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Comments: RE: Crawford Vegetation Management Project Objection as per 36 CFR 218.8

* Project Name: Crawford Vegetation Management Project

* Responsible Official: Forest Supervisor Patricia Grantham

* Klamath National Forest Supervisors Office

Thank you for accepting this Objection pursuant to 36 CFR [sect] 218 from the Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center (KS Wild), the Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC), the Klamath Forest Alliance (KFA), regarding elements of the Crawford Vegetation Management Project Draft Record of Decision. For the purpose of this Objection KS Wild is the "lead objector."

Scope of this Objection

As per 36 CFR [sect] 218 this Objection applies to the draft decision to conduct commercial logging and road construction activities that will downgrade and remove native forest critical habitat in occupied Northern spotted owl (NSO) activity centers. Our organizations do not object to plantation thinning, precommercial thinning, and understory fuels reduction activities that do not involve the downgrading and removing of suitable NSO habitat.

Our organizations had hoped that the content of our comments might influence the direction of this project -but it once again appears that the decision to authorize logging that will result in the "incidental take" of spotted owl populations through the downgrading and removal of native forest canopy continues to be the status quo for the Klamath National Forest. Our attempts to work with the Forest Service in good faith throughout this planning process have not been reciprocated.

We ask the Regional Forest Service Office to take special note that the proposed objection resolution points contained in this objection are narrowly tailored and specifically designed to meet the project purpose and need to improve forest health, increase biological diversity and provide forest products. It is unfortunate that the Klamath National Forest nevertheless insists that native forest canopy must be removed and threatened wildlife species must be harmed in order to meet these laudable project objectives. Our organizations propose modifying the project to better achieve the project purpose and need while protecting, rather than harming, threatened old-growth associated wildlife species and their USFWS-designated critical habitat.

A great deal of existing timber plantations are currently present in this project area. These plantations have the highest stand density, the most trees per acre, the least habitat values and the highest fire hazard of any forest stands in the project area. The Forest Service could best meet project objectives by focusing timber removal in the second growth plantations rather than by logging mature forest stands down to 30% canopy cover.

We remain perplexed by the agency's decision to drop the utilization of prescribed fire from its preferred action alternative. We were under the impression that Klamath stakeholders and agency planners recognized the need to return fire to these fire evolved forests as a means of reducing fuel loading, improving forest health and increasing biological diversity. We are unable to find a rationale in the EA for this sudden and significant change in project direction.

We would like to work with the KNF to find a way to expedite plantation thinning, precommercial thinning, careful mastication and meadow and wetland restoration. We are also open to exploring small-diameter commercial thinning. But the agency's refusal to protect spotted owl habitat and large trees makes support for the project

impossible and ensures needless controversy. Why not truly collaborate with interested stakeholders to achieve forest restoration that produces wood products while reducing road density and retaining spotted owl critical habitat in occupied activity centers? Why emphasize a policy of ignoring and minimizing the requests, suggestions and concerns of conservation advocates who want the best for Forest Service managed public lands?

Objection Point #1: Failure to Meet the Project Purpose and Need

Our organizations would like to support a project outcome that meets the agency's objectives of improving forest health, increasing biological diversity and providing forest products. These goals could be achieved while recognizing the crucial role that the remaining mature forests provide in contributing to those objectives. By pushing listed species closer and closer to the brink of extinction the KNF's is directly undermining each of the stated project objectives. By rejecting the utilization of prescribed fire previously proposed by Forest Service staff, the agency is failing to address the forest health and biological diversity objectives of the project. By logging mature trees the Forest Service will simplify forest structure and increasing controversy associated with the production of forest products.

As stated on page 10 of the initial Silviculture Report, "[t]he 1960s and 1980s harvesting reduced the presence of mature and old-growth trees, which reduced species presence of Sugar pine, Ponderosa pine and Incense cedar." Yet the project specifically targets mature forests for canopy removal/reduction and will remove mature trees in free thinning logging prescriptions as well as in cable yarding corridors, landings and temporary road locations.

Please note that page 7 of the initial EA indicates that via its preferred alternative the Forest Service intends to log nearly double of the amount of mature native forests (297 acres) as second-growth plantations (162 acres).

