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Comments: May 21, 2020

Regional Forester (Reviewing Officer)

Pacific Northwest Regional Office

Attn: 1570 Objections

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Objection to the Spirit Lake Tunnel Intake Gate Replacement and Geotechnical Drilling Project located on the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, Gifford Pinchot National Forest, Skamania County, Washington (Responsible Official: Thomas A. Torres, Gifford Pinchot, Acting Forest Supervisor)

Dear Regional Forester:

I am submitting this objection in accordance with the requirements of 36 CFR 218. I submitted timely, specific written comments on the Notice of Proposed Action for this project, which were received electronically on January 13, 2020. Issues I raise in this objection are based on those comments, and new information arising after that comment opportunity in the project Environmental Assessment (EA) and associated appendices, Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), and Draft Decision Notice (DN). The following issues raised in my comments were not adequately addressed in any of those documents:

- * A hard look at the actual risks of Spirit Lake outflow failure, and providing a complete and transparent disclosure to the public of these risks;
- *Consistency with direction of Public Law 97-243 creating the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument that it be managed to "protect the geologic, ecologic, and cultural resources...allowing geologic forces and ecological succession to continue substantially unimpeded;"
- *A detailed disclosure and analysis of what specific research projects would be impacted by construction of the road across the Pumice Plain;
- *Impacts of the proposed road across the Pumice Plain on streams and ephemeral and seasonal drainages;
- *Recreational and visual impacts of the road across the Pumice Plain;
- *Introduction of invasive species that are known to disrupt natural ecological processes and impact native species; and
- *Development of a new alternative, or modification of Alternative C, that does not require construction of a road across the Pumice Plain.

Without question, the most significant piece of new information worthy of objection is the FONSI, written in tone and language that is clearly aimed toward minimizing and marginalizing the numerous significant impacts of the project to justify a decision that an environmental impact statement would not be prepared.

To set the stage in the "Context" section (Page 1), the conclusion is offered that the "selected alternative activities will have impacts that are smaller in scale to what occurs during periods of volcanic activity, elevated runoff, increased stream flow from precipitation, and rain on snow events." Comparing impacts of the project with natural processes is completely inappropriate and absurd. As is stating that the 160-acre area of direct impacts of the project represents only a small percentage of the entire Monument---failing to mention that those acres are within the Pumice Plain, a geologically and ecologically unique and sensitive area that is designated as a Class 1 Research Area in the Mt. St. Helens National Volcanic Monument's Comprehensive Management Plan (MSHVN Plan). The last paragraph contains many misleading and inaccurate statements that "the context of

the project is limited to the project area," "the project will not pose significant short or long-term effects," "the small scale of the project limits its effects," and "no aspect of the selected alternative will result in any significant impact." Just stating these things over and over does not make them true. The EA as well as the Specialist Input Reports identify both short-term and long-term impacts to multiple resources.

The FONSI is flawed (page 3) in its conclusion in the "Intensity" section that an EIS is not required because the project does not impact any "ecologically critical areas," the term in one of the Council of Environmental Quality factors that must be evaluated in analyzing significance of project impacts. Justification is provided that no areas within the Monument were designated as "ecologically critical" within Public Law 97-243 designating the Monument, or the MSHVNM Plan, or the Gifford Pinchot National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. This statement is misleading because "ecologically critical" is not a land designation in ANY national monument, nor is it a designation used in federal land management plans. Whether the Pumice Plain has a designation of "ecologically critical" is not an appropriate standard for evaluating this factor.

Among the facts that clearly recognize the Pumice Plain is an "ecologically critical" area:

- *The designation within the MSHVNM Plan of the Pumice Plain as a "Class I Research Area" which is considered the "most scientifically important and sensitive area in the Monument" (quote from the Final Research Specialist Report in the EA,) with the goal of providing "maximum opportunity for natural processes and features to continue unimpeded in the most sensitive areas."

- *The Pumice Plain was protected through in the MSHVNM Plan by placing it within Category A/semi-primitive non-motorized status and Closure Area 1 to protect sensitive biological communities and ongoing scientific investigations by prohibiting overnight camping, campfires, off-trail travel pets, bicycles and horses. There are also strict regulations on the introduction of organisms (which would include invasive species);

- *International recognition that this unique and fragile landscape exists nowhere else, and has allowed research that is not possible anywhere else in the world;

- *Millions of public and scientific foundation dollars spent over the past 40 years to support hundreds of research studies in the Pumice Plain that have documented unprecedented discoveries about succession and other ecological processes in a devastated landscape. This research has been significant both in its invaluable contribution to science, and in how it has engaged, excited and informed the public.

