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Re: Objections on the St. Vrain Forest Health Project Final Environmental Assessment, Draft Decision and Finding of No Significant Impact

I. Introduction

Intermountain Forest Association (hereinafter "IFA") hereby submit this objection letter (hereinafter "Objection") pursuant to the United States Department of Agriculture/ United States Forest Service's (hereinafter "USFS") objection procedures under 36 C.F.R. Part 218 Subparts A and B. This objection contains concerns related to the proposed actions described in the Final Environmental Assessment, Draft Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact for the St. Vrain Forest Health Project (July 19, 2023), collectively "FEA/DN".

IFA is a member-based organization that advocates for healthy forests and healthy communities, including actively promoting sound forest management that provides a stable and sustainable supply of timber from public and private forestlands. IFA's members engage in many aspects of forest management and are an important stakeholder partner to the USFS. IFA's members presently (and plan in the future) to engage in timber removal in some capacity from the St. Vrain Forest Health Project (hereinafter "SVFHP") area.

Overall, IFA is supportive of the USFS and their willingness to manage National Forest lands to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and to foster forest resilience in a changing climate. We appreciate the USFS for taking a landscape-level approach to planning and are excited about the idea of conditions-based management. This type of planning and management is critical in light of the forest health crisis facing many of our National Forests.

IFA has been involved with the planning process for SVFHP since 2022. Below is a summary of our participation in the planning process:

a. Scoping comments dated July 7, 2022 in response to the call for public comment in conjunction with Notice of Opportunity to Comment USDA Forest Service Roosevelt National Forest, Boulder and Canyon Lakes Ranger Districts St Vrain Forest Health Project (June 8, 2022);

b. Formal comments dated April 17, 2023 in response to the with Notice of Opportunity to Comment USDA Forest Service Roosevelt National Forest, Boulder and Canyon Lakes Ranger Districts St Vrain Forest Health Project and in conjunction with the release of the Preliminary Environmental Assessment for the St. Vrain Forest Health Project (March 19, 2023).

IFA appreciates the changes made based on our previous comments; in particular the addition of a table depicting the overlapping wildlife timing restrictions, and modification of the language related to the Fuels 7 Design Feature.

IFA's objection against USFS' FEA/DN is based upon the same issues we raised in our scoping comments and our formal comments cited above. As discussed in detail below, USFS has not adequately resolved many of our concerns or issues raised during the call for public comment.

This objection is filed in accordance with 36 C.F.R. Part 218 et. seq. and contains inter alia:

1. A statement of the issues and/or the parts of project to which the objection applies;
2. A statement that demonstrates the connection between prior specific written comments on the particular proposed project and the content of the objection;
3. A concise statement explaining the objection and suggestions on how the proposed plan decision may be improved;

II. Summary of the Issues and/or Parts of the FEA/DN Objected To
1. Need for the Proposal
2. Proposed Action Alternative
i. Management Action Opportunity Areas/ Focus: Enhancing Forest Resilience & Restoring Fire Dynamics
ii. Prescribed Fire Management Action Strategy
* Lodgepole Pine and Spruce-Fir Forests
iii. Appendix A: Condition Based Management Guide and Management Cards
* Seasonal Timing Restrictions
iv. Appendix B: Design Features
* Visual Resources/Scenery Management
* Hydrology, Soils, Watersheds and Fisheries

III. Statement and Explanation of the Objections

a. The Need for the Proposal Does Not Adequately Evaluate the Use of the Timber Industry as a Means to Achieve the Purpose

In both our scoping and formal comment letters (pages 2 and 1-2, respectively) we raise the issue that the timber industry could be utilized as a means to achieve the purpose of the project, and that under the multiple use mandate USFS has a duty to consider a variety of resources, including timber. 16 U.S.C. §§ 528 and 529 et seq.

IFA appreciates that USFS recognizes the important role the wood products industry has in reducing treatment costs (see Consideration of Comments at 73). However, despite this recognition USFS asserts that there are "substantial challenges to generating a predictable supply of material from the Project Area..." (Id.) including future fuels management site conditions, growing conditions, lack of mill sites, and cost of hauling to mill sites as limiting wood utilization (generally, Specialist Analysis Reports Silviculture and Vegetation at 33). IFA disagrees with these conclusions and believes forest management and economic development in the project area are compatible.

Although IFA agrees with the USFS that hauling costs have increased and there is limited milling infrastructure immediately adjacent to the proposed treatment areas, we believe that leaving more opportunities to remove material generated from activities in the project area would aid the USFS in accomplishing the objectives of the project. By allowing more opportunities to remove material, USFS would benefit from cost reduction and help sustain milling infrastructure in the region ("[h]aving local harvesting capacity and a sustainable wood products industry helps reduce the overall cost of treatment," see Consideration of Comments at 73).