As stated on page 19 of the initial Silviculture Report the extensive mature forest logging "could result in some blown down during strong winds" (although this issue is neither acknowledged or analyzed in the project EA). Yet the KNF seems intent on removing mature forest canopy and trees regardless of the impacts to forest health, biodiversity or timber production.

At page 15 of the initial Wildlife BE the Forest Service indicates that the timber sale will significantly reduce the number of large trees >26" in diameter across the project area. The removal of these large fire-resilient overstory trees (from forests critical to the survival and recovery of NSO populations) directly undermines the project purpose and need and calls into question the repeated assertion in the EA that the project will retain rather than remove large diameter trees. Indeed, Appendix B of the initial Silviculture Report indicates that the Forest Service "sample mark" includes removal of trees in the 40" to 50" DBH size class. Such old-growth logging undermines the purpose and need for the project and calls into question a number of the assumptions and conclusions presented in the EA.

Proposed Resolution to Objection Point #1: Achieve the objectives of improving forest health, increasing biodiversity and providing forest products by modifying the draft decision document to retain, rather than remove, large-diameter trees and native forest canopy providing NSO critical habitat while focusing treatments in the ubiquitous second growth plantations.

Objection Point #2: No Opportunity to Provide Scoping Comments on Significant NSO Critical Habitat Removal Associated with the New Fuel Break Logging Units

Despite the Crawford timber sale project having been "scoped" twice (under different NEPA authority) only when the EA was finally released did the Forest Service disclose its plans to log mature forests, remove spotted owl habitat and construct new logging roads to facilitate an extensive fuel break along the 15N20 road. The proposal

to greatly expand proposed logging and to eliminate needed prescribed fire prescriptions necessitates a new scoping period allowing the public to provide reasonable alternatives to the proposed action and to raise issues of concern prior to Forest Service analysis. Given that the logging associated with the fuel break and with the other logging units will remove extensive spotted owl habitat located in home ranges that are already in deficit for habitat, the Forest Service must go back to the drawing board and complete an EIS for this project that includes a scoping notice that describes the actual actions and acres proposed for logging that will remove NSO critical habitat and result in incidental take of the species.

Proposed Resolution to Objection Point #2: Please implement careful small-diameter thinning prescriptions along that 15N20 road that will better allow the road to serve as a fuel break while retaining, rather than removing NSO critical habitat. Please do not reduce overstory mature forest canopy to less than 60%. Avoid tanoak brush response (that will increase future fire hazard) through the removal of forest canopy down to 30%. Please do not log large fire-resilient trees along the 15N20 road to meet arbitrary basal retention objectives. Acknowledge that recent wildfires in the area are burning at desirable ranges of intensity and providing needed resource benefits.

Wildfires burned at primarily low severity in the project area in the 2016 (Pony) and 2017 (Clear) fire seasons. In general these two wildfires moved the project area closer to desired condition in regards to fuel loading and vegetation composition and structure. -Crawford Silviculture Report page 3 describing the effects and behavior of recent fires in the project area.

Objection Point #3: Political Decision To Ignore Significant Project Impacts In Order to Avoid Writing an EIS

The EA contains no information whatsoever justifying the agency's abrupt and political decision to discount the significant environmental impacts associated with removing spotted owl critical habitat within occupied spotted owl activity centers. Was the agency mistaken in its previous determination that an EIS was required to analyze and disclose the significant impacts associated with harming listed species and designated critical habitat? If so, how? Further, please note that the proposed impacts to spotted owls and their habitat from logging are greatly increased in Alternative 4 compared to the Proposed Action described in both scoping notices. The unlawful political decision of the Executive Branch and Department of Agriculture to refuse to acknowledge and document environmentally significant impacts via an EIS is arbitrary and capricious.

Proposed Resolution to Objection Point #3: Please drop the proposal to downgrade and remove critical habitat in occupied NSO activity centers that will result in "take" of the species. If the KNF insists upon logging NSO critical habitat in occupied NSO activity centers then the Forest Service must complete an EIS to address the significant impacts of its logging and road construction activities upon this threatened species and its habitat.

