

May 21, 2022

**Objection Reviewing Officer
Region 6 Regional Forester
Pacific Northwest Region
Attention: 1570/1950 Objections
PO Box 3623
Portland, OR 97208-3623**

Re: North Fork Nooksack Vegetation Management Project #58218 Objection

Dear Objection Reviewing Officer:

I am again providing an objection letter regarding the April 25, 2022, North Fork Nooksack Vegetation Management Project Draft Decision Notice (DN) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and the April 2022 North Fork Nooksack Vegetation Management Project Revised Final Environmental Assessment (EA).

Previously, I provided comments to the Draft EA online through your "Commenting on This Project" portal on 4/3/2021 and received the US Forest Service NEPA Projects Home electronic response on 4/3/2021 saying "Thank you for Your Comment" and received my letter ID of #58218-3840-315. However, I still do not see my letter anywhere in the "Public Reading Room" for the North Fork Nooksack Vegetation Management Project #58218. I did find my earlier 7/1/2020 scoping comments letter in the "Public Reading Room." Because of the omission of my Draft EA comments letter, I wonder about the effectiveness and security of your online "Public Reading Room" system. On 11/8/2021, I sent an Objection letter regarding the Final EA (date?), DN, and FONSI on 11/8/2021 and assume that it was not recorded due to the pause issued by the USFS.

As I stated previously, I fully support the need for thinning second growth stands in the NF Nooksack River watershed. However, in spite of some changes made to this Revised Final EA, I am still concerned that this EA is too confusing, complex and technical for the average citizen that would be interested in this project to review and comment. I worked for the USFS almost 30 years and involved in many EAs over the years. I still find this Revised Final EA, like the previous EA, to be very difficult to navigate and understand.

The proposed preferred alternative for this project, "Alternative 1- Modified," would implement a combination of variable retention harvest (approximately 586 acres) and variable density thinning (up to 519 acres) in matrix stands; and would include up to 692 acres of variable density thinning in Late Successional Reserve (LSR). in the North Fork Nooksack River watershed. **This project would affect the North Fork Nooksack River watershed for many years to come. Therefore, it is critical to get this management right.**

I have the following objections to the EA, DN and FONSI

Appendix A

Top of page 7 states that “SWF21 – Comply with and adhere to all requirements of regional General Permit #8 (RGP-8 (USACW 2017) authorized by the Seattle District of the US Army Corps of Engineers, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service programmatic biological opinions for aquatic restoration activities (ARBO II, NMFS 2013 and USFWS 2013), including all special conditions, general conditions, and design criteria of the authorized activities.” None of these key references are found in Appendix C – References. How can the public find and review these documents when they are not even fully referenced?

Response to Substantive Comments

Appendix E - Response to Substantive Comments you responded to my comments on the Draft EA about many missing in-text citations in Appendix C. In **Comment 8 on page 6**, you state that “We have corrected the items mentioned in the list except where some references have been replaced with more recent best available science. Appendix C should now include all references cited.” Unfortunately, these references are still not correct. A number of citations in the EA that are still missing or have errors in Appendix C.

These include: James 2019; Mauger 2015; Bilby 1981; Raphael et al. 2011; Wisdom et al. 2018b; Hayes et al., 1997.

Important References Left Out

As I pointed out in my comments to the Draft EA, some very important references (see Additional References Recommended) that deal with the effects of climate changes, fire and aquatic ecosystems were not consulted for this project. These are still not referenced and include **Vose et al. (2016)**, **Halofsky et al. (2018)**, and **Bisson et al. (2003)**. Considering the importance of the using the best-available-science to make critical decisions on vegetation management in the North Fork Nooksack River watershed, I find it sad that these important references were apparently not reviewed or included in the EA and related analysis.

No Treatments Planned Along Deadhorse Creek Road #37 and Upper Wells Creek Road #33

Why are there still no stand treatments proposed for the second growth (old clearcut units) stands immediately adjacent to the Deadhorse Creek Road FSR# 37. The Stand Origin Map 5 on page 5₂ in the previous Final EA 11/8/202, showed significant areas with stand ages 0-39 years and 40-79 years, immediately adjacent to the Deadhorse Creek Road FSR# 37 all the way up to the Skyline Divide Trailhead (#678), approximately 12.7 miles. Map 5 indicated that there are significant areas along the west side of Wells Creek, and upper Wells Creek Road #33, with stand ages 0-39 years, and 40-79 years, below the 4000 feet elevation Mt. Hemlock Zone, that are still left out. These are prime areas that desperately need thinning to speed up the process to change younger forest into older forest and are easily accessible from roads in these areas. I still see nothing in this Final EA that addresses why stands along the Deadhorse Road #37, and upper Wells Creek Road #33, are not being considered for thinning. I consider this to be a serious error and a significant missed resource management opportunity. These areas are located within easy access to these roads and would have a much lower risk of watershed impacts, especially compared to units being proposed along Canyon Creek, which has a significant

history of naturally unstable slopes, slope failures, and inner gorge slides, debris floods, high sediment loads, and disturbance from fires, timber harvest, high rain-on-snow related floods (USDA 1995).

It is interesting that the April 25, 2022 Final EA no longer has any stand origin maps. Why are these left out?

I am glad to see that the original proposal to add a new road connection to the east of the Jim Creek Slide area, along the Canyon Creek Road (FSR #31), was dropped. This was just too risky considering all of the unstable soils in that area.

