

October 17, 2026

Submitted via online portal: <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=387325>

Holly Jewkes, Forest Supervisor
Deschutes National Forest
63095 Deschutes Market Road
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Re: Comments on 2026 Newberry Geothermal Consent to Lease and Forest Plan Amendment Draft Environmental Assessment

Supervisor Jewkes,

On behalf of Central Oregon LandWatch, the Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project and the Sierra Club (hereafter, “LandWatch”), please accept these comments on the 2026 Newberry Geothermal Consent to Lease and Forest Plan Amendment Draft Environmental Assessment (“Draft EA”), posted on the [project website](#)¹ on September 17, 2026.

LandWatch is a conservation organization that has advocated on behalf of fish, wildlife, and forests in Central Oregon for 40 years. With more than 1,100 members in Central Oregon, LandWatch has a long history of protecting ecosystems within the Deschutes National Forest. LandWatch’s members and supporters live in Central Oregon, including on lands adjoining Bend-Fort Rock District. They camp, take photographs, view wildlife, hike, mountain bike, and engage in other recreational activities in and around Newberry Volcano and Newberry National Volcanic Monument generally, and in the project area specifically.

BMBP is a public lands conservation organization dedicated to the protection of the natural ecosystems of the Blue Mountains and Eastern Oregon Cascades. BMBP has been working to protect and restore these ecosystems and the native flora and fauna they support since 1991. BMBP’s work area encompasses federal public lands in eastern Oregon and southeastern Washington including the Deschutes, Ochoco, Malheur, Umatilla, Fremont-Winema, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. BMBP prioritizes the protection of mature and old-growth forest including large trees, sensitive and Endangered Species Act listed species, water quality, roadless areas, and natural ecological processes. BMBP's has a long-held and vested interest in the management and ecological health of the the region's public lands, including the Deschutes National Forest and the Newberry National Volcanic Monument

¹ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r06/deschutes/projects/387325>



The Sierra Club is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to exploring, enjoying, and protecting the wild places of the earth; to practicing and promoting the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources; to educating and enlisting humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment; and to using all lawful means to carry out these objectives. Sierra Club has approximately 16,500 members in the state of Oregon, many of whom use and enjoy the public lands in the Deschutes National Forest and the Newberry National Volcanic Monument including in the project area.

LandWatch has been involved with the management of Newberry National Volcanic Monument since its establishment in 1990, including as party to the negotiations that resulted in prohibitions on geothermal development within the Monument's boundaries. As such, we are keenly interested in the recent uptick in geothermal exploration and development surrounding the Monument, including the request to expand sub-surface leasing for geothermal resources by an additional 30,000 acres. We see the current exploratory geothermal projects near Newberry as interesting opportunities with exciting potential for Central Oregon's energy future, but we caution the Forest Service not to pursue these opportunities entirely at the expense of existing, irreplaceable forest values.

The Draft EA considers a Bureau of Land Management ("BLM") request to lease 29,477 acres of National Forest System Lands within the Deschutes National Forest on Newberry Volcano for geothermal development. The Proposed Action consents to geothermal leasing on 12 of the 14 proposed parcels over 24,682 acres, "with applicable stipulations," and withholds consent for parcels 14 and 15, which are inside the boundary of the Newberry National Volcanic Monument Special Management Area (Draft EA at 2-3). Although the Proposed Action does not involve any ground-disturbing activities at this stage, the Draft EA also includes an amendment to the Deschutes Land and Resource Management Plan ("Deschutes LRMP" or "Deschutes Forest Plan"), as amended by the 1995 Regional Forester Amendment #2 Revised Continuation of Interim Management Direction Establishing Riparian, Ecosystem and Wildlife Standards for Timber Sales ("Eastside Screens"), to allow for the removal of trees greater than or equal to 21 inches diameter at breast height ("dbh") within the nearly 25,000 acres that the Forest Service proposes to consent to lease (Draft EA at 3).

