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#### Colville NF Plan Revision Comments

The Washington Cattlemen's Association (WCA), the Public Lands Council (PLC) and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) submit the following comments on the proposed revised Land and Resources Management Plan for the Colville National Forest.

WCA is a Washington not-for-profit trade organization which represents the interests of cattle producers on legal and legislative issues including the use of natural resources. WCA was founded in 1926 and is supported through a grassroots network of individual livestock operators and county cattlemen's organizations. Current membership in the WCA includes 26 affiliated county organizations and approximately 1,400 individual members engaged in cattle ranching. Our members include those that depend on the ability to graze livestock on the Colville National Forest (Colville) and own land in the vicinity of the Colville that would be threatened by wildfire on the Forest. Our members graze livestock on the Colville grazing allotments and are concerned that the Colville Proposed Plan (Plan) will hinder the reasonable use of the allotments. WCA regularly promotes agriculture and the cattle industry by, among other things, advocating at the local, state, and federal levels. PLC is the only national organization dedicated solely to representing the roughly 22,000 ranchers who operate on federal lands. NCBA is the beef industry's largest and oldest national marketing and trade association representing American cattlemen and women who provide much of the nation's supply of food and own or manage a large portion of America's private property.

#### I. Introduction and summary of comments.

The purpose of the action is to revise the 1988 forest plan for the Colville which encompasses approximately 1.1 million acres in Northeast Washington. WCA, PLC, NCBA and our members have been participating in the Colville plan revision process since its inception.

During the Plan revision process, the Plan has expressed the importance of livestock grazing to the economy, culture, and resource management across the greater Colville area. Alt. P is an improvement on the proposed action in some ways such as reducing the amount of recommended wilderness and increasing the General Restoration acres while decreasing Focused Restoration acres. However, Alt. P would significantly reduce livestock grazing on the Colville, despite the improvements on the proposed action.

WCA, PLC and NCBA's comments are focused on primary areas where the proposed Plan or Draft EIS (DEIS) can be improved to better fulfill the multiple use mandates while simultaneously addressing environmental concerns. Some of these types of improvements include: limiting or avoiding unnecessary restrictions of livestock grazing in riparian areas and avoiding the Plan's reduction of public access. Further, the Plan fails to consider an adequate range of alternatives.

#### II. WCA, PLC and NCBA are strongly opposed to the Preferred Alternative (Alt. P) Aquatic and Riparian Conservation Strategy-modified (ARCS-mod).

The information regarding the development of ARCS-mod is inadequate and lacks transparency. The DEIS states that "[b]ased on public and internal comments, best available science, and new policies on Forest Service management of aquatic and riparian resources, including the Watershed Condition Framework, plan components in ARCS were updated in alternatives P and R." DEIS at 287 (emphasis added). Contrary to this statement, there was no public involvement in updating plan components in ARCS. The same paragraph states that "ARCS-modified plan components were updated based on discussions with the Forest Plan interdisciplinary team, resource specialists in the Pacific Northwest regional office, and other reviewers of the draft forest plan."

DEIS at 287. The public is only now able to review the "draft forest plan" and therefore was not involved in updating ARCS plan components.

Additionally, the DEIS states that the ARCS plan components were updated for the purposes of clarification and that the interdisciplinary team "considered operational constraints." DEIS at 287. However, the interdisciplinary team went well beyond "clarification" and imposed unreasonable restrictions on livestock grazing standards and guidelines and expanded the key watershed network. ARCS, like INFISH, is a major decision with long-term implications and was, appropriately, open to public comment and review. Similarly, the ARCS-mod updates to ARCS will have long-term implications as well as direct, immediate consequences and the Forest Service must be willing to change the ARCS in response to public comments on the plan.

Despite these procedural missteps, the ARCS-mod standards and guidelines in Alt. P are strongly rejected by WCA because (1) current riparian management strategies are effective in maintaining or improving conditions, (2) the ARCS-mod lacks flexibility to adapt to site-specific conditions, and (3) the ARCS restrictions will degrade riparian resources.

