

Center for Responsible Forestry
P.O. Box 7504, Tacoma, WA 98417
Phone: (360) 544-6510
Email: info@c4rf.org

November 1, 2021

To: Board of Natural Resources
MS 47000
Olympia, WA 98504-7000
Submitted via email: bnr@dnr.wa.gov

Re: Statement of Opposition to "Point Blank" Timber Sale

Dear Chair Franz and Board Members,

In evaluating its progress toward meeting the habitat objectives of the 1997 HCP, DNR has repeatedly argued that age is not as important as stand structure, and that younger forests can be managed to accelerate the development of old growth characteristics. In their report on meeting older forest targets, prepared earlier this year, Mike Buffo and Allen Estep cite the following passage from the HCP:

"If and when it can be shown that appropriate structure can be obtained at a different age, different age classes may be used."¹

Buffo and Estep further cite the 2004 Sustainable Harvest FEIS, which states that:

"Age class is not a sufficient indicator of stand structure, nor is it a satisfactory indicator of ecological functioning" because "many factors affect the rate at which a stand develops, including site conditions, tree genetics, the tree species used to initiate regeneration after harvest, the density of the new trees, natural disturbance, and management activities."

This argument forms the basis for DNR's claim that they can meet the fully functional stand structure objectives of the HCP and 1997 Biological Opinion for the HCP by the year 2096.

Now DNR is trying to argue that the structural characteristics of the stand are irrelevant, and that the proposed Point Blank timber sale is justified based on stand age. According to the response we received from DNR's Pacific Cascade Region Office to our SEPA comments, the stands proposed for harvest do not qualify for deferment or protection because they are only about 85 years old, and:

"Douglas-fir on site 1 ground can easily achieve heights of 200' or more as they approach 100 years of age."

¹ See DNR. 2021. Identifying Stands to Meet Older Forest Targets in Western Washington, Allen Estep and Mike Buffo.

The 1997 Intraservice Biological Opinion for the HCP clearly sets a lower threshold of 150 years as the minimum amount of time that is required for any stand to enter the fully functional stage of development.² This minimum age threshold is repeated throughout the Biological Opinion, in the HCP, and in multiple other environmental impact statements and planning documents prepared by DNR. However, we agree with DNR that maintaining and restoring stand structures that provide suitable habitat for sensitive species that are associated with late successional forests is central to meeting the objectives of the HCP, and that stands that exhibit these characteristics should be considered as potentially contributing to fully functional stand structure objectives, regardless of their age.

The stands that are proposed for harvest in Units 1, 2, and 3 of the Point Blank timber sale are populated by dozens of trees that are close to four feet in diameter and 200 feet tall. These forests already exhibit the characteristics of forests in the later, structurally complex stages of development, as shown in the attached photographs, and as DNR intimates in their response to our SEPA comments.

Furthermore, the origin dates reported by DNR are often inaccurate. Origin dates of older, naturally regenerated forests are difficult to determine, because they are un-even aged, structurally complex, and patchy. The 1951 aerial photo of the area clearly shows that the areas proposed for harvest were occupied by mature forests with closed canopies. It is reasonable to speculate that the stands visible in the 1951 aerial photo may have originated in the 1910's or 1920's.

Regardless of whether these stands originated in 1910 or 1935, they represent a small and disappearing fraction of DNR's total land base in southwestern Washington. DNR forest inventory raster data indicate that only 3.5% of the South Coast planning unit outside of the Olympic National Forest is covered by forests that are over 60 years old. Stands as old as those found in the Point Blank timber sale occupy only about 1% of the planning unit, which includes the Chehalis River Basin, the Quinault River, and all of the rivers and streams that drain to Willapa Bay.

It is remarkable that so little natural forest is left in this part of the state. The South Coast HCP planning unit is a diverse area that spans 400 square miles and crosses the boundaries of eleven different ecoregions. Most of the older, native forest that remains in the South Coast HCP planning unit is located on lands managed by DNR. For example, in the Upper Chehalis River watershed, where the Point Blank timber sale is located, more than 80% of all forests over 80 years of age are located on lands managed by DNR. As noted in previous letters submitted to the Board of Natural Resources, many of these forests are currently scheduled to be logged.