USFS goes beyond identifying difficulties related to "generating a predictable supply of material" by severely limiting the option to use mechanical treatments. Specifically, the FEA/DN does not discuss the potential to generate forest products (emphasis added) from the removal of material by any mechanical or manual treatments, whether by thinning, patchcuts, or other treatments. Instead USFS when discussing the types of potential treatments omits any possibility of the harvested material having any potential as forest product.

IFA contends that the language in all sections regarding the treatments in the project area include the following language: "treatments may include product removal when available."

Remedy

We suggest that future actions prioritize product removal and mechanical treatments for areas with less than 40% slope, include the following language: "treatments may include product removal when available" for all treatment proposals, and that USFS confer with industry on troubleshooting challenging sites, as collaboration could be an important tool in meeting the purpose and need.

b. The Proposed Management Action Alternative is Internally Inconsistent, Does Not Consider All the Relevant Science, Does Not Ensure the Health of All the Various Ecosystems, and is Inflexible

i. Management Action Opportunity Areas/ Focus: Enhancing Forest Resilience & Restoring Fire Dynamics

In our formal comment letter dated April 17, 2023 we raise concerns related to the lack of treatments prescribed for lodgepole pine and spruce-fir forests, and raise concerns about the use of prescribed fire for first entry in ponderosa pine and mixed conifer stands (formal comments at 2), discussed in detail below.

ii. Prescribed Fire Management Action Strategy

IFA remains concerned that a preference for broadcast fire in certain forest types is inappropriate considering the forest conditions described in the FEA at 26. As we pointed out in our previous formal comments at 2, Map 6 indicates that the majority of the project area is considered to be moderately to highly departed from historic condition class. With this in mind, Map 2, when compared to Map 8 indicates that a significant number of lands are identified for prescribed fire only and are within management area 1.41 (core area habitat), 3.5 (forest flora and fauna habitat), and 4.3 (dispersed recreation). For these reasons, we believe prescribed fire as first entry is inappropriate.

In the Consideration of Comments at 7 the USFS states:

"…First entry broadcast burning often occurs on lands where product removal is operationally or economically unfeasible. It may also occur to restore forests and promote heterogenous conditions at a faster pace and scale than many alternatives, treating a wide range of forest conditions in a single entry. Additionally, some areas may have been thinned in a previous project and prescribed burning is now necessary as a secondary action to reduce fuels in the
area"

However, in the FEA USFS also states:

"Opportunities to use stand-alone prescribed fire in stands needing density reduction and changes in tree species composition would be limited because prescribed fire alone does not substantially reduce basal area or alter the species composition to achieve desired heterogeneity when compared with combining variable thinning with prescribed fire (Knapp et al. 2017)." FEA at 25

Based on the statements in the FEA, the USFS' assertions related to the use of prescribed fire for first entry or fire alone is internally inconsistent and raises the question as to whether impacts are adequately analyzed or disclosed in the FEA.

Further, Table 4: Estimate Number of Acres within Management Action Opportunity Areas for Fire-Adapted Communities and the corresponding discussion indicate that approximately 35,469 acres within Potential Operation Delineation boundaries, Infrastructure and, Wild-Urban Mitigation Zones would be treated without prescribed fire (generally, FEA at 30). However, Table 1: Management Action Opportunity Area Summary indicates only 6,325 acres within the entire project area would be treated mechanically and or manually (id. at 21). Again, this is internally inconsistent and USFS should clarify in a supplemental information report that mechanical treatment will be an option in management action opportunity areas for fire-adapted communities.

Remedy

We agree with the USFS that prescribed fire is a valuable tool with potential benefits when implemented in areas that have first undergone fuels/density reduction and/or structure restoration actions. However, USFS needs to clarify its position on the efficacy of fire for first entry and as a standalone treatment. USFS should clarify, in acreage, lands that have already been mechanically or manually treated so that the public can properly consider the impacts. For lands that have not already been mechanically treated we suggest USFS prioritize product removal and mechanical treatments for areas with less than 40% slope first.

As previously stated, the discrepancy between the tables 1 and 4 needs to be resolved. We believe this can only be achieved through a supplemental information report and should include that these areas may be treated mechanically.

1) Lodgepole Pine and Spruce-Fir Forests

As previously mentioned, in our formal comment letter dated April 17, 2023 we raise concerns related to the lack of treatments prescribed for lodgepole pine and spruce-fir forests.

With respect to lodgepole pine and spruce fir forests, USFS states in the Response to Comments at 56 that the scientific literature does not support management for the purpose of restoration in these forests (emphasis added). We believe that this assertion is overly narrow and that USFS has not adequately considered all the relevant science related to the restoration of these forests.