While we strongly object to the use of a site-specific amendment to abandon large and old tree protections at such a scale and at a stage in the process where no site specific project proposals have been submitted, we also recognize the possible benefits of well-planned geothermal development in our region. Newberry geothermal projects offer Central Oregon the potential to become a leader in sustainable energy, while respecting the boundaries of the National Monument that LandWatch and other Central Oregonians worked hard to create. We urge the Forest Service to be thoughtful in its management of all forest resources in the pursuit of this new, promising, energy source.



I. Project Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is “to respond to a request from the BLM, for the Forest Service to consider whether to consent or deny leasing of geothermal nominated parcels,” and the need is “to determine if National Forest System lands are suitable for leasing and to identify appropriate stipulations or project design criteria for those lands” (Draft EA at 2). While we do not object to geothermal development in appropriately sited areas *per se*, we do question the need for an additional 24,682 acres of National Forest for geothermal development adjacent to the 6,174 acres available for lease based on the 2014 Newberry Geothermal Consent to Lease Final Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact, and with thousands of additional acres also already available for leasing on the Deschutes National Forest.

In combination with the 2014 Consent to Lease parcels, this Proposed Action would fully encircle the southern end of the National Monument with lands open to geothermal leasing. We question the need for development this close to the monument boundary, particularly when ongoing exploratory projects have already elicited promising results for Enhanced Geothermal Systems further from the National Monument itself. In the context of the current Administration’s push toward “energy dominance,”² we continue to have reservations about making this much area available to lease without a more nuanced and strategic long-term geothermal development plan.

In addition to questioning the proximity to the monument, it's unclear why so many additional acres are being proposed for potential leasing. There are around 20,000 acres on the Deschutes National Forest currently available for geothermal development. Compared to other energy infrastructure, geothermal generally occupies a relatively small surface footprint. For example, the two existing geothermal projects on the caldera have developed around 60 acres, a fraction of a percent of the acres available. In other words, there is currently still ~20,000 acres available for geothermal leasing on the Deschutes National Forest, an area that could accommodate more than 300 projects of similar size to the current geothermal infrastructure developed. The EA has failed to demonstrate why additional acres are needed.

II. Inadequate Range of Alternatives

The Forest Service must ensure that it is fully complying with the statutory requirements of NEPA. Importantly, the statutory requirements include analyzing a range of alternatives to the

² Executive Order 14154, “Unleashing American Energy.” January 20, 2025.
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/unleashing-american-energy/>



proposed action, including a No Action alternative.³ This project only includes a Proposed Action, without analysis of a No Action alternative or any other action alternatives.

A No Action alternative is necessary to compare the potential impacts of the Proposed Action against how geothermal leasing and development might progress without consenting to lease any of the BLM's requested 29,477 acres. At minimum, the Forest Service should analyze an action alternative involving consenting to lease a smaller number of acres—perhaps in line with the roughly 6,000 acres the Forest Service consented to lease in 2014—and without a Forest Plan amendment to allow removal of trees ≥ 21 " dbh.

III. Inadequate Effects Analysis

Draft EA engages in a confusing and somewhat arbitrary exercise of deciding whether and to what extent this proposed action has any anticipated effects. The Scope of Analysis Section says that "This project proposes to allocate National Forest System lands as open or closed to geothermal leasing, neither of which have any effects because no ground-disturbing activities are authorized from the leasing action itself" (Draft EA at 4). It goes on to describe a "reasonably foreseeable development scenario" that outlines four basic steps in geothermal development, noting that while the scenario is a "general evaluation of the types of impacts that may occur on the Forest, it cannot predict the magnitude or extent of these impacts" (Draft EA at 4).

Some of the potential activities in various development phases include drilling, site clearing, construction of access roads or trails, fluid injection, construction of sumps, and reclamation activities (Draft EA at 4). Despite identifying these activities, the Draft EA fails to analyze and disclose reasonably foreseeable effects of these specific activities and related foreseeable impacts, including transmission lines, road infrastructure, fire risks, impacts to water resources, and direct habitat degradation or harm to species.