Objection Point #4: Mature and Old-Growth Forest Logging

Please note that page 21 of the initial EA indicates that the Forest Service "intent is to maintain most mature and all old-growth trees" yet the draft decision would log a majority of mature forest stands down to 30% canopy and several units down to as little as 20% canopy cover. The widespread removal of overstory canopy from mature forest stands is not consistent with an intention to retain mature trees and mature forest structure. Additionally, Appendix B (page 30) of the Silviculture Report reveals that the Forest Service is targeting some old-growth trees in the 40" to 50" inch range for removal.

Proposed Resolution to Objection Point #4: Retain fire-resilient large trees and 60% forest canopy in native forest stands in order to protect biodiversity, avoid the take of NSO and their critical habitat and better achieve the project purpose and need.

Objection Point #5: Failure to Analyze and Disclose Impacts to Pacific Fisher

The Crawford timber sale EA contains no actual data or substantive analysis regarding the impacts of the proposed logging and road construction on Pacific Fisher populations, reproduction, denning and presence in the Crawford project area. Rather than analyze and disclose the impacts of the timber sale on this ESA Candidate Species the EA contains summary conclusions that rely upon NSO habitat as a surrogate for analyzing and quantifying impacts to Fisher.

In our comments on this project we specifically request that the Forest Service respond to the following finding by Zielinski and others (2006):

"Although owl fish habitat are moderately correlated on federal lands, we cannot assume that federal lands can play the same relative role (i.e. contribution to overall population viability) for the fisher as they have been expected to do for the owl (USDA Forest Service and USDI BLM, 1994). Thus, we should not assume that fisher viability in northern California is insured by protections for the spotted owl included in the Northwest Forest Plan."

Zielinski, WJ, C Carroll and JR Dunk, Using landscape suitability models to reconcile conservation planning for two key forest predators. *Biological Conservation* 133: 409-430. This study is part of the Administrative Record for the Crawford timber sale.

Please note that fisher populations are not "stable" and avoid actions that will contribute to the need to list this species. Please see:

Matthews, S, JM Higley, JS Yeager and TK Fuller. 2011. Density of fishers and the efficacy of relative abundance indices and small-scale occupancy estimation to detect a population decline on the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation, California. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 35(2): 69-75. This study was attached to our EA comments and is part of the project Administrative Record.

"[T]he primary goal of forest management is to avoid or minimize impacts to species whose viability has been identified as a concern." -Klamath National Forest Management Direction 817 and 8-18. On page 4-28 of the Klamath National Forest Plan indicates that Pacific Fisher are a Sensitive species and directs the agency to "collect information on Sensitive species to assess population distribution and habitat associations." No effort to address fisher population distribution has been made in support of the proposed Crawford timber sale.

What is disclosed in the EA is that implementation of the Draft Decision Notice will decrease wildlife connectivity in by creating more artificial forest openings throughout the planning area.

Proposed Resolution to Objection Point #5: Focus project activities on reducing stand density in second-growth timber plantations. Reduce, rather than increase, road density in the project area. These actions will aid Fisher populations and distribution in furtherance of the biodiversity and forest health objectives of the project and the KNF RMP.

Objection Point #6: Achieve the Objectives of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS) of the Northwest Forest Plan

Page 41 of the initial EA indicates that the Forest Service intends to conduct road and log landing reconstruction within the Riparian Reserve land use allocation. Yet the location, impacts and extent of this reconstruction is not revealed, analyzed or quantified in the EA.

Page 48 of the EA states the timber sale will involve "skidding logs across ephemeral stream channels and stream channels of dry intermittent stream channels," yet the location, impacts and extent of such skidding is not revealed, analyzed or quantified in the EA.

While other Forest Service NEPA documents (including some from the Klamath National Forest) have quantified the impacts of extensive log haul involving road/stream crossings on sediment delivery, at page 49 of the EA the KNF elects to avoid disclosing or considering this information.

Please note that the bulk of the Forest Service findings and recommendations contained the Ishi Pishi/Ukonom Ecosystem Analysis are not carried forward into the agency's Draft Decision and are not discussed or disclosed in the Crawford timber sale EA.

