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Comments: I OPPOSE the Telephone Gap Integrated Resource Project.

National Forests - "Lands of Many Uses"

In the early days of our country and of the USFS the "uses" we gained from our public lands were informed by the times. Vast quantities of timber were stripped from these lands in seemingly responsible ways for the good of our country.

Times are now different. We now know unequivocally that climate change is greatly influenced by GHG emissions from human activities. This means that our public lands now hold another, greater purpose, than just resource extraction. These lands, especially mature and intact ecosystems such as Telephone Gap, now act as invaluable carbon reservoirs and as safe harbors for plant and animal species already pressured by a changing climate.

The areas proposed for logging have major concentrations of trees between 80-160 years old, which science shows accumulate and store the most carbon in the fight against climate change compared to young trees. The GMNF has greater carbon density than most forests in the Eastern US; we should manage this public land for the benefit of the climate and biodiversity, not cut it down. We should not be spending our tax dollars to subsidize cutting old trees. Our children and grandchildren alive today will bear the brunt of the climate catastrophe that is happening all around us.

The International Panel on Climate Change states that time is running out for action. On the global scale, forest protection represents approximately half or more of the climate change mitigation needed to hold temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Research also shows that New England's forests could store two to four times more carbon if we just let them grow old. Letting these old trees stand is one of the most effective things that Vermonters can do. We must put our public forests on a different path.

Mature and old-growth forests excel at removing and storing carbon from the atmosphere. And yet, 92% of the areas proposed for logging in the Telephone Gap timber sale are classified as mature or old by the Green Mountain National Forest, violating President Biden's historic Executive Order from Earth Day 2022, which directed the US Forest Service to protect these forests for the benefit of the climate and biodiversity. In December, the US Forest Service withdrew a timber sale in Oregon called "Flat Country" because it targeted mature forests of up to 150 years in age. Telephone Gap proposes logging forests up to 160 years in age. If Flat Country was important to withdraw, why is the Telephone Gap timber sale moving forward?

The Northern Long-eared Bat is a species that is teetering on the edge of extinction. The US Fish and Wildlife Service listed the bat as "endangered" in November 2022. The Northern Long-eared Bat prefers mature and old-growth forests for roosting and foraging - exactly the sorts of areas that are proposed for logging. Much of the Telephone Gap project area is suitable habitat for this endangered bat.

The Telephone Gap timber sale threatens important headwaters for Otter Creek, which flows into Lake Champlain, as well as the White River, a tributary of the Connecticut River. Logging threatens water supply areas like the Chittenden Reservoir, and risks exacerbating flooding in downstream communities. Imperiled brook trout and reintroduced populations of Atlantic salmon depend on cold, clear water flowing from these high mountain streams.

The Telephone Gap timber sale proposes nearly 2,600-acres of logging inside the 16,000-acre Pittenden Inventoried Roadless Area, second largest in the entire Green Mountain National Forest and one of the largest wildlands in Vermont. Straddling an undeveloped and rugged section of the Long Trail from Brandon Gap south towards Chittenden Reservoir, this area is important for wildlife habitat and connectivity as well as quiet recreation.

Carbon sequestration, endangered species, clean water, recreation for all: just one of these should be reason enough to halt this project and others like it. But when combined they take us to a fork in the road. Will we continue to do business as usual and suffer the consequences? Or, will we decide to manage our public lands for the highest and best use of protecting nature and thus protecting ourselves?

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