The FONSI is also flawed in its conclusion (Page 4) that the effects on the quality of the human environment associated with project are not highly controversial. The rationale provided is that the "science" behind the need for action and protection of downstream communities is not highly controversial. There IS a high level of scientific controversy, as documented in extensive comments provided on the Notice of Proposed Action, about the significant impacts of this project both to the sensitive and unique Pumice Plain landscape and the irreversible destruction of research plots associated with ongoing research. Furthermore, the "science" behind the need for action is controversial because scientists disagree with the Forest Service's conclusion that the tunnel and debris blockage is in imminent risk of catastrophic failure (U.S. Geological Survey Assessment and the 2017 General Technical Report (PNW-GTR-954). Although these documents are cited in the EA, the conflicting conclusions are not discussed.

The FONSI fails to adequately demonstrate that the context and intensity of significant effects of the project do not compel a decision to prepare an environmental impact statement. I object to the conclusion that an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

The following is a summary of my additional objections to the project:

- 1) Inadequate analysis and unsupported conclusions about impacts of the road across the Pumice Plain. The road is repeatedly characterized as "temporary" when it will leave a permanent scar across the landscape that cannot be mitigated. The EA repeatedly makes the unsubstantiated claim that the Pumice Plain "is expected to return to pre-project conditions 2 to 5 years after project implementation" (although this is contradicted by the statement that original soil layers and properties will be permanently altered.) The watersheds that were created

following the eruption and associated streams and ephemeral and seasonal drainages will be irreparably damaged by erosion and sedimentation.

2) Inadequate analysis and disclosure of impacts on research. In my previous comments, I requested that detailed information on what specific research projects would end or be compromised by construction of the road across the Pumice Plain. The Final Specialist Report for Research does not fully disclose direct, indirect and cumulative effects on ongoing research, and fails to identify lost opportunities of projects that have been funded but cannot be implemented due to the road construction. A mere tabulation of plots impacted does not adequately assess impacts to irreplaceable, long-term research projects. What are the full implications of 10 researchers stating that their studies would likely not continue as intended or designed, or would be impaired and potential value decreased?

Plots affected by indirect effects of dust and ash plumes were not adequately disclosed, and mitigation measures are inadequate or infeasible (such as "encouraging work crews to minimize the number of vehicles used and the number of trips made by vehicle.") Furthermore, there is no scientific basis to speculative, unsubstantiated statements in the report concerning impacts to research: "effects to hydrology will occur over the active 2 to 5 year field seasons and potentially a few years after;" "effects to soils on the landscape will potentially occur for 2 to 5 years after rehabilitation and soil recovery restoration actions, based on experience with soil disturbance in timber sale logging and burned area rehabilitation;" and "the physical environment is expected to return to pre-project conditions in 2 to 15 years after project implementation."

3) Introduction of invasive species. The high volume of wheeled vehicles needed to implement Alternative B will significantly increase introduction of invasive species (such as New Zealand mud snails) that are known to disrupt natural ecological processes and impact native species. Mitigation measures identified will not adequately reduce or eliminate these effects.

4) A full range of reasonable alternatives as required by NEPA was not developed. In my previous comments, I urged development of a new alternative, or modification of Alternative C, to complete the project without road construction in the Pumice Plain. Neither Alternative B nor C addresses this concern. I agree that Alternative A, No Action, is not acceptable due to the need to replace the tunnel intake gate to manage Spirit Lake water levels to protect public safety. However, my conclusion in reviewing the EA is that it is possible to develop an alternative using helicopters to transport equipment in and out of Duck Bay for the tunnel intake gate replacement, and utility terrain vehicles and boats for personnel traveling daily to the intake structure. The geotechnical drilling component of the project is not as high of a priority and appears to be driving the need for the road across the Pumice Plain and limiting development of reasonable alternatives. Additional alternatives in an environmental impact statement should be developed that separate these two actions to eliminate the unacceptable and irreversible impacts of the road on the Pumice Plain.

Thank you for considering my objection. I request an objection resolution meeting to discuss the full range of objections to the project, and ways they can be resolved.

Sincerely,

Sarah J. Madsen