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First name: Kate

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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear Regional Forester Glen Casamassa,

Our forests have not recovered from decades of unsustainable logging, overgrazing, and fire suppression. There remains a deficit of large and old trees in eastern Oregon that provide habitat for wildlife, protect clean water, build healthy soils, and sequester carbon.

For over two decades, the Eastside Wildlife Screens have helped protect large trees and the values they sustain. The Wildlife Screens have proved to be a remarkably durable and workable solution that reduced the conflict and controversy that surrounds old growth logging, yet allows the Forest Service to do meaningful work in the forest - including hundreds of timber sales. We're not done restoring the large trees and forests that were decimated by decades of clearcutting and high-grading. There is no compelling need to start logging big and old trees. Doing so will only increase conflict and controversy and do tremendous ecological harm along the way.

The screens were enacted as a placeholder until more comprehensive ecosystem protections could be developed and adopted. Your agency has never honored that promise. It is unfair and inappropriate to remove protections for large trees, which is the key element of the wildlife screens, without adopting much-needed regional conservation measures.

This plan amendment process has been controversial, divisive, and unjust. It has been rushed over the objections of dozens of conservation groups, independent scientists, elected officials, and more. It has led to a draft proposal that entirely eliminates protections for many of the biggest and oldest trees in eastern Oregon and shifts any remaining protections from strong standards into weak guidelines.

Any change to the screens will have tremendous impacts to fish, wildlife, soil, water, and the climate. It deserves a more robust process for environmental review and public involvement. It's important to consider exactly what this plan amendment will allow, not what we wish might happen.

This proposal is not narrow in scope. It affects millions of acres of our public lands including riparian areas, roadless areas, scenic areas, and designated wildlife areas across a broad range of forest types. Making the decision of whether or not to protect big trees discretionary will increase conflict, further erode public trust, and undo decades of good-faith work by stakeholders to chart a better path forward.

We are facing an urgent climate emergency. This proposal to eliminate protection for large and old trees is in direct conflict with the need to increase forest carbon storage. Rather than barreling forward, I urge you to consider strengthening - rather than weakening enforceable protections for the oldest and biggest trees that are loaded with carbon.

I urge you to stop this planning process and instead work in good faith with all stakeholders to find an ecologically and socially responsible way to protect our public lands and the values they support. Your current process and proposals are leading in the exact wrong direction.

Sincerely,

Ms Kate Aarden