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August 10, 2021

Eric Wisch, DNR Pacific Cascade Region Manager

Via: SEPA Center

P.O. Box 47015

Olympia, Washington 98504-7015

sepacenter@dnr.wa.gov

Re: Green Thomas timber sale – SEPA comments (File No. 21-072703)

Dear Mr. Wisch,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the "Green Thomas" timber sale. This timber sale would clearcut close to 120 acres of naturally regenerated, century-old Douglas fir and hemlock forest, including hundreds of Douglas fir trees that exceed four feet in diameter and are probably well over 100 years old. The timber sale would also harvest approximately one to two acres of old growth, including a number of huge snags, and hemlock trees that approach six feet in diameter. Branch stubs or scars are generally absent on the older hemlock, and epicormic branches are apparent on the upper stems, which suggests that these trees originated prior to 1850, according to Van Pelt's key to identifying old growth¹ (see attached photographs). Although the SEPA checklist states that trees with large diameters were favored as leave trees, very few of the larger Douglas fir, and *none* of the old growth hemlock trees, appear to be located in designated leave tree areas or marked as leave trees.

The proposed timber sale targets some of the best remaining older forest habitat in Southwestern Washington for commercial harvest. Clearcutting of old growth and century-old, naturally regenerated forests is clearly at odds with FSC standards², and the intent of the Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) and the Policy for Sustainable forests to conserve and promote the development of older forest characteristics within the Columbia HCP planning unit. This and similar timber sales in the area also undermine DNR's ability to meet their established fully functional forest targets for the Columbia HCP planning unit. DNR is obligated under the Policy for Sustainable Forests, the Department's procedures for Identifying and Managing Structurally

¹ See Van Pelt, R. 2007. Identifying Mature and Old Forests in Western Washington. Washington State Department of Natural Resources, Olympia, WA.

² See Forest Stewardship Council, 2015. FSC Principles and Criteria for Forest Stewardship, Principle 6.9, p. 15: "The Organization shall not convert natural forest to plantations" except when that conversion will "produce clear, substantial, additional, secure long-term conservation benefits in the management unit."

Complex Forests (PR 14-004-046), and the Multi-species Conservation Strategy of the HCP to work toward maintaining or restoring "fully functional forests" on 10 to 15 percent of lands covered by the HCP. DNR commonly refers to the 10 to 15 percent target as the "older-forest target". 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.

PR 14-004-046 directs DNR to 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 HCP planning unit. **Only after the 10 to 15 percent target is met** may structurally complex forest stands be considered for harvest activities.³

DNR's incidental take permit requires that the Department work to maintain or restore between 12 to 22% of lands covered under the HCP within the Columbia HCP planning unit, and 9 to 17% of lands outside of spotted owl management units, to fully functional conditions by 2096.⁴ According to the Intra-Service Biological Opinion, it is necessary for DNR to provide a specific percent of fully functional forest to "ensure that stand structural stages not provided by other conservation strategies of the HCP are present in the HCP area."

According to the HCP (Table IV.14), and Table 11 of DNR's incidental take permit, at least 150 years is required for a stand to reach the "fully functioning" development stage. An analysis of the most recent combined origin forest resource information dataset suggests that **less than one percent** of lands within the Columbia planning unit currently meet this threshold.

It is commonly assumed, and has been stated previously by the Pacific Cascade Region Office, that old growth stands and structurally complex forests located in special ecological management areas (EMAs) such as spotted owl and marbled murrelet habitat, NRCAs, and natural areas, and riparian management zones (RMZs), will provide the fully functional habitat necessary to satisfy the 10 to 15 percent older forest target. Data obtained from DNR indicate that there are a total of almost 48,000 acres in the Columbia planning unit that are protected within one or more EMAs, and another 82,000 acres contained within RMZs. However, according to the Department's combined origin resource inventory data, only 14,387 acres are old enough to contribute to the 10 to 15 percent target within the Columbia HCP planning unit by 2097. This represents about 5% of DNR managed forestlands within the planning unit. Not only does this fall far short of the 10 to 15 percent target, according to data obtained from the Public Disclosure Office, the Region currently has plans to sell 1,935 additional acres of timber in this age class over the next ten years. This would bring the percentage of the landscape that is capable of reaching the fully functioning stage of development by 2097 down to 4%. Our calculations indicate that only about half of that area, or approximately 7,521 acres (less than 3% of the planning unit as a whole), is protected within an EMA or RMZ.

DNR's combined origin forest in inventory data, which is based to a large extent on the FRIS 2.0 DAP-based data, is known to under-estimate stand age in the Columbia planning unit, and to under-represent the contribution of riparian areas to older forest targets. To calculate an upper estimate

³ See Policy for General Silvicultural Activity, p. 46, in Policy for Sustainable Forests (DNR, 2006).

⁴ 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. 14, 22, 23, and 66.

of the maximum potential contribution of the EMAs and RMZs to fully functional stand structure objectives, we merged the combined origin polygons with the old plot-based data and newer 2017 DAP-based raster dataset (FRIS 3.0), by first converting the raster dataset to polygons using a pattern recognition routine in ArcGIS, and then taking the maximