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Comments:

I am writing to express my strong support for the protection of mature and old-growth forests within the Gifford Pinchot National Forest and the broader region affected by the Northwest Forest Plan amendment. As an avid hiker and recreationist, I have spent countless hours exploring these landscapes, and I deeply value the immense ecological, recreational, and cultural significance these forests provide. It is crucial that the Forest Service prioritize their preservation.

Mature and old-growth forests are vital not only for their unique beauty but also for their essential role in maintaining biodiversity, mitigating climate change, and sustaining local ecosystems. According to the U.S. Forest Service's own research, old-growth forests act as carbon sinks, helping to sequester large amounts of atmospheric carbon dioxide, which is critical for combating climate change (Smith et al., 2021). They also provide irreplaceable habitats for many endangered species, including the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet, both of which rely on old-growth forests for nesting and survival (USFWS, 2020).

The Gifford Pinchot National Forest is a prime example of the rich natural heritage that must be protected. These forests are not only ecologically valuable but also hold great cultural importance to local Indigenous tribes, who have relied on these forests for centuries. For example, the Yakama Nation has expressed the importance of old-growth forests in maintaining traditional ecological knowledge and resources (Yakama Nation, 2019).

As a recreational user, I can attest to the fact that these mature forests provide unparalleled experiences for hiking, birdwatching, and connecting with nature. The Gifford Pinchot offers some of the most scenic and tranquil areas in the region, with towering trees and lush understory, creating a rare opportunity for solitude and reflection. Protecting these forests will ensure that future generations can also enjoy these experiences.

I urge the Forest Service to strengthen the proposed amendment to the Northwest Forest Plan by including stronger protections for mature and old-growth forests, particularly those in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. These forests are a valuable part of our natural heritage and must be preserved for their ecological, recreational, and cultural importance.

I believe their protection is essential for the health of our ecosystems, climate, and local communities.

Matrix forests, which lie outside of protected areas like reserves but are still crucial to overall ecological health, play a vital role in maintaining biodiversity, enhancing carbon storage, and supporting a variety of wildlife species. These forests are often intermediate-aged, providing important habitat for species like the northern spotted owl, whose survival depends on a diverse range of forest habitats, including second-growth and transitional forests (Gutiérrez et al., 2007). If we allow logging in matrix forests, we risk losing the crucial habitats that are still recovering and contributing to ecological resilience.

Second-succession forests are similarly important in maintaining ecological balance. These forests, which regenerate after disturbances like fire or logging, offer critical transitional habitat for many species. While they may not yet have the structural complexity of mature forests, second-growth forests still support vital functions such as soil stabilization, water filtration, and carbon sequestration. Allowing continued logging in these forests threatens the long-term ecological integrity of the landscape.

The U.S. Forest Service has recognized the importance of second-growth forests, as they are essential in helping to create long-term forest resilience in the face of climate change (USFS, 2019). Logging these forests

would reduce their ability to mature into more complex ecosystems and diminish their ecological contributions. Instead, we should be focused on ensuring that these forests are allowed to reach their full ecological potential, which will benefit both wildlife and future generations.

Furthermore, protecting these forests would align with the growing demand for sustainable forest management practices. Rather than focusing on short-term economic gains from logging, we should prioritize approaches that allow for both conservation and long-term ecological stewardship. This would support the forest products industry by promoting the regeneration of mature forests that can be sustainably harvested in the future, rather than depleting the resources we rely on.

I urge the Forest Service to implement stronger protections for matrix and second-succession forests in the upcoming amendment to the Northwest Forest Plan. These forests play an essential role in supporting biodiversity, sequestering carbon, and maintaining ecosystem services. By protecting them from further logging, we will contribute to healthier forests, a more resilient climate, and a more sustainable future.

I also strongly urge the Forest Service to protect matrix and second-succession forests from logging in the proposed amendment.

I have spent many hours among the second succession forests in the Yacolt Burn State Forest area and find them another secret gem. They help to prevent erosion, supply fresh water, and are enjoyed for their recreational and tribal values, as well.

Thank you for your consideration, and I hope to see strong protections for these critical landscapes in the final amendment.