These remaining older, un-planted blocks of native forest have the potential to play a critical role in preserving the genetic, biological, and ecological legacies of the eleven ecoregions that intersect the South Coast HCP planning unit. The Multispecies Conservation Strategy of the HCP specifically directs DNR to provide suitable habitat for "unlisted animal species of concern and other unlisted animal species". The strategy names a total of 62 animal species of concern, but allows that other species are likely to be added to the list, because it is "difficult to predict which species are at the brink of 'at risk'". Each species has its own unique habitat requirements, and the use of indicator or keystone species such as spotted owls or murrelets as biodiversity surrogates is no longer generally accepted as a valid strategy

² See USFWS. 1997. Intra-Service concurrence memorandum and Biological Opinion for the Washington Department of Natural Resources Habitat Conservation Plan. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Lacey, WA. January, 1997, pp. 5-6, 14, 22, 23, and 66.

for ensuring that the habitat requirements of other species of concern are met.³ For example, areas set aside to provide habitat for spotted owls and murrelets are concentrated in areas where these species are most abundant, and not necessarily in larger blocks of older forest. This problem is acknowledged in the HCP, which states that "species-specific forest practices have become an inefficient and impractical means of attaining wildlife conservation objectives". Instead, the HCP dictates that Multispecies Conservation Strategy objectives be met through "forest management that provides a variety of well-distributed, interconnected habitats" in order to support the continued presence of suitable habitat for each species "over as much of its historic range as possible", thereby ensuring the "successful reproduction of wide-ranging unlisted species".

Policy for Sustainable Forests: "Older-Forest" Targets

The **Policy for Sustainable Forests** directs DNR to protect wildlife species and habitats by working to conserve biodiversity:⁴

An important trust objective is the conservation of upland, riparian, and aquatic wildlife species, including fish and their habitats, species listed as threatened and endangered, and non-listed species... with a focus on ecosystem sustainability and the conservation of biodiversity across forested landscapes.

The Policy for Sustainable Forests recognizes the **conservation of biodiversity** as a "**fundamental guiding principle for sustainable forest management**."⁵

In order to promote the conservation of biodiversity and protection of unlisted species, the Policy for Sustainable Forests lists as one of its intended outcomes to "meet a 10 percent to 15 percent older-forest target for each Western Washington HCP planning unit" within 70 to 100 years of the adoption of the HCP in 1997.

According to the Policy for Sustainable Forests:

DNR intends to actively manage structurally complex forests, especially those suitable stands in the botanically diverse stage of stand development, to achieve older-forest structures across 10-15 percent of each Western Washington HCP planning unit in 70-100 years. Older-forest structures that contribute to this target are represented by stands in the Niche Diversification or Fully Functional stage of stand development.

In the Policy for Sustainable Forests FEIS, the Board's preferred alternative "emphasizes that the 10 to 15 percent older-forest targets will be accomplished" within 70 to 100 years. DNR's HCP Implementation Procedures for Identifying and Managing Structurally Complex Forests (PR 14-004-046) dictate that the Department develop landscape level management strategies to achieve the 10 to 15 percent older-forest targets during the forest land planning process that will be conducted for each

³ See Lindenmayer, D.B. and Franklin, J.F. 2002. Conserving Forest Biodiversity: A Comprehensive Multiscaled Approach. Island Press, Washington.

⁴ See Intended Outcomes, p. 6, Policy for Sustainable Forests (DNR, 2006).

⁵ See Policy on Wildlife Habitat, p. 36, Policy for Sustainable Forests (DNR, 2006).

HCP planning unit. **Only after the 10 to 15 percent target is met** may structurally complex forest stands be considered for harvest activities.⁶

As stated above, stands that contribute to the older-forest target are defined in the Policy for Sustainable Forests as those that are in the **Niche Diversification** or **Fully Functional** stages of stand development. Robert Van Pelt divides forest stand development into eight stages (Table 1). The Niche Diversification and Fully Functional stages of development are the last stages of development, and equivalent to what we generally consider to be old growth. The HCP suggests that at least 150 years is required for a stand to enter the Fully Functional stage of development. According to Van Pelt, old growth characteristics begin to emerge after 175 to 250 years.