The initial Aquatics Report (BE and MIS) at page 71, Table 18, anticipates a significant increase in mass wasting volume over background rates from project activities in the Swillup Creek Watershed. The Aquatic Conservation Strategy does not allow for this result. Rather, forest stands in which logging, road construction and log landings will increase mass wasting are required to be designated as upslope riparian reserves by the Northwest Forest Plan. This has not occurred in the Crawford timber sale planning effort.

Page 89 of the Aquatics Report confirms that implementation of Alternative 3 and the avoidance of new logging road construction would result in significantly reduced negative impacts (as compared to the other action alternatives) to hydrological riparian reserves that benefit species including frogs, salamanders, shrews and long-tailed voles. Yet the Forest Service has elected to reject Alternative 3 in favor of a more aggressive logging alternative with greater impacts to watershed values.

Proposed Resolution to Objection Point #6: Implement Alternative 3 in order to reduce avoidable negative aquatic outcomes. Designate forest stands in which logging would increase mass wasting in the Swillup Creek Watershed as upslope riparian reserves.

Objection Point #7: Harming Spotted Owls and Their Critical Habitat

Our organizations are extremely perplexed and troubled by the decision of the Forest Service to emphasize the removal of occupied spotted owl critical habitat in all of its action alternatives. On the heels of the over 100 incidental takes associated with the Westside logging project on the Happy Camp Ranger District it appears that the Klamath National Forest is actively and swiftly contributing to the extirpation of the species.

Page 61 of the initial EA indicates that the Crawford timber sale will remove 139 acres of Foraging habitat consisting of critical habitat located in habitat-deficit NSO home ranges. By any reasonable measure this is a "significant" environmental impact necessitating completion of an EIS.

Page 59 of the EA reveals that "the likelihood of spotted owls occurring in the analysis area is high" due to the presence of four NSO cores two of which reproduced for the last three years. Removing additional habitat from these activity centers is a significant action necessitating completion of an EIS.

Page 63 of the EA confirms that due to extensive logging in the project area "the home range analysis shows that all the four cores and home ranges are deficit in Nesting, Roosting and Foraging acres." (See Table 18). Additional logging within these activity centers will thus involve incidental take of a listed species which is a significant action, particularly following the disastrous Westside logging decision which may have pushed the species towards jeopardy and extinction.

The Draft FONSI at pages 71 and 72 is in error in contending that spotted owl activity centers currently are not in deficit for habitat and that no foraging habitat is slated for removal from nest cores. Both of these conclusions are directly countered by both the EA and the Wildlife BE. While the erroneous conclusion in the Draft FONSI has been recently corrected, the agency has failed to alter its plans to remove existing NSO critical habitat that is needed now by owls trying to survive and reproduce in the project area.

We are particularly troubled by the Forest Service proposal to modify habitat in the core of the KL 4224 NSO site that reproduced successfully in 2018. This action seems especially egregious and unwise.

Please note that the NSO Recovery Plan at III-2 states, "Because spotted owls on established territories are likely to be more successful if they remain in those locations, managing to retain spotted owls at existing sites should be the most effective approach to bolstering the demographic contribution of a habitat conservation network and the highest priority for land managers. Retention of long-term occupancy and reproduction at established spotted owl sites will require a coordinated and cooperative effort to craft management approaches tailored to regional, provincial or local conditions."

The EA neglects to fully analyze the impacts of the proposed logging on barred owl competition. Yet page 19 of the initial Wildlife BE acknowledges "the removal and degradation of habitat in the [NSO] homes ranges may increase the likelihood of barred owls affecting the spotted owls ability to continue in this activity center." The Forest Service must analyze and disclose the synergistic impacts of logging spotted owl habitat and increased barred owl encroachment in an EIS. The Forest Service failed to fully analyze the findings contained in the 2019 study attached to our EA comments entitled The Past and Future Roles of Competition and Habitat in the Range-Wide Occupancy Dynamics of Northern Spotted Owls.

Proposed Resolution to Objection Point #7: Treat and maintain, rather than downgrade and remove, critical habitat within occupied NSO activity centers.

