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Comments: Certified Mail# 7017 3380 0000 9482 4790February 9, 2021Forest ServiceAshland Ranger DistrictAttn: Ronald Hecker, District RangerPO Box168Ashland, MT 59003RE: SCOPING COMMENTS FOR THE PROPOSED SOUTH OTTER LANDSCAPE RESTORATION AND RESILIENCY PROJECTHello,Native Ecosystems Council (NEC) and the Alliance for the Wild Rockies (AWR) would like to provide the following scoping comments for the recently-proposed South Otter Landscape Restoration and Resiliency Project on the Ashland Ranger District.1. How will cumulative effects associated with other projects on the Ashland Ranger District be addressed?There would be 3 large projects being potentially implemented over the same time frame for the entire Ashland Ranger District. Overlap seems highly likely given the long time periods these adjacent projects are projected to last. This district consists of 436,546 acres. The proposed Ash Creek Restoration and Resiliency Project covers 110,273 acres of the District, all of which would potentially be prescribed burned. The Threemile Restoration and Resiliency Project has already been finalized as per a decision. This project area comprises 32,924 acres located in between the Ash Creek and South Otter project proposals. The South Otter project would cover 293,000 acres. These 3 non-overlapping projects cover the entire Ashland Ranger District. How will all of these ongoing disturbances and losses of habitat to wildlife be addressed as per cumulative effects in regards to wildlife disturbances? There could be up to 22 or more individual projects implemented. Thus the agency needs to defme how these 3 projects will be coordinated in regards to habitat effectiveness and elk security over each year these projects may overlap within and between project areas.2. The South Otter Project is a violation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and is a clear attempt of the agency to side-steppe this law.The complexity of this project, including treatments on 293,000 acres in 6-12 project over 15-20 years, is far outside the ability of the general public to address. Actually, given the estimates for acres treated, the timeline for this project would be at least 24 years (e.g., treating up to 12,000 acres per year over 293,000 acres would require 24 years). The agency is admitting this as well, noting that the project requires a break-down into 6-12 separate projects. It would take weeks, if not months, for the general public to understand the changes that will result from these proposed actions, and as a result, most publics do not have the time available for such a monumental effort at public involvement. The agency is clearly purposely discouraging public input on this project as a result.The size of the proposal is so large that it will be impossible for the agency to disclose the impacts of 6-12 individual projects on 230,000 acres over the next 15-20 years. For example, what will be the habitat effectiveness level, defined as important in the collaborative recommendations developed by the Forest Service, including the Custer-Gallatin National Forest, and the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) (2013), be for each of the 9 project area break-downs for this proposal during each year of implementation? Where will elk security areas be provided for each project area? How can this detailed information be provided in less than thousands of pages of analysis?No wildlife surveys have been done for these projects. It will be impossible for the agency to complete valid wildlife surveys, including for goshawks, before a decision seems likely. Without surveys, the agency cannot define how wildlife will be impacted by the proposal. If information cannot be made available during the analysis process, the agency needs to demonstrate why this information cannot be obtained. The rationale that the project is too large to obtain reliable wildlife survey data is a violation of the NEPA. The project size needs to be limited to the ability of the agency to conduct wildlife surveys, in order that wildlife impacts can be disclosed to the public in the project.Making a decision for such a long time line, 15-20 years or more, means that the actual effects of the individual projects that result from proposed treatments are unknown yet considered unimportant, and as well, not significant, in violation of the NEPA. Since these effects cannot be measured at this time, only estimated, the agency is making conclusions that are not verifiable over a huge portion of the Ashland Ranger District. Implementing a large number of projects (6-12) without any requirement to verify assumptions for wildlife is a clear way to avoid the requirements of the NEPA. For example, the scoping notice claims that this project is in part being implemented for improve habitat for wildlife. This is clearly a controversial claim, and needs to be substantiated through reviews after projects are completed.The agency is assuming that there will be no changes in wildlife populations that would require project alterations for the next

20-24 years. For example, will mule deer populations be forced into decline as this project proceeds? How would this be addressed? The ongoing decline of neotropical migratory birds, if it continues, would not be addressed by this long-term project. Clearly, logging and burning will have adverse impacts on western forest birds.3. The South Otter Project is a violation of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) as Forest Plan monitoring would not apply to this decision.The project time line equals, and likely significantly exceeds, the time line incorporated for Forest Plans, which is 15 years. Given that a decision on the South Otter project would be in place for the entire planning period of the Custer-Gallatin Revised Forest Plan (RFP), this project would escape any of the Forest Plan monitoring requirements, the few that actually exist for wildlife. If a NEPA document is incompatible with the RFP and NFMA monitoring requirements, it is not a valid NEPA document. The agency cannot use a long-term project to escape the monitoring