Current riparian management strategies are effective in maintaining or improving conditions; there is no ecological need for increasing restrictions in riparian areas. The DEIS and Fisheries Report state that riparian areas and water quality are either maintaining or improving under the current INFISH strategy. DEIS at 288-89, 536; Fisheries Report at 47, 53. The DEIS states that the ARCS-mod standards and guidelines would "constrain grazing beyond what has been identified as optimal to protect stream and riparian values in most areas." DEIS at 537 (emphasis added). Accordingly, WCA, PLC and NCBA strongly oppose unwarranted restrictions and encourages the Colville to abandon ARCS-mod. Instead, the Forest Service should consider modifying INFISH to provide more flexible restrictions tailored to site-specific conditions to avoid imposing limits beyond what is needed for the optimal level of stream protection.

The ARCS-mod lacks flexibility to adapt to site-specific conditions. The current INFISH buffers are far too stringent as a "one-size fits all" approach to riparian management; ARCS-mod doubles current INFISH riparian buffers for intermittent streams, lakes and natural ponds. DEIS at 226, table 74. These arbitrary "one-size fits all" buffers do not allow for management decisions based on the existing ground conditions. The Plan should avoid these arbitrary buffers and instead develop an adaptable alternative that provides site-specific flexibility. For example, the stubble height requirement of 6-8 inches, MA-GDL-RMA-09, does not account for the research indicating that 2.75 inches may be adequate stubble height. DEIS at

536. The Range Report states that many of the riparian areas on the Colville are unable to produce 8 inches of stubble height where there is no grazing. Range Report at 28. The stubble height requirement could lead to 14,000-16,500 fewer AUMs, a 50 percent reduction from current levels. DEIS, 536. Implementation of similar standards and guidelines have led to a 27 percent reduction in authorized grazing in Region 5. Range Report at 28. The stubble height restrictions alone will ensure a reduction in authorized grazing by shortening grazing seasons or the number of livestock on the allotments. This is unacceptable and unwarranted. The reduced utilization of forage will lead to increased fuel loads that support more intense and rapidly spreading wildfire that destroy both public and private land.

The Colville is 1.1 million acres and it is unrealistic to broadly apply stringent standards to every riparian area within such a large land-base. Consistent with the best science and the limited capacity of all Colville rangeland to grow 8 inches of stubble height, the Plan should either change the guideline to 2.75-8 inches or eliminate the stubble height requirement and adopt a site-specific approach to managing riparian areas through allotment management plans with general guidance to maintain or improve riparian conditions.

Also, the language of standard MA-STD-RMA-01 "[w]hen riparian management areas are properly functioning, project activities shall maintain those conditions," is both overly strict and vague. "Shall" requires strict compliance and does not provide any flexibility. This is problematic because the standard contains vague language, "maintain." Compliance with this standard as written is subject to interpretation and will be strictly enforced. Therefore,

permittees and the Colville will be subject to potential claims upon implementation. WCA, PLC and NCBA recommend using flexible and concise language that allows for practical implementation of project activities when riparian management areas are properly functioning, such as "should" in place of "shall."

Another example of an unreasonable restriction that will significantly limit grazing is standard MA-STD-RMA-11.

This standard prohibits livestock access to federally listed threatened and endangered fish redds and is not feasible. The DEIS provides only one way to comply with this stringent standard, enclosure fencing. DEIS at 537. The EIS should also disclose that the enclosure fencing will be detrimental to wildlife movement and diminish the growth and health of vegetation inside the enclosure, increasing weeds and invasive species. Fencing is not only extremely expensive and labor-intensive, but "this method could make pasture moves more difficult." DEIS at 537. The proposed action guideline for fish redds is preferable as it requires permittees to "[g]enerally avoid trampling." Table 123, DEIS at 327.

The ARCS-mod standards and guidelines will degrade riparian conditions. For example, standard MA-STD-RMA-09 requires livestock water facilities to be 300' outside of fish-bearing streams. Plan at 100. The DEIS states that compliance with this standard is likely to lead to livestock reverting to drinking water from the streams, rather than troughs, thereby impeding riparian recovery which in turn violates standard MA-STD-RMA-10. DEIS at 536; Plan at 100 (requiring riparian function to allow conditions to move toward the desired condition).

Given that all livestock water facilities on the Colville are located within riparian management areas (RMAs), DEIS at 536, compliance with MA-STD-RMA-09 will cause widespread degradation to riparian areas. WCA, PLC and NCBA reject such standards which compel permittees to degrade riparian areas.

