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The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack

Secretary of Agriculture

1400 Independence Ave., S.W.

Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the proposed National Old-growth Amendment, which would amend nearly all national forest land management plans (LMPs) to provide consistent direction for management of old-growth forests.

I strongly support the USDA's effort to "foster the long-term resilience of old-growth forests and their contributions to ecological integrity and ecosystem services across the National Forest System", following President Biden's Executive Order 14072. The National Old Growth Amendment (NOGA) should be lauded for recognizing the importance of old growth and mature forests as nature-based solutions to climate change, preserving biodiversity, and maintaining key ecosystem functions.

The management approach in the NOGA should also be praised for using the best available science and indigenous knowledge for formulating the Adaptive Strategies and other components of the Amendment.

I have read responses to the Notice of Intent and the DEIS regarding the NOGA,

and generally agree with the preferred Alternative 2. However, I have provided a number of comments below.

1. While silvicultural practices and vegetation management (thinning, prescribed and cultural burning, and others) can aid in the restoration and maintenance of old growth forests by promoting structural complexity and biodiversity, eliminating the requirement in the NOI that vegetation management activities must not degrade or

impair old-growth forest conditions (Standard 1) seems to run counter to the overall objective of the NOGA and E.O. 14072. The non-degradation standard in the NOI should be reinstated, and the Forest Service should actually use this Standard to guide "proactive stewardship" and any other management efforts in Old Growth forests and "high quality" mature forests.

Further, the DEIS states that old-growth forests are not required to continue

to meet the definition of old-growth following vegetation management treatments (DEIS, p. 16). This again seems to be contrary to the overall intent of the NOGA. Consistent with the reinstated non-degradation standard mentioned above, the final EIS should include stronger statements in relevant plan components that the NOGA will not allow vegetation management treatments to degrade or impair old-growth characteristics or otherwise result in the loss of old-growth forests.

2. Secondly, the DEIS focuses strongly on "proactive stewardship". However, this emphasis fails to recognize that many old-growth forests may not need vegetation management to maintain their structural attributes, diversity, ecosystem functioning, and resilience to disturbance or climate change. By disregarding any analyses of surrounding mature forest, opportunities for long-term management are also limited (see also comment #5 below).

The USFS should consider redefining the definition of "proactive stewardship" to include passive stewardship as a management "activity". Reinstating the non-degradation standard as discussed above and the inclusion of more focused analyses in the EIS differentiating between types of old-growth forests and potential "proactive stewardship" actions would improve the direction of the EIS. For example, old growth forests in Regions 5 and 6 in the PSW in relatively dry, fire-prone areas may require active management in conjunction with activities associated with the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, while many others such as moist forests in the PNW and Region 9 in the Eastern U.S. may require little or no management so that old growth characteristics persist and recover naturally.

3. Although harvesting old growth forest is much reduced compared to previous decades, Standard 2.b in the DEIS seems to make old-growth conservation subordinate to other multiple use activities. This actually defeats the purpose of the NOGA by providing exceptions that could lead to the loss of old-growth forests. In particular, an allowance for harvesting old-growth forests when "incidental to the implementation of a management activity not otherwise prohibited" is too vague. Standard 2.b should be modified to provide greater safeguards from other management activities.

As stated in the DEIS under "Timber", the NOGA does not change lands suitable for timber production, and does not provide any specific designation for old growth reserves or an equivalent designation. In fact, only 13.8 million acres (56%) of old growth forest is in Designated Areas such as wilderness areas, inventoried roadless areas, and natural areas, so that the remaining 44% occurs in an unprotected status. Although timber harvesting is much less than in previous decades, lands designated as ASQ and PTSQ remain intact and thus unprotected. If these lands are expanded in the future, does the NOGA not cover this situation?

4. Deviations listed in Standard 2.c are so broad that they could invite abuse during some management activities, and especially 2.c.iii (DEIS, p. 53). Standard 2.c should be modified so that deviations are permitted only if the proposed vegetation management actions or incidental tree harvesting or removal have been included in an analysis and the rationale for that determination is covered in a decision document or supporting documentation (i.e., updated forest plan). One positive point is the clarification in Standard 3 that vegetation management in old-growth forests must not be for the purpose of timber production (DEIS p. 32).

5. Although the DEIS recognizes that forests are dynamic systems and requires focus on areas with inherent capability to sustain future old-growth forests (DEIS p. 23), it is unfortunate that the DEIS does not consider the management of high quality mature forest in greater detail, especially larger stands that are adjacent to old growth forests outside of proposed "refugia". Mature forests comprise 68.1 million acres (47 %) of all NFS forests, and one of the goals of the NOGA is to create a consistent framework to manage long term persistence, distribution and recruitment of old growth forests.