Most of the native forests that exist on state forestlands are in the Maturation I stage of development. The Maturation I development stage precedes the Maturation II, Niche Diversification, and Fully Functional development stages. Van Pelt developed a key that may be used to classify forests by development stage. This key is regularly used by DNR to identify stands to be deferred from harvest and protected as old growth. DNR policy dictates that stands must be in the either the Maturation II, Niche Diversification, or Fully Functional stage of development to qualify for protection under the Old Growth Timber Harvest Deferral and Protection policy (PR 14-004-045).

Stands in the Maturation I stage of development are defined by Van Pelt as those in which the dominant trees have reached 60-70% of their maximum height, and "tree crowns become more individualized to their own space, rather than intermingling with neighboring trees as they did when younger". Increased light levels in the understory allow shade-tolerant plants to emerge during this development stage.

Stands in the Maturation II stage of development are defined by as those in which the dominant trees have reached 80-90% of their maximum height, and the spatial, competition-based mortality process that were dominant in earlier stages of development shift to "mortality processes driven by fungi, wind, and insects." In this stage, Van Pelt states that the understory is "often fully recovered and remains so for all subsequent stages." According to Van Pelt, stands that are currently in this development stage, like those in later Niche Diversification and Fully Functional stages of development, pre-date European settlement. All of the stands that *currently* exhibit the characteristics of forests in Niche Diversification and Fully Functional development stages on lands managed by DNR pre-date European settlement.

In practice, these policies have done nothing to slow the clearcutting of older upland forests. The continued logging of some of the most biologically and structurally diverse forests in southwestern Washington is justified by DNR based on an obscure interpretation of the niche diversification stage of stand development that allows DNR to count stands that are currently as young as 45 years old as contributing toward meeting older-forest targets.⁷ By classifying 45-year old tree plantations as "older-forests", DNR is able to justify the clearcutting of native forests such as those found in the Point Blank timber sale.

⁶ See Policy for General Silvicultural Activity, p. 46, in Policy for Sustainable Forests (DNR, 2006).

⁷ Assumptions appears to be based on a report published by DNR in 1996, that is out-of-print and no longer available for download on the DNR website, entitled "A Pragmatic, Ecological Approach to Small Landscape Management" by S. Carey et. al.

Table 1. Stand Development Stages

Source: Van Pelt, R. 2007. Identifying Mature and Old Forests in Western Washington. Washington State Department of Natural Resources.

OG Guide	DNR Glossary	Essential Ecological process, elements and other notes
Cohort establishment phase	Ecosystem initiation	Establishment of cohort individuals
Canopy closure	Competitive exclusion: sapling exclusion	Canopy closes
Late canopy closure and early Biomass accumulation/stem exclusion	Competitive exclusion: pole exclusion	Inter-tree competition is the dominant ecological process. Live trees compete with each other for resources (light, water, nutrients). Loss of stems <2" dbh due to shading; Self pruning begins
Biomass accumulation /stem exclusion and early Maturation I	Competitive exclusion: large tree exclusion	Inter-tree competition is the dominate ecological process. Live trees compete with each other for resources (light, water, nutrients). Loss of stems <5" dbh due to shading.
Maturation I	Understory development And Botanically diverse	A shift of the dominate mortality processes occurs from inter-tree competition to stochastic events (disease, wind, fire, pests) resulting in stem loss of larger trees (dominant and co-dominant) and a loss of shade. Openings in the canopy appear, allowing regeneration of shade tolerant species. High rate of biomass accumulation is maintained. In later stages, rate of live biomass accumulation begins to decrease. Continued understory development and stochastic stem loss. Stages generally lacking large down woody debris and large snags.
Maturation II	Botanically diverse	Development of additional species in lower and mid canopy. Large down woody material and large snags are generally absent or at low levels.
Vertical diversification	Niche diversification	Development of additional species in lower and mid canopy to abundant additional species at all canopy levels and increasing levels of large down woody debris and large snags.
Horizontal diversification	Fully functional	More stochastic stem losses create larger gaps. High accumulation of large woody debris, large snags.

Development stages used in this guide from Franklin et al. 2002. DNR stages adapted from Carey et al 1996 and Franklin et al 2002.