requirements of the NMF A. A project needs to be compatible with the monitoring requirements of the RFP and NFMA in regards to time lines, which is generally 5 years.4. Please provide a detailed analysis of all costs associated with this project for the entire period of up to 24 years the project will be implemented.The scoping notice did not address any of the costs associated with this project. This is critical information to the public, as general information as to how the agency priorities are defined for management of public lands. For example, the public needs to know what the costs will be for weed management over the life of the projects, what the costs will be for any wildlife surveys, the average cost per acre for prescribed burning, and the design and implementation costs for all logging units and associated roads, including maintenance and reconstruction of motorized trails.5. Please map all areas that currently contain sagebrush and any areas occupied by sage grouse.The Ranger District appears to have largely eliminated sagebrush habitats in this landscape. Please provide high-quality maps that display any remaining areas of sagebrush, define the acreage of such in each project area, and define what is expected to be left after project implementation with burning. Also, please address past and current sage grouse populations in this landscape, and how they will be affected by the projects.6. Please define how the project will adhere to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) as well as the 2008 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) the Forest Service has with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service(FWS). The MOU requires the Forest Service to evaluate project impacts on migratory birds. There are up to 50 species of western forest birds that will be adversely impacted by this project. The agency needs to provide an in[shy]depth analysis of how migratory birds associated with old growth, snag forests, undisturbed older forest habitat, and conifer seeds, will be affected by this project. Where and on what percentage of the landscape will these critical features for migratory birds be provided? These areas need to be quantified as well as mapped. This analysis also needs to include an assessment of how many birds will be killed with logging and prescribed burning, due to destruction of nests. The level of bird mortality that is likely from this project needs to be estimated in order that the Forest Service had adequate information to request a "take permit" from the FWS for this killing of migratory birds.7. The Forest Service automatically is designing projects that will have significant adverse impacts on wildlife because the Custer-Gallatin RFP lacks any conservation strategies for migratory birds, mule deer, white[shy]tailed deer, and elk.As is noted in the scoping letter for the South Otter Project, there are no wildlife standards identified in the section on RFP direction. Without any conservation strategies, it is a given that any vegetation project that will alter wildlife habitat without any habitat criteria used, which inevitably will have significant impacts due to the lack of coordination with wildlife habitat needs.8. The Ashland Ranger District developed management guidelines for mule deer and white-tailed deer in 1990, via collaboration with MFWP; how will these guidelines be incorporated into the proposed South Otter Project?The deer guidelines developed for the Ashland Ranger District in 1990 were stated to represent the best information currently available concerning the relationships between deer and ponderosa pine on the Ashland Ranger District; the guidelines will be used to incorporate deer habitat needs with timber and range management, as well as roads; the guidelines will be used for 10 years.These guidelines note that the Ashland Ranger District provides habitat for the most stable and important population of mule deer in southwest Montana. Deer hunting is a major recreational activity on the district. The guidelines also note that a large-scale loss of cover would severely reduce habitat quality for deer over a large area; timber harvest removes habitat components that deer require.At the time, the mule deer population for the Ashland Ranger District was identified as form 6.8 to 23 .2 deer per square mile. The current population for mule and white-tailed deer on the District needs to be provided, and any changes addressed. The expected impact of the South Otter Project on mule and white-tailed deer numbers also needs to be assessed for the NEPA analysis, based on changes of habitat that will be created by

the South Otter Project. What is the current population trend for mule deer in Hunting District 704? How is this project and adjacent projects expected to affect this population?The Ashland Ranger District deer guidelines (1990) define the key factors in both mule deer and white-tailed deer habitat. For example, the cover/forage ratio of 40/60 was identified as a goal of the guidelines. In addition, hiding cover should be retained along 60% of the perimeter of natural and created openings, and along 75% of arterial and collector roads. Hiding cover was defined as greater than a 50% canopy cover greater than 600 feet in width. A 160 square foot basal area provides thermal cover, although optimal thermal cover is 220-240 square feet of basal area. Of the 40% cover goal, at least 10% should be thermal cover, 10% hiding cover, and the remaining either type. Thermal cover has a canopy cover of70% or greater; for mule deer, thermal cover is over 75% canopy cover in trees less than 5 feet tall, and 60% canopy cover in pole and larger stands. Hiding cover should be in patches of at least 20 acres. It takes 60-100 years to get thermal cover, and 15-20 years to get hiding cover. The guidelines also noted that optimum forage/cover ratios for mule deer are 70:30.Although the collaborative elk management recommendations developed by the Forest Service and the MFPW in 2013 state that a 40% canopy cover provides hiding cover for big game based on concealment of 90% of an elk within 200 feet, there was no actual documentation that