In part, the inadequate analysis is the result of a Determination of Analysis Reliance ("DAR"), in which the Forest Service has determined that it may rely in part on the 2014 Newberry Geothermal Consent to Lease project, which applied to roughly 6,000 acres of mostly adjacent parcels on Newberry. The 2026 Draft EA is thus relying on a 12-year-old analysis of, among other topics, minerals and geology, recreation, scenic resources, wildlife, botany, fisheries and water resources, and air quality (Draft EA at 6). While the proximity and functional similarities between this Consent to Lease and the 2014 Consent to Lease may mean some analysis reliance is reasonable, the Forest Service has not adequately considered how population growth, drought, increased tourism, declining groundwater, and climate change may have affected many of these aspects of the human environment. We urge the Forest Service to further analyze and disclose

³ 42 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(C)(iii).



reasonably foreseeable direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of these areas and of those areas not contemplated under the DAR.

Equally concerning is the lack of consultation with USFWS related to whitebark pine, which is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (“ESA”). The Draft EA asserts that the proposed action “would have no effect on ESA threatened, endangered or proposed plant species, or Regional Forester sensitive species. Because the “no effect” standard under Endangered Species Act Section 7(a)(2) is met, consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is not required” (Draft EA at 7). The Draft EA then immediately goes on to say that the reasonably foreseeable development scenario “could affect whitebark pine and pumice moonwort plant species. In this scenario equipment could break, crush, trample whitebark pine seedlings, saplings, or mature trees, pumice moonwort, or other undocumented sensitive plants” (Draft EA at 7). Given this likelihood, and the known presence of whitebark pine in at least two of the proposed parcels, ESA consultation will be required prior to any development, and would be useful to informing more functional leasing stipulations. We urge the forest service to engage the USFWS in consultation on whitebark pine during the consent to lease phase, and as early as possible prior to ground-disturbing activities.

More broadly, the Draft EA engages in circular reasoning that both acknowledges and deflects possible effects, and therefore abdicates and defers establishment of an adequate environmental baseline and subsequent effects analysis. Refusing to engage with the likely effects of leasing for geothermal development at this point leaves the public—and the agency itself—with only a partial understanding of long-term, landscape scale impacts. We request a more coordinated, strategic, and transparent approach that clarifies the overarching development vision and goals, sets clear sideboards, and allows the public to meaningfully respond to development proposals before they reach a potentially rushed agency approval process for site-specific projects.

IV. Support for No Surface Occupancy and Controlled Surface Use Stipulations

We strongly support the No Surface Occupancy, Controlled Surface Use, and Timing Limitations Stipulations as applied across the parcels the Forest Service is proposing to consent to lease. Given the extent of No Surface Occupancy and Controlled Surface Use Stipulations on Parcel 9 and the proximity of the parcel to Paulina Lake, we request that the Forest Service consider withholding consent for leasing to Parcel 9 (Controlled Surface Use Maps at 8; No Surface Occupancy Maps at 8).

V. Support for Withholding Consent for Parcels 14 and 15

We strongly support the Draft EA’s proposal to withhold consent for parcels 14 and 15. Any proposal to lease geothermal resources within Newberry National Volcanic Monument would be



contrary to both the statutory directives of the Newberry National Volcanic Monument Act and the Monument planning direction to protect surface resources within the Monument boundary.

VI. Inappropriate and Arbitrary Forest Plan Amendment

Amending the Forest Plan to eliminate Eastside Screens protections on nearly 25,000 acres as part of issuing a consent to lease is inappropriate and arbitrary. The Draft EA repeatedly claims that the proposal will have no effect because the decision “does not authorize any ground disturbing or site-specific activities. Its sole purpose is to determine whether the nominated parcels of National Forest System Lands are available for geothermal leasing” (Draft EA at 1). Yet, it goes on to claim that an amendment to the Eastside Screens portion of the Deschutes Forest Plan “is needed to meet the purpose and need of the project and would result in the potential removal and/or sale of live trees 21 inches diameter at breast height and greater within the nominated parcels” (Draft EA at 3). This is a direct contradiction: in no way does determining whether parcels are available for geothermal leasing—the “sole purpose” of this project—necessitate the removal of protections for trees ≥ 21 inches.