In the previous Final EA 11/8/202, Page 4, stated that “Two of top 20 sub watersheds identified as having the greatest opportunity for active management to contribute to ecosystem restoration are within the Project Area (Hedrick Creek-North Fork Nooksack River and Glacier Creek sub-watersheds).” The Hedrick Creek-North Fork Nooksack River sub-watershed includes the Boyd Creek, Deadhorse Creek areas. Why were these subwatersheds left out of consideration for stand treatment? **I consider it to be a serious mistake and a missed opportunity to leave out of these areas for thinning purposes.**

It is interesting that the April 25, 2022 Final EA no longer has any information about the top 20 sub watersheds. Why was this information left out?

Watershed Restoration

Table 6. “Comparison of Alternatives ..” Page 28 in the narrative still incorrectly refers to “Hendrick Creek-North Fork River sub-watershed” although the spelling of Hedrick Creek is correct in the Sub-Watershed Name table.

Section 4. Legal Consistency (Pages 89-90)

As I stated in my comments to the Draft EA, it is very sad to me to see that WDFW is not listed as one of the agencies consulted by the USFS during the development of this EA, since WDFW is responsible for managing the fish and wildlife in the State of Washington, along with the tribes, who are also co-managers. Considering that a major objective of this project is to provide forage for deer, elk, and other early seral species, it is incomprehensible that WDFW was not consulted. In addition, the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest Plan (USDA FS 1990), on page 4-127, states that “The Forest Service should continue to work closely with the Washington Departments of Wildlife and Fisheries (now combined into the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife) in all aspects of fish and wildlife management.”

WDFW did provide a letter (Bob Warinner) on 7/2/2020 during the scoping process. Warinner stated that although “WDFW is encouraged by the ecological improvement objectives of the project.” He stated, “We have concerns that the actions as described in the scoping document may have detrimental impact that will not be overridden by the stated ecosystem benefits” and that “The management described in the project scope seems to be a clear departure from how the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest has been managed in recent decades. It appears that there will be significant changes to the Forest Plan & Regional Guide, and **for this reason we feel that a comprehensive environmental impacts statement (EIS) is appropriate.**”

Such significant comments by WDFW about this project seem to have been ignored in the Final EA. Consultation with WDFW should have occurred with this project. Since WDFW has the legal responsibility for managing the fish and wildlife on all lands in the State of Washington, while the USFS

only has responsibility for managing the land and habitat for these wildlife species, it seems obvious that WDFW should be an equal consultation partner, along with the tribes, NMFS and USFWS! **I consider leaving WDFW out of the consultation process to be a serious error that should be rectified.**

Endangered Species Act (ESA) Listed Fish Species

The Draft DN and FONSI (page 26) and Revised Final EA (pages 48 & 100) state that “Section 7 ESA consultation for fisheries is currently incomplete” and that consultation “will be complete before the Final Decision Notice is signed.” Is this not a violation of NEPA and ESA, to have a Revised FINAL EA, without completing consultation? **How can the EA be final when a number of ESA-related documents are not complete and have not been provided to the public?**

Appendix C- References

As mentioned previously, many important references cited in the EA are still not included in the references section, making it difficult, if not impossible, for the public to follow up on a citation.

Summary

For the many reasons that I have stated above, this project is incomplete and should include among other things, thinning areas along the Deadhorse Road #37, up to the Skyline Divide Trailhead, and upper Wells Creek Road #33.

A major objective of this project is to provide forage for deer, elks and other wildlife species, which is under the purview of WDFW. It was a serious error to not consult with WDFW in designing the thinning units, etc., for this project.

It is also a serious problem that ESA consultation for fisheries with the USFWS and NMFS is still not complete. Is this not a violation of NEPA and ESA if there is a Revised Final EA but ESA consultation is not yet complete?

This project would affect the North Fork Nooksack River watershed for many years to come. Therefore, it is critical to get this management right.

With these unresolved issues it would be wise to go back to the drawing board and conduct an EIS.

Sincerely, Brady

D. Brady Green

cc. Brendan Brokes, Regional Director, WDFW

Additional References Recommended And Not Included In the Final EA

Bisson, P. A., B.E. Reiman, C. Luce, P/F/ Hessburg, D.C. Lee, J.L. Kershner, G.H. Reeves, and R. E. Gresswell. 2003. Fire and aquatic ecosystems of the western USA: current knowledge and key questions. *Forest Ecology and Management* 178:213-229.

Halofsky, J. S., D.C. Donato, J.F. Franklin, J.E. Halofsky, D.L. Peterson, and B.J. Harvey. 2018. The nature of the beast: examining climate adaptation options in forests with stand-replacing fires regimes. *Ecosphere* 9(3):e02140. 10.1002/ecs2.2140. 18pp.

Tappeiner, J. C. II, D.A. Maguire, T.B. Harrington, and J.D. Bailey. 2015. *Silviculture and ecology of western U.S. forests*. Second Edition. Oregon State University Press. Corvallis, OR. 446pp.

Vose, J.M, J.S. Clark, C.H. Luce, and T.Patel-Weynand. 2016. Effects of drought on forests and rangelands in the United States: a comprehensive science synthesis. US Forest Service General Technical Report WO-93b. January 2016. 303 pp.