In sum, WCA, PLC and NCBA strongly oppose ARCS and the arbitrary riparian buffers that will be twice the width as INFISH and the ARCS-mod standards and guidelines. The Colville is encouraged to develop an adaptable alternative that provides site-specific flexibility.

III.Alt. P restricts access to grazing allotments by reducing road densities and creating non-motorized areas.

Reductions in road densities, recommending wilderness designation and designating backcountry areas will substantially increase the costs of livestock grazing as this alternative will eliminate access to grazing allotments. "Permit holders for allotments with less motorized access may take more time and labor to observe stock, check fences and water developments, and distribute salt than allotments with motorized off-highway vehicle access." DEIS at 528. The reduction in road density and motorized access also limits the public's recreational opportunities which is not the direction the Plan should take given the significant aging of the population that will occur over the next twenty years. Accordingly, WCA, PLC, and NCBA strongly oppose the decreases in access and recommends that the Colville develop an alternative that meets the needs for livestock grazing in these areas; the Colville should be identifying ways to increase livestock grazing, meeting the unfilled local demand, rather than burdening the current permittees with increased costs.

The recommendation of 68,300 acres, 6 percent of the Colville, as wilderness will have a long-lasting negative effect on livestock grazing if Congress designates this area as "wilderness." The DEIS states that if designated as wilderness by Congress, grazing is likely to cease on the portions of inactive allotments within the wilderness boundary, DEIS at 530. This is not in line with Congressional direction addressing livestock grazing in wilderness areas. "There shall be

no curtailments of grazing in wilderness areas simply because an area is, or has been designated as wilderness, nor should wilderness designations be used as an excuse by administrators to slowly 'phase out' grazing." FSM 2323.22(1). Further, grazing is allowed to continue on allotments which were vacant on the date of wilderness designation. FSM 2323.24(2). Even 'where grazing is allowed in Wilderness, grazing is significantly restricted and costs are increased because new roads and power tools to maintain the allotments are prohibited.

This proposed further reduction of livestock grazing is unacceptable given the Colville is already unable to meet the demand for authorized grazing under the current plan. The DEIS states that grazing is an important use to the local ranching industry and local communities and that the Colville is currently unable to meet the local demand for authorized grazing. DEIS at

519. The Plan proposes to restrict motorized use on 17 percent (wilderness and backcountry) of the Colville.

DEIS at 538. Although grazing of active allotments within the wilderness

boundary could continue, it will not be feasible because mechanized equipment will no longer be permitted. DEIS at 530. Similarly, livestock grazing will not be feasible in "backcountry" as standard MA-STD-BC-O J prohibits motor vehicle use. Plan at 84. It is common practice for permittees to use off-highway vehicles to manage allotments and by eliminating this valuable tool, Alt. P is increasing the time, labor, and capital required to

properly manage grazing allotments.

Alt. P will further reduce access for grazing, in violation of NFMA, MUSYA, and the Forest Service Manual. NFMA § 1604(e)(1) (forests must provide for multiple use in revising plans), MUSYA § 528 (forests shall be administered for range purposes among other resources), FSM 2203.1(2) (forests must make forage available to qualified livestock operators from lands that are suitable for livestock grazing). Alt. P proposes the road decommissioning of 78 miles of road in key watershed networks over the next 10-15 years. Table 119, DEIS at 321. Alt. P expanded the key watershed network to encompass 452,051 acres. DEIS at 235. Alt. P states a desired condition of no greater than 1.0 mile of road per square mile in Focused Restoration which encompass 565,550 acres. DEIS at 233-34. Alt. P states a desired condition of no greater than 2.0 miles of road per square mile in General Restoration which encompasses 245,063 acres. DEIS at 233-34. The desired conditions, stated above, along with the key watershed network expansion, will greatly reduce access to grazing allotments thereby increasing the time, labor, and capital required to properly manage grazing allotments.

IV. Alt. P will increase the risk of wildfire by reducing access through road density reduction and increasing fuel loads by reducing grazing.