this occurs. The references cited for this study were did not actually compare canopy cover levels with ground-level horizontal cover, so show they were equal in hiding cover values. As well, one of the references was a Forest Service whitepaper, without any peer review from outside experts. There are no published habitat recommendations that show a 40% canopy cover level conceals 90% of an elk at 200 feet. The use of a 40% canopy cover as a substitute for mule deer hiding cover is not valid as per science, and should not be used for the South Otter project. With understory thinning and prescribed burning, a ponderosa pine stand with only a 40% canopy and no understory will not provide hiding cover to big game. Such a stand may provide landscape screening for hunters across a slope, but within-stand concealment of deer from hunters is highly unlikely, given that mule deer are much shorter than most forest canopies.The guidelines mapped mule deer and white-tailed deer winter ranges, area which require special management. Winter range for mule deer includes scattered juniper and ponderosa pine on south exposures, with adjacent thickets of juniper and pine plus various shrubs; shrubs are the principle source of winter forage for mule deer. On spring/summer ranges, mesic draws are important, including as fawning areas. For monitoring of mule deer does on the District, the average home range for these were 160 acres. Within these home ranges, thermal cover was 41.1 % and all forest stands with over a 40% canopy cover averaged 56%; openings were the remaining habitat, at roughly 44%. Fawning cover would have at least a 50% canopy cover with trees at least 2-6 feet tall. In order to maintain mule deer across the South Otter project area, these habitat conditions need to be provided every 160 acres. This will mitigate for the failure to map fawning areas.

White-tailed deer inhabit dense, mesic conifer stands. Their cover to open ratio is recommended to be 85: 15. The guidelines recommended treatment of 10% of white-tailed deer summer range every 10 years, in units under 10 acres in size. Treatment of white-tailed deer winter range should be limited to 10% every 13 .3 years.The guidelines noted that there was no current published science demonstrating that logging increases mule deer populations. For management of logging projects, the guidelines note that there should be only one timber project at a time; adjacent areas should not be scheduled for logging until cover has been reestablished in the previously-logged area. An open road density of 1.5 miles per section is identified as important for mule deer. This would be a 55% habitat effectiveness level as per the graph provided in an appendix of the guidelines, a graph that was included in the 15 year elk-logging study completed by the Forest Service and the MFWP. It was also noted that all roads should be designed so that they can be effectively closed to motorized traffic.9. The current best science for elk management needs to be applied to the South Otter projects, as well as used as an analysis basis to ensure high quality information is provided to the public, as is required by the NEPA.There is new research published on elk security in the heavily-hunted mountain range of the Elkhorns, on the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest. This study found that elk sought secure areas during the hunting season that were from 1.4 to 2 miles from active motorized routes. Preferred security areas had up to 60% canopy cover, although canopy cover levels of as low as 23 % were used provided the distance from roads was adequate. This is actual research that demonstrates that elk security includes cover, just as was identified by the Hillis paradigm, which was based on research of elk habitat use in the hunting season. For the South Otter project, please evaluate elk security by accepted methodologies including both cover and distance from roads. Since the South

Otter landscape is more similar to the Elkhorns than habitat conditions for the Hillis Paradigm, the road distances need to be applied from the Elkhorns to define elk security. And as per the 2013 collaborative elk recommendations developed by forests including the Custer-Gallatin, roads that are frequently used by non-publics or temporary roads used in the hunting seaso11 need to be included in a security analysis. These areas would disqualify that area as hunting season security.The analysis needs to map the elk security areas for each of the 9 project areas, including as affected by adjacent project areas. Will these project areas meet the minimum recommended level of30% security, and if not, why won't significant[middot] impacts to elk displacement be triggered.Please define what the current situation is for elk displacement in this hunting district (704). What has been the population trend, and how does the current population relate to elk displacement to adjacent private lands. As per the 2013 collaborative elk management recommendations by the Forest Service and FWP, elk displacement from public to private lands is a significant issue that needs to be addressed for elk management. We see that the displacement issue already exists for hunting district 704, given the elk population objectives are being exceeded. So it is unclear how this large project, that involves massive increases in motorized use and massive reductions in hiding cover, will not exacerbate an existing situation that is already considered significant.Also, please define the habitat effectiveness levels, as per the graph in the Ashland Ranger District deer guidelines, for each project area during the next 20 years. As per the 2013 collaborative elk recommendations developed by the Forest Service and the MFWP, 2-4 vehicle trips per 12 hours trigger avoidance by elk; and consistent, frequently-used non-public routes or temporary roads will detract from habitat effectiveness if used in the summer. As per the Region 1 publication on elk management, anything below a 50% habitat effectiveness creates significant losses in elk summer use.Also please address the notations in the 2013 collaborative elk recommendations by the Forest Service and MFWP that summer forage values for elk can be highest within forest stands; also, summer cover lengthens the season of succulence and palatability for elk forage, since the overstory provides shade; open areas cure out sooner in the summer. As such, claims that forage will be improved for elk due to forest thinning are