The Draft EA further states that “It is not possible for reasonably foreseeable geothermal exploration and development activities to avoid all trees 21 inches and greater” (Draft EA at 3). Without any analysis of the existing location and extent of trees ≥ 21 ” dbh within the proposed lease parcels, this is speculative and baseless. This also implies that the potential effects of consenting to lease parcels are specifically distinguishable for trees ≥ 21 ” dbh in a way that is not true for, *e.g.*, whitebark pine, scenic impacts, or cultural resources, despite the Draft EA’s repeated claims that there will be no effects on any of those elements of the project area.

The push for a site-specific amendment to eliminate the 21” rule implies that there is a set of known and/or reasonably foreseeable impacts of the proposed action, which in turn would imply effects on other resources and would require a robust effects analysis in the EA. Without specific proposed actions beyond consenting to lease, however, there is no need to do a Forest Plan amendment for potential ground disturbing activities yet to be proposed in the consent to lease acres. How does the Forest Service know that it will be impossible to avoid cutting 21” trees when it seems to not have any other information about ground-disturbing activities in the 29,744 acres the BLM has requested to lease?

The Forest Service cannot have it both ways: if the Proposed Action has no effects, then there is no basis from which to claim a need to amend the Forest Plan. If the Proposed Action has known, specific, reasonably foreseeable effects, then a project at this scale requires an Environmental Impact Statement to adequately analyze all possible impacts. Further, the 2014 Consent to Lease that informs this 2026 Consent to Lease did not propose any site-specific amendments, which calls into question the need to do so here.



If cutting trees greater than 21” dbh is truly unavoidable, which this Draft EA does not demonstrate, the more appropriate stage to consider Forest Plan amendments is during the NEPA analysis at the project level. Otherwise, this gives carte blanche to remove some of the last remaining large, old trees on the Deschutes National Forest, which will have cumulative effects that this Draft EA entirely fails to consider or examine. We ask that the Forest Service remove any proposed Forest Plan amendments in the Final EA.

VII. Request for Public Input During Future Site-Specific NEPA Processes

The baseline information and analysis in the Draft EA at the consent to lease stage are inadequate to support robust public input on geothermal project development proposals. For all future site-specific analyses on any parcels ultimately leased for geothermal development, we request that the Forest Service offer an opportunity for public comment prior to authorizing the proposed use. We request public notice and comment opportunities regardless of the level of NEPA analysis employed, including Categorical Exclusions.

VIII. Pre-Decisional Administrative Review

The Draft EA states that, “This project and the associated EA, Finding of No Significant Impact and Decision Notice may be subject to the revised objection process if the final 36 CFR 218 rule is published before the project’s objection period is initiated. Otherwise, this project will follow the objection process established prior to the proposed rule” (Draft EA at 1). The final revised rule was posted to the Federal Register October 13, 2026,⁴ meaning that the revision will go into effect 30 days later, potentially preceding this project’s objection process.

Regardless of the pre-decisional administrative review rules in place at the start of this project’s objection period, we urge the Deschutes National Forest to adhere to the spirit of the objection process by holding an objection resolution meeting. In the recent past, objection periods and associated objection resolution meetings have been critical to achieving workable compromises on projects proposed within the Deschutes National Forest.

IX. Tribal Consultation

The Draft EA states that consultation with the Klamath Tribes, Burns Paiute Tribe, and Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs was initiated in June of 2026. The Forest Service must engage in meaningful government-to-government consultation and uphold the respective Tribes’ reserved Treaty Rights in the course of this project. The Forest Service must ensure additional

⁴ 2026-20890 (91 FR 64760).



consultation occurs if future site-specific, ground-disturbing projects are proposed on the potentially leased acres considered in the Proposed Action.

X. Conclusion

We continue to believe that geothermal energy, particularly the emerging Enhanced Geothermal Systems in testing at Newberry, may offer promising opportunities for Central Oregon and the Pacific Northwest more broadly. We urge the Forest Service to move forward thoughtfully with consenting to lease parcels and with any future site-specific project analysis and approval. In particular, we urge the Deschutes National Forest not to use the consent to lease process as a pretext for logging trees $\geq 21"$ prior to any site-specific proposals or analyses.

Thank you for considering these comments. Please retain LandWatch on your outreach list for this project and please ensure that the comment reading room for the Draft EA is available to the public at the conclusion of this comment period on October 19, 2026.

Sincerely,



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