Objection Point #8: Failure to Analyze Logging and Road Construction in Dormant Landslides

The Klamath National Forest is aware of numerous dormant landslides located on ridges in the project area. Yet the Crawford timber sale EA contains no site-specific analysis, disclosure or data regarding the impacts of fuel break establishment, logging, yarding, road construction or landing construction on dormant landslides. This is particularly troubling given that Alternative 4 greatly increases the amount of ridgeline logging, yarding, landing construction and road construction compared to what was initially scoped for this project. Buried on page 14 of the initial Geology Report a thorough reader can learn that implementation of Alternative 4 is projected to increase the landslide volume in Coon Creek by 5% and the landslide volume in Swillup Creek by 3%.

Proposed Resolution to Objection Point #8: Implement the Aquatic Conservation Strategy of the Northwest Forest Plan by avoiding logging actions that will increase landsliding in the Coon Creek and Swillup Creek Watersheds.

Objection Point #9: Logging Partial Retention Viewshed Along FS 15N19.

Please note that the existing mature native forests proposed for logging along Forest Road 15N19 are designated as "Partial Retention" in the Klamath National Forest Resource Management Plan to emphasize the visual objective of "large tree character." The extensive logging and canopy removal of mature LSOG forest stands along 15N19 will inhibit the visual objectives identified in the Resource Management Plan. Also note that the initial Silvicultural Report (Appendix B) indicates that the Forest Service is specifically targeting some trees in the 40" to 50" diameter class for removal in these and other logging units.

Proposed Resolution to Objection Point #9. Retain, rather than remove, trees contributing to "large tree character." Retain 60% canopy cover so that a functioning attractive forest ecosystem still exists after treatment.

Objection Point #10: Failure to Analyze and Disclose the Impacts of Road and Landing Construction.

"Monitoring from previous projects on the Klamath has shown an increase in compaction, reduction in soil cover, and soil displacement leading to a loss of nutrients and reduced infiltration on the landings and temporary roads.

Landings and temporary roads therefore do not meet desired conditions for soil organic matter and soil structure because the majority of these areas have the upper soil layer displaced or compacted enough to effect hydrologic function and productivity for the desired plant species." -Crawford Soils Report Page 7

Please note in their initial scoping comments concerning the project (prior the political decision was made by the Forest Service to avoid writing an EIS) the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) asked Crawford project planners to disclose the location and impacts of proposed new log landings and logging roads. Site-specific information regarding the location and impacts of log landing construction is simply absent from the Crawford timber sale EA.

While the project maps indicate where some of the new road construction may occur, the EA fails to analyze or disclose any of the site-specific impacts associated with the proposed new road construction. How many mature trees would be removed to facilitate additional logging roads? How would these new roads impact wildlife, soil and hydrological forest resources? Please recall that in 2009 District Ranger Ken Harris directed that the project should utilize the existing transportation system as opposed to building more logging roads. That direction was not carried forward in the Draft Decision Notice.

Proposed Resolution to Objection Point #10. Implement the direction and advice of the District Ranger who initiated this planning effort by utilizing the extensive existing transportation system while avoiding new logging road construction in this planning area.

Conclusion

The issues and concerns detailed in the Objection Items listed above were previously identified to the Forest Service by our organizations in our scoping and EA comments during the Crawford timber sale planning process and hence we have "standing" to raise these concerns in an Objection. For the purposes of this objection under 36 CFR 218 KS Wild is identified as the "lead objector."

We again ask the agency to consider the above suggestions for reasonable modifications to the Draft Decision Notice so as to better achieve the management objectives identified in the project purpose and need.

We are unclear as to the reasons for the recent dramatic increase in mature forest logging proposed in Alternative 4 (which was not subject to scoping) and the agency's decision to backtrack on its commitment to document the significant adverse impacts to spotted owls and their critical habitat through an EIS for the Crawford project.

We support the agency's previous recommendations contained in the Dillon Late Successional Reserve Assessment (LSRA) in which Forest Service personnel indicated that effective thinning prescriptions should focus on plantations and pole sized forest stands rather than on latesuccessional forest habitat.

We also supported the 2009 direction to the Crawford ID Team from (then) District Ranger Ken Harris to focus the project on plantation thinning and to utilize the existing transportation system as opposed to building more logging roads.

The agency's insistence on harming listed species, logging large trees and building additional logging roads seems designed to ensure conflict and acrimony rather than to foster collaboration and restoration.

Thank you for considering the comments, concerns, and suggestions detailed in this objection.