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Title:

Comments: Dear Forest Service Officers and Representatives,

As an avid hiker, backpacker, and backcountry skier, my knee-jerk reaction is to tell you how much these forests mean to me, my work, and my interests. Yet, the proposed amendments, just like the forests, are uninterested in my personal passions, interests, and sentiments. There is something much larger at play here.

For the past several hundred years, humans, especially Americans, have largely seen ourselves not as part of nature, but instead as beneficiaries of it. I believe this is the root cause of why we look to places like our public lands for resources to extract and bring to our lives, separate from nature. It is only my humble opinion, but we were never supposed to extract from nature. Sure, we need resources to build our homes and businesses, but this should have been done in symbiosis with nature, not at the expense of it.

I fear the amendments to the Northwest Forest Plan are an adherence to archaic principles that originally led to the deforestation of virtually all old growth forests in the Pacific Northwest. As someone who spends well over 100-days per year in our public lands, it stuns me when I see real old growth. Why is it so surprising to see trees that were always supposed to be there? This should be the norm, but instead after centuries of clear cut logging practices, we have shifted our perspectives to look at these isolated stands of old growth as "special". They are only special because so few are left. If our forests were managed with humans placed in within nature, instead of above it, we would have never felt such novelty for an untouched forest.

This is where the amendments to the Northwest Forest plan begin to fail us, and fail our public forests. Any of the proposed amendments would lead to further destruction of old growth forests, and forests well on their way to becoming old growth. As recent developments in research about our public forests have shown, old growth trees do not live in isolation. In fact, you cannot have old growth forests with old growth trees alone. Extended mycelium networks, mature biota in the soil, and diverse undergrowth and wildlife are all part of the complex system that makes an old growth forest work so darn well.

I am sure you have many scientists that are much wiser than me advising you on this topic, but I will make my voice heard nonetheless and appreciate your time and consideration. Forests (not groups of monoculture trees) provide habitat for countless species of plants and animals, some of which are critically endangered. But I get it, we don't need to fight about the Northern Spotted Owl again.

We can much more easily reframe our understanding of the forests to how they suit our needs more capably as forests than they do as timber. Here is how:

1. Forests provide oxygen for us to breathe, which is fairly important.
2. Forests sequester carbon into the soil. This helps curb the acceleration of global warming, keeping our communities safer. When forests are clear cut, the soil is disturbed, releasing centuries of stored carbon back into the atmosphere.
3. Forests help manage our watersheds, controlling erosion, flooding, mitigating drought, and improving water quality. Better drinking water for our communities and more reliable water for our farms, I will take it.
4. Forests help mitigate wildfires. Forests that have diverse vegetation are better defenders of wildfires than the monoculture tree crop that is traditionally planted once a forest is harvested.
5. Forests provide pretty great recreation opportunities. Over 100-million Americans recreate outdoors, including many people here in the Pacific Northwest and visitors of this region. Humans need trees so much that research shows that hospital patients that have views of trees from their hospital bed have more positive patient outcomes

than those who do not.

So even if you only care about what forests can do for humans in our separate-from-nature societies, they are pretty incredible at showing us their power, if left standing.

With that said, there are certainly flaws within the existing Northwest Forest Plan framework. Primarily, indigenous stakeholders have been drastically underrepresented in forest management for the past 150-years. Studies show that forests all across the globe that are managed by indigenous peoples are on average healthier, more diverse, and more sustainable than forests that have no indigenous involvement. Any proposed amendment should implement a drastic increase of indigenous stakeholders at the decision-making table. My own life experiences in our forests pale in comparison to the extensive familial and cultural history for our indigenous brothers and sisters that have called these forests home since time immemorial.

In summary, I am aware I lack the qualifications to advise on exactly how our forests should be managed. Yet, I do know how the perspectives of the past have strained our relationship with our forests to a breaking point. The original Northwest Forest Plan was a powerful precedent to separating what we can do and what we should do. Unfortunately, all of the amendments in their existing framework widen that gap between "can" and "should". I understand the need to support our local economies and provide lumber for our communities to grow and thrive. Yet, there are other ways to do this that do not require logging forests and destroying entire ecosystems to get there. A retrofitted pole and post lumber mill in Wallowa county provides stable jobs and valuable products while concentrating logging on small diameter lumber that has become an overly dense fire hazard in many parts of the Northeastern part of Oregon. This simultaneous identification of a viable market paired with an ecosystem service is more closely aligned with the symbiosis needed for the forests of tomorrow. All I ask is that you keep our communities at the heart of our intentions with any amendments to the Northwest Forest Plan.

I genuinely appreciate your time and consideration of my thoughts and concerns.

Sincerely,
Christian Murillo