Kootenai Tribe possesses federally reserved fishing, hunting, and gathering rights within Ktunaxa Territory, as reserved in the Treaty of Hellgate of 1855. The Kootenai Tribe and the United States Forest Service (USFS) enjoy a close working relationship and often collaborate on issues of common concern to protect the fish, wildlife, and plant resources within the Territory. Management of these resources within Ktunaxa Territory is essential to fulfilling our Covenant with the Creator to keep and guard the land forever. The Kootenai Tribe reviewed the supplemental environmental documents for the Ripley Project after being notified of their availability for review and comment by the USFS. The Ripley Project in its current form appears to be consistent with our Covenant. The Ripley Project is located within Ktunaxa Territory where the protection and restoration of natural resources are essential to the Kootenai Tribe. The Tribe supports this project moving forward for the reasons set forth in this comment letter. The Supplemental Environmental Assessment (SEA) for the Ripley Project demonstrates a clear and methodologically sound response to the deficiencies identified by the Montana District Court, and it reflects a rigorous application of current scientific information, Forest Plan direction, and Endangered Species Act consultation requirements. The updated grizzly bear analysis is robust. The USFS amended the Kootenai Forest Plan to establish the Fisher Bears Outside the Recovery Zone (BORZ) based on recurring use data per its usual practice. The USFS then took a hard look at secure habitat, route densities, and cumulative effects using the updated baseline. The SEA appropriately integrates new monitoring data, including BORZ triggering criteria from Kasworm et al. (2022), and applies the Forest Plan's FW-STD-WL-02 standard using the revised spatial extent. The analysis of secure habitat blocks, motorized route configurations, and temporal effects during project implementation is consistent with the methods used in the 2023 Forest Plan Biological Opinion and aligns with the best available science on grizzly bear habitat security and movement ecology, including the research of Sells et al. (2023) regarding connectivity pathways. Movement of grizzlies to increase populations throughout Ktunaxa Territory is critical to honoring the Covenant. The expanded Canada lynx analysis also reflects a technically sound approach. The Supplemental Biological Assessment and 2026 Biological Opinion incorporate updated habitat mapping, LAU boundaries, and effects pathways for vegetation structure, snowshoe hare habitat, and potential denning conditions. The effects determination is supported by quantitative treatment acreages, spatial overlays of lynx habitat types, and a clear explanation of why the project does not alter baseline conditions in a manner that would impede lynx recovery or violate the Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy. Additionally, the SEA's treatment of other species-wolverine, yellow billed cuckoo, monarch butterfly, and Suckley's cuckoo bumblebee---demonstrates appropriate use of species occurrence data, modeled habitat layers, and effects mechanisms. The USFS correctly identifies where habitat is absent, where effects are discountable or insignificant, where design features fully avoid potential impacts, and where species will benefit from the treatment. To illustrate that last point, the SEA discloses that treatment "would create more open forest structure and increased sunlight, improving conditions for native flowering plants that benefit both the host species and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee." SEA at 71. See also SEA at 27 (discussing the benefit to wildlife from forage production after prescribed burning); SEA at 79, 80 (discussing Ripley Project

benefits to big game species). Overall, the SEA provides a transparent, technically defensible analysis that incorporates new information, responds directly to the Court's concerns, and demonstrates compliance with NEPA, the ESA, and the 2015 Forest Plan as amended. The updated record well supports the conclusion that the project does not result in significant environmental effects. The Tribe hopes that USFS will continue to develop and implement ecological restoration projects, such as the Ripley Project on the KNF, for the benefit of all concerned. This includes the grizzly bear, the Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone population of which was most recently estimated at about 64 bears (based on 2024 data), with a 72% chance of a stable or increasing population. Forest restoration projects are important to the future of the grizzly bear and other species of fundamental importance to the Tribe. Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments and participate in the Ripley Project process.