not actually true. And as per the 15 year elk-logging study completed by the Forest Service research branch and the MFWP, logged areas were not found to attract elk use. So if the agency is going to claim that logging will increase forage for elk in the South Otter landscape, the specific research upon which this is based needs to be provided.The 2013 collaborative elk recommendations developed by the Forest Service, including the Custer-Gallatin National Forest, along with MFWP, made a false statement regarding the level of cover preferred by elk. This document stated that there is no research basis for any specific cover level required by elk. However, the 15 year elk-logging study clearly noted that 66% cover was "good" cover for elk, while less than 33% cover was "poor' cover for elk.This 2013 collaborative report also falsely stated that there are no existing recommendations for the size of cover patches for elk. Clearly, the Hillis Paradigm recommends a minimum cover patch size of 250 acres for elk security.The 2013 collaborative elk recommendations noted that it is important to protect elk calving areas from both habitat degradation and disturbance during the calving period. Please map these areas in the South Otter project landscapes, and define the habitat objectives for such to ensure these areas are optimized for elk calving.Research in the Elkhorn Mountains, as well as the 2013 collaborative recommendations for elk developed by the Forest Service and MFWP, note that thermal cover for elk on the summer and fall range provides an important "thermal refuge" for elk. As noted previously, 10% thermal cover is recommended for mule deer by the Ashland Ranger District deer guidelines. This will also provide summer-fall thermal cover for elk, and needs to be mapped for each of the 9 project areas in regards to current as well as proposed levels after project completion.10. The purpose for landscape level prescribed burning is never actually defined in anything other than vague terms, such as reducing fuels and creating "resilient' landscapes; the fact that burning removes wildlife habitat is never noted; the rationale for burning is clearly to increase forage for cows and a jobs program for the Forest Service; given that burning is identified as a purpose and need of the project, the agency needs to be honest with the public and identify that massive removals of wildlife habitat is also a purpose and need of this project.The Forest Service seems to have completely lost its way in regards to management of public lands. These massive proposals for prescribed burning are severely detrimental to wildlife, yet these are being presented to the public as "habitat improvement." Please provide the science and monitoring data as to why prescribed burning in any area of the South Otter project area will benefit specifically what wildlife species among the 50-plus species that may be present, including wild turkeys, and what these benefit claims are based on as

per published science or monitoring by the Forest Service. Not only will migratory bird habitat be destroyed, but most habitats required by mule deer, including fawning areas, will also be destroyed for decades. And burning out the understory of ponderosa pine forests will be severely detrimental to migratory birds. It remains unclear what the actual purpose of these burning programs are, other than for cows. Already, in the Threemile landscape, sage grouse have been eliminated, likely because of burning of sagebrush.11. Please map the areas occupied by wild turkeys, and define how a management program for this unique bird will be implemented in the South Otter landscape.Turkeys provide a unique wildlife species to this landscape, as well as provide important recreational hunting opportunities to the general public. Please define what the management program is for turkeys in this landscape, and how populations will either be maintained or increased with the proposed "habitat improvement" program.12. Please define how each of the 9 project areas will be monitored in regards to impacts on game and nongame wildlife in these units, and how these monitoring results will be applied to remaining units to be treated.It is not clear how monitoring of project impacts on wildlife will be applied over the 20-plus years of this project. For example, how will logging treatments impact migratory birds and mule deer fawning and winter habitat, including dense thickets of juniper and ponderosa pine, and riparian draws? Will monitoring be designed to actually identify wildlife responses to vegetation treatments? If so, what will these monitoring programs entail? If there will not be any specific monitoring of how wildlife populations are affected in each of the 9 project areas, how can the agency define project impacts correctly to the public?13. The agency is violating the NEPA by claiming to the public that this logging and burning program will improve habitat for wildlife; unless the agency has hard data to support this claim, a new scoping notice needs to be released to the public where this claim of habitat improvement is deleted, so that false information is not being provided to the public in order to justify logging and burning activities.It seems extremely unlikely that logging in this sparsely-forested landscape, along with the huge addition of motorized activity, will improve wildlife habitat for either game or nongame wildlife. This alone makes the announcement in the scoping letter that this project will improve wildlife habitat a violation of the NEPA. A new scoping notice needs to be released to the public whereby it is noted by the agency that extensive losses of habitat for wildlife will result from this proposal.Sara Johnson, DirectorNative Ecosystems CouncilMike Garrity, DirectorAlliance for the Wild Rockies