Habitat Conservation Plan: Fully Functional Stand Structure Objective

The 1997 Intra-Service Biological Opinion⁸ states that:

- A. *"The **HCP includes commitments** to provide [among other outcomes] **certain percentages** of stand structural classes from open forest to **fully functional complex forests.**"*
- B. *"Timber harvest... must be consistent with the goals and objectives to of the HCP to develop and maintain these habitat types."*

The HCP classifies forests into six development or stand structural stages: open, regeneration, pole, closed, complex, and fully functional. The Biological Opinion establishes specific stand structural targets that require DNR to develop or maintain **12 to 22% of each HCP planning unit** as fully functional forest by the year 2096. The provision of specific percentages of stand structural stages is described as necessary to "ensure that the full range of upland forest habitats are available for use by species in the HCP area" and that stand structural stages "not provided by other conservation strategies of the HCP are present" within each HCP planning unit. Fully functional forests are defined in the Biological Opinion as conifer forests that are at least 150 years old. DNR's own internal analysis indicates that DNR will not come close to meeting this objective within the South Coast HCP planning unit by 2096. According to DNR, existing conservation areas will contribute only between 3.8% to 6.3% fully functional stand structure objective by 2096.⁹

DNR argues that it can continue to harvest existing older, structurally complex forests, because approximately 10% of lands covered under the HCP within the South Coast planning unit will reach 150 years of age by the year 2110. This is not consistent with the requirements of the incidental take permit as described above. By its own admission, DNR is not on track to meet satisfy the fully functional stand structure objectives of its incidental take permit, and needs to exclude other areas that are capable of contributing to this objective from timber harvest.

Furthermore, data obtained from DNR's Public Disclosure Office suggests that the vast majority lands that DNR has designated as contributing to fully functional stand structure objectives are located within riparian buffers and areas that have been classified as potentially unstable slopes. Areas classified as potentially unstable slopes occupy about 10% of the total land base, or about one-quarter of areas that DNR has identified as conservation areas that it claims contribute to fully functional stand structure or older-forest targets. As illustrated in Addendum A of our Joint Petition to the BNR, counting these areas toward older-forest targets is misleading, because they are rarely excluded from logging after they have been ground-truthed.

A strategy that relies so heavily on riparian corridors and unstable slopes to meet older-forest and fully functional stand structure objectives will result in a fragmented landscape that is subject to edge effects, lacks interior forest habitat, lacks large conifers, and is often dominated by alder and other early

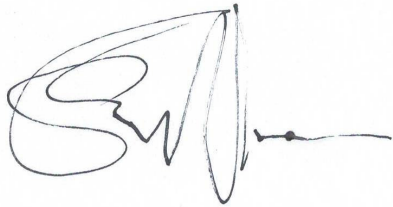
⁸ See USFWS. 1997. Intra-Service concurrence memorandum and Biological Opinion for the Washington Department of Natural Resources Habitat Conservation Plan. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Lacey, WA. January, 1997, pp. 5-6, 14, 22, 23, and 66.

⁹ See DNR. 2021. Identifying Stands to Meet Older Forest Targets in Western Washington, Allen Estep and Mike Buffo, p. 11, Table 5.

successional or invasive species. We believe this approach is both unrealistic, and inconsistent with the intent of the Multispecies Conservation Strategy and the objectives of the Policy for Sustainable Forests.

In summary, DNR has failed to develop a plan to meet the older-forest targets described in the general silvicultural strategy of the Policy for Sustainable Forests; has failed to implement the Multispecies Conservation Strategy of the HCP in the South Coast planning unit; and has failed to demonstrate that it can meet the stand structure objectives of its incidental take permit in the South Coast HCP planning unit. Instead of logging the oldest and most structurally complex forests that remain in the planning unit, we recommend that DNR focus on developing a management strategy to generate revenue for trust beneficiaries that conserves older forests, accelerates the development of fully functional forests, and is consistent with the requirements and objectives of DNR's Habitat Conservation Plan, the Intra-Service Biological Opinion for the HCP, PR 14-004-046, and the Policy for Sustainable Forests.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SK', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Stephen Kropp
Director

Attachments:

1. Photographs of Point Blank timber sale
2. Previous letters and responses from DNR Pacific Cascade and South Puget Sound Region offices concerning similar timber sales
3. June 2021 Chair Report on Older Forests Policy
4. Critical review of Halofsky-Buffo BNR Presentation
5. DNR Internal Memo entitled "Identifying Stands to Meet Older Forest Targets in Western Washington", May 11, 2021
6. Public records request, June 12, 2021
7. Joint Petition to the Board of Natural Resources, April 1, 2021