While the revised NOGA provides greater emphasis and detail about identifying mature forests for recruitment, retention, and promotion of old-growth forests where conditions permit as a key accomplishment of the Adaptive Strategies (DEIS p. 21), and proposes to enhance landscape and patch connectivity where old growth stands are isolated, by limiting the recruitment of future old-growth forests to areas of likely climate or fire "refugia," the NOGA constrains the ability of Adaptive Strategies to identify and prioritize other mature forests to become old-growth.

Thus, as currently written, the NOGA is essentially a static plan and fails to consider future changes to forests progressing from at least late phase mature to old stands in areas that are not designed as "refugia". Likely the worst outcome from this approach is isolated old growth stands surrounded by degraded forests!

6. The DEIS includes a paragraph discussing the importance of old-growth "quality" (DEIS p. S-3), the DEIS has incorporated quality into the definition of proactive stewardship (DEIS p. 29), and a reference to old-growth characteristics appears in the Statement of Distinctive Roles and Contributions (DEIS p. 19). While acknowledging the importance of old-growth quality and associated habitat diversity as key components of ecological integrity, the NOGA provides few management directions to maintain and restore high quality old-growth forests. The NOGA would benefit from greater integration of old-growth quality into the Desired Conditions, Objectives, and other plan components.

7. The timeframe to develop the Adaptive Strategies is quite short and does not allow

sufficient time for necessary data collection and evaluation. In addition, the DEIS does not provide any examples of what the Adaptive management strategies might be, and although the 2012 and 2016 Planning rules and amendment strive to increase public and stakeholder engagement, it will be difficult to address "shared

stewardship", authentic collaboration and tribal consultations on such a short time frame.

As an example, the DIES frequently references "cultural burning" in pine and mixed-canopy forest, and is promoting Tribal inclusion and co-stewardship by requiring national forests to initiate at least one co-stewardship project with interested Tribes for the purpose of proactive stewardship (Objective 3, DEIS p. 27). However, do we really know enough about Native American burning regimes as a baseline in Eastern and Western forests to adapt this knowledge to successful Adaptive management strategies in only two years?

The USFS should consider extending the time for completing Adaptive Strategies, and further emphasize the importance of collaboration and partnerships when developing the Adaptive Strategies, as well as offer greater guidance on the collaborative adaptive management process.

8. The DEIS mentions the importance of old trees in non-old growth stands, and Guideline 3 requires vegetation management projects to retain and conserve old trees occurring outside of old-growth forests. However, it is unclear how the USFS plans to manage these in the long term, and it does not appear as a Standard or covered in any Adaptive management strategies. In addition, it is unclear that these efforts would not be limited to "refugia" only.

9. The NOGA is targeting old growth and some selected mature forest only, and nearly all National Forest plans will be amended. Development of a series of Adaptive strategies that are successful and well-integrated with other large-scale activities (i.e., Healthy Forest Initiative, Wildfire Crisis Strategy, etc.) will take considerable planning effort by each National Forest. However, this should not preclude Forests with out of date plans to update these through the 2012/2016 Planning rule framework. The majority of forests on National Forest lands are in younger serial stages, and there has been a lot of "checkerboard" clear cutting on forests throughout the West, isolating old growth stands and patches of older trees. Such areas would greatly benefit from thoughtful integration with NOGA, with stakeholder and public input through the NEPA process.

In addition, will National Forests with greater areas of old growth forest be prioritized for development and implementation of Adaptive strategies? These may be beyond the capacity of individual Forests, so that assistance from the WO and/or Region will likely be necessary. Overall, the USFS will hopefully continue to update Forest plans on schedule, because the 2040 date is not too far in the future.

10. It is not entirely clear how the NOGA will be integrated with the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, although this major endeavor will drive management practices throughout Western and some Eastern forests. While the WCS should be praised for reducing wildfire risk, and the DEIS states that the WCS will result in the reduction of hazardous fuels to reduce the risk of old growth forest loss and facilitate return to appropriate fire regimes and conditions (likely derived from LANDFIRE simulations), WCS efforts to date, and wildfire suppression efforts in general, seem to be directed towards protecting communities, municipal watersheds, and critical infrastructure (Standard 2.c.3). It would be of value for the NOGA to expand the analyses of how the Amendment will be integrated with

the Wildfire Crisis Strategy in and externally to fire "refugia", and provided some additional guidance for especially forests in Regions 5, 6 of PSW and the inner montane regions.

11. Finally, the DEIS proposes to establish a national monitoring network to track the distribution patterns and trends in old growth and some mature forest. This effort seems redundant with the already well-established FIA program, and it could be more cost-effective to increase the density and sampling frequency of FIA plots, and expand the use of remote sensing techniques such as LiDAR across the National Forest system, rather than reinvent the wheel.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the DEIS of the NOGA, and encourage the USDA Forest Service to continue modifying and improving the NOGA as the Agency proceeds to finalize it in the coming months.

Sincerely,

Kenneth L. Clark, Ph.D.

Forest Ecologist