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Comments: The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) appreciates the opportunity to support the proposed Divide Project in the Detroit Ranger District. We endorse the project's objectives to restore and enhance meadow and wetland habitats and create early seral conditions within the Willamette National Forest. ODFW recognizes that mesic meadows and wetlands are increasingly rare on the landscape due to conifer encroachment, altered hydrology, and historic management practices. These habitats are critical for maintaining biodiversity and providing forage for big game species such as elk and deer. Restoring meadow systems will improve forage quality across the Santiam Wildlife Management Unit, where ODFW has observed a steady decrease in elk populations.

Wetland restoration, including the installation of beaver dam analogues, will improve hydrologic function, raise water tables, and create complex aquatic habitats. These actions not only benefit amphibians and fish but also encourage the return of beavers—an essential ecosystem engineer whose activities enhance water storage, reduce peak flows, and increase resilience to drought and wildfire. Beaver activity also contributes to habitat complexity that supports a wide range of species. The project area occurs within ODFW's North Santiam Beaver Emphasis Area (BEA), and the department has performed beaver activity surveys and assessed wetland for restoration potential through a GNA partnership with the Detroit Ranger District of the Willamette National Forest. We also support the creation of early seral habitat patches as part of this project. Early seral conditions provide diverse plant communities that offer food and cover for pollinators, cavity-nesting birds, migratory songbirds, and big game. These habitats are increasingly limited due to fire suppression and past management practices, and their restoration will help sustain bird populations that depend on open, structurally diverse environments.

ODFW is committed to partnering with the Forest Service to ensure these restoration efforts succeed. We can provide technical expertise on wildlife habitat needs, assist with monitoring outcomes, and collaborate on strategies to maximize benefits for fish and wildlife.

We look forward to working together to restore these vital habitats and improve ecological resilience in the Divide project area.