We suggest the USFS review the following publications:

o Hood, S. M., H. Y. Smith, D. Wright, and L. Glasgow. 2012. Management Guide To Ecosystem Restoration Treatments: Multi-aged Lodgepole pine forests of Central Montana, USA RMRS-GTR-294. Page 126. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, Fort Collins, CO (hereinafter, "GTR 294).

GTR 294 discusses the need, in many lodgepole systems, for restoration of forest structure to move potential fire behavior and stand dynamics towards historic and more resilient conditions. GTR 294 further discusses that many lodgepole pine systems have previously been two-storied in structure and, despite not technically being outside of the fire return interval, are now single storied stands in need of restoration.

Summarizing GTR 294, the USFS1 states:

"Our results indicate that even-distribution thinning alone or combined with prescribed fire results in extremely low overstory density. Homogenous prescribed burning of any intensity in lodgepole pine, especially stands with activity fuels present, will almost always result in high mortality and is not recommended if retention of overstory trees is desired. For areas where windthrow is a concern, we recommend variable retention harvests similar to the group shelterwood described in this guide. The group shelterwood fostered lodgepole pine regeneration in the cut corridors while maintaining lodgepole pine in the overstory in the leave patches."

Additionally, to the extent the USFS would contend limited applicability of the low to moderate fire regime in many lodgepole pine stands historically, GTR 294 also notes that, "[h]istorically, clearcutting and broadcast burning of lodgepole pine forests was the most economical and efficient method for regeneration. These treatments mimic the effects of natural stand replacement fires."

Further, USFS' assertion that lodgepole pine and spruce-fir forests are "largely resilient to stand replacing fire and bark beetle" (FEA at 26) is an oversimplified examination of the conditions that exist in these forests. While these forests may not be the focus of this planning process because it is believed they are less degraded than other areas in the SVFHP area, restoration activities within these stands now, could prevent continued degradation.

1
Available at: https://www.firelab.org/project/lodgepole-pine-restoration.

Remedy

Lodgepole pine and spruce-fir forests are important to the overall health of the National Forests, as well as the SVFHP area, and as a commodity. USFS should include treatment actions (predominantly mechanical) in these forest types to ensure the health of all the forests in the project area.

iii. Appendix A: Condition Based Management Guide and Management Cards

1) Seasonal Timing Restrictions

During the scoping period for SVFHP, IFA noted that many of the vegetation management cards contained in Appendix A indicate that work will be performed typically from June 1st-November 15th. IFA maintains that the

ability to conduct logging operations during the winter is essential and can be helpful in mitigating other resource concerns.

Remedy

We suggest that USFS provide additional operating periods during the winter season and provide exceptions through ground-truthing as it relates to vegetation management.

iv. Appendix B: Design Features

1) Visual Resources/Scenery Management (Visual/Scenery 1)

In our comment letter dated April 17, 2023 we contested and continue to maintain that the level of specificity regarding stumps, slash, and landings for higher scenic integrity levels, and the requirement to cut stumps flush is very hard to achieve, difficult to implement, expensive, and depending on conditions, dangerous.

Remedy

We suggest that USFS provide flexibility in design features as it relates to visual resources and scenery management and provide for exceptions when these outcomes create economical or operational barriers.

2) Hydrology, Soils, Watersheds and Fisheries (HSWF 2c & HSWF 7 a/b)

During the scoping period for this project, we recommended that mechanical harvesting (as long as the tracks/machine do not enter the restricted area) be permitted in light of current technology of ground-based logging equipment, making it possible to mechanically remove encroaching conifers without operating within wetlands, fens, or wet meadows. We also raised the issue that it is sometimes necessary to keep temporary roads open longer than a year after a project is completed to allow for reforestation and other fuels work. We maintain these positions.

Remedy

We suggest that USFS provide flexibility in design features as it relates to hydrology, soils, watersheds, and fisheries because current technology exists that allows for mechanical treatment. We continue to recommend that mechanical harvesting be an option as long as tracks/machinery do not enter the restricted area. For the design features regarding closure of roads, we recommend that the following language be added to HWSF 7a & b "unless necessary for follow-up activities (such as planting, burning piles, etc.)."

IV. Conclusion

IFA supports the USFS and their willingness to manage National Forest lands to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and to foster forest resilience in a changing climate. We appreciate the USFS for taking a landscape-level approach and support conditions-based management. However, we believe SVFHP can be improved based on our suggestions herein and encourage the USFS to provide for increased flexibility as it relates to the management of the timber industry. As previously stated, we believe the discrepancy in acreages identified in Tables 1 and 4 is significant enough to warrant a supplemental information report clarifying that within the POD boundaries, infrastructure and WUI Mitigation Zones that mechanical and/or manual treatments may occur.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Colorado Programs Manger