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Comments: The scope and extent of the proposed hazard tree removal is excessive and unnecessary in my opinion. While removing some trees that may pose an immediate threat to primary roadways is reasonable, the retention of dead and dying trees is essential for the long-term ecological recovery and health of affected areas. These trees provide important habitat for species - including endangered species - and eventually decompose and provide essential nutrients to soils that enable natural regeneration of forests. Hazard trees along secondary roads that are primarily used for recreation should be retained and only removed if they fall onto the roadway and impede access. Hazard trees along trails should be retained.

The habitat created by dead and dying trees following wildfires can become one of the most biodiverse habitats and allow for multiple species to endure and thrive in this unique recovering forest ecosystem. The maze of biomass provides superior nesting for many bird species and excellent protection for smaller mammals and amphibians from predators allowing populations to expand and recover. Dead trees also absorb and retain more moisture than living trees and can help to prevent future fires from becoming catastrophic. Many of the trees that have died will continue to store carbon as will the others that have not yet died providing more climate change protection than removing them would. Some of the trees that appear to be dying may live for many years or decades and others may very well recover sufficiently to endure for another century. Removing dying trees prematurely will negatively impact forest and ecosystem health and recovery.

I urge the agency to reduce the number of trees proposed for removal, and carefully, thoughtfully reassess the values that will best serve the public over the long term. The largest stakeholder class is made up of people who will never set foot in the forest but will benefit from the ecosystem services that provide clean water, air, wildlife habitat, and functioning ecosystems. Retention and protection of these fire-affected forests and watersheds serves the best interests over the long term for the American people.