

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 2/21/2026 4:04:30 PM

First name: John

Last name: George

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Comment on the Austin Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Malheur National Forest

My name is John George. I am a lifelong Eastern Oregon resident, and I am submitting this comment based on my personal experience using the Austin Project area and my review of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).

I have used the roads in the Austin Project area for my entire life. These roads are not abandoned, not unused, and not "stored" in any real-world sense. I have personally driven them year after year, as have my family and neighbors. Many of these roads were built by local families decades ago and have remained open and in regular use for as long as I can remember.

The Forest Service's repeated claim that these roads are not being closed - only "stored" - does not match what that designation actually means or how it affects people like me on the ground. Under Forest Service policy, a "stored" (Maintenance Level 1) road is closed to public motorized access. Calling it something different does not change the outcome. If these roads are designated as stored, I lose access to areas I have always relied on.

That is not a theoretical impact. It is a direct and personal one.

Emergency Authority Is Being Used Beyond Its Intended Scope

The Austin Project is being advanced under emergency authority that is supposed to focus on wildfire risk and public safety. Nothing about that authority requires or justifies removing longstanding motorized access from people who live here.

The DEIS does not show that the roads being labeled as "stored" are causing wildfire danger. It does not explain how closing them improves firefighter safety or protects communities. Instead, road storage is treated as a given, as if it were already settled, even though these roads are still open and actively used.

From where I sit, this looks like access restrictions being pushed through under the cover of an emergency designation that was never meant to be used this way.

Purpose and Need Does Not Justify Road Storage

The stated Purpose and Need of the Austin Project is about reducing wildfire risk, improving fire behavior, and protecting public and firefighter safety. It does not include closing roads, reducing public access, or advancing long-term travel management goals.

Yet the DEIS assumes that road storage is appropriate without demonstrating:

that these specific roads are creating wildfire danger,

that storing them is necessary to meet the project's stated goals, or

that less restrictive options would not work.

I support responsible forest management and vegetation treatment. I do not accept the idea that those treatments require cutting people like me off from the land we depend on. There is no reason logging and fuels work cannot move forward while keeping these roads open.

The Baseline Is Wrong: These Roads Are Not "Stored"

Many of the roads shown as "stored" in the DEIS are physically open, drivable, and used regularly by the public. Some have old gates that haven't been locked or enforced since the 1990s. Others were never physically closed at all.

These roads function as open system roads. Treating them as if they are already unavailable to the public misrepresents existing conditions. When the baseline is wrong, the entire analysis built on it is wrong.

The DEIS Does Not Even Identify Which Roads Are Being Treated as Stored

One of the most troubling issues for me is that the DEIS never clearly identifies which specific roads are being treated as "stored."

There is no road-by-road list. No table. No appendix. No disclosure of road numbers, segments, or the administrative actions that supposedly closed them.

All that is provided are maps and mileage totals. That is not enough for the public to understand what access is being lost or to verify the agency's claims. Without that information, meaningful public review is impossible.

Community Impacts Are Ignored

The DEIS talks about timber volume and mills, but it does not take a hard look at what losing access means for people who actually live here.

These roads are how we gather firewood, hunt, access grazing areas, respond to emergencies, and take care of our families. Losing them is not an abstract inconvenience. It affects daily life in rural Eastern Oregon.

Those impacts are not meaningfully analyzed in the DEIS.

My Request Is Simple and Direct

The Forest Service keeps saying these roads are not being closed. If that is truly the case, then the solution is straightforward:

Designate these roads as open on the project maps and in the DEIS.

Remove road storage as an assumed condition unless the agency can clearly show, road by road, that it is necessary to meet the project's stated Purpose and Need.

Correct the baseline to reflect how these roads are actually used and managed on the ground.

If the agency cannot do that, then it should be honest with the public about the fact that access is being reduced.

Closing

I am not opposed to logging. I am not opposed to fuels reduction. I am opposed to losing access to land I have used my entire life based on word games and assumptions that do not match reality.

The Austin Project, as written, does not accurately describe existing conditions and does not justify the access restrictions it relies on. I urge the Forest Service to correct these problems before moving forward.

John George