Fuel reduction treatments have been utilized by the Colville as a proactive step to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire. The DEIS states that the Colville fire managers have been faced with unprecedented fire behavior. DEIS at 126. Also, it states that the Colville fire frequency and severity has been altered, creating conditions susceptible to uncharacteristic fire events.

DEIS at 129. The road density reduction will increase the costs of fuel treatments, DEIS at 132, which will result in fewer acres being treated and a likely increase in fire frequency and severity. The road reduction will lead to inefficiencies when managing fires, prescribed or not, as roads are commonly used as fuel breaks. The DEIS states that roads tend to have the largest influence of any single variable on the ultimate size and spread of a wildfire. DEIS at 135. The Forest Plan should focus on enhancement of the existing road and trail infrastructure, not removal or obliteration of roads and trails.

Also, the DEIS states that reductions in road density will increase costs for fuel

treatments and increase response time to wildfires. DEIS at 132. Increased response times to wildfire will in turn increase the potential for a catastrophic wildfire spreading rapidly across the Colville; this will be exasperated when combined with the proposal for 17 percent of the Colville to prohibit the use of motor vehicles (backcountry and wilderness.) In addition to fewer fuel treatments and longer response times to wildfires, the restrictions imposed on livestock grazing will increase fuel loads as a result of the massive reduction of AUMs, as stated earlier. Increased fire frequency will further restrict grazing as it is generally advised to restrict grazing for a period of one to three years following a large fire. Range Report at 45. Alt. P restrictions and lack of access will lead to increased fuel loads and longer response times which will lead to more catastrophic, uncharacteristic fires which will in turn further restrict grazing post-fire, thereby creating a vicious cycle that will harm permittees, natural resources, the public, and private property.

V. The EIS analysis is inadequate and fails to provide a reasonable range of alternatives.

The DEIS fails to provide an alternative that addresses the demand for grazing. It is the objective of the National Forest System to "contribute to the economic and social well-being of people by providing opportunities for economic diversity and by promoting stability for communities that depend on range resources for their livelihood." FSM 2202.1(4). One desired condition for livestock grazing, FW-DC-LG-02, is for "[a]vailability of lands identified as suited for this use contributes to animal products, economic diversity, open space, and promotes cultural values and a traditional local life style." Plan at 69. However, Alt. P is not designed to achieve this goal as it will reduce authorized grazing, potentially eliminate portions of grazing allotments, and substantially increase costs for permittees.

There are 690,211 acres capable for cattle grazing. Table 179, DEIS at 526. Of these capable acres, every alternative reduces the amount of suitable acres for cattle grazing from the current plan and provides only 363,217 acres as suitable for cattle grazing. Thus, in every alternative, the EIS provides only about half the

acres suitable for cattle grazing that are capable of grazing. Table 181, DEIS at 527. This is not a reasonable range of grazing alternatives in violation of the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Forest Management Act.

Remarkably, The DEIS states that the Colville is not meeting the demand for grazing but that 16 of the 58 grazing allotments are currently vacant. DEIS at 520-21. The Forest Service should explore ways to restore grazing to these allotments and include EIS alternatives with more acres designated suitable for grazing. We also could not find a map of these suitable acres.

The lack of authorized grazing is inconsistent with NFMA, MUSYA, and the Forest Service Manual. NFMA § 1604(e)(1), MUSYA § 528, FSM 2203 .1(2). The Plan will reduce forage that is available to qualified livestock operators by reducing AUMs and increasing costs for permittees. The inevitable lack of available forage due to shortened grazing seasons is also inconsistent with desired condition FW-DC-LG-02, that a "viable level of forage is available for use under a grazing permit system where use generally occurs on an annual basis generally between June and October." Plan at 69. Therefore, WCA, PLC and NCBA recommend developing an alternative that is consistent with Forest Service policy and the Colville's desired conditions which meets the demand for authorized grazing by restoring grazing on the 16 vacant allotments, modifying INFISH standard to be more (not less) flexible, and maximizing livestock grazing on suitable lands.

Finally, we have incorporate the comments of the American Forest Resource Council that support good forest management that can thin out the Forest to increase forage and the lands suitable for grazing. Forest management will also promote better forest health that makes the forest more resistant to insects, disease, and wildfire.

VI.Conclusion.

Thank you for your efforts on this plan revision process and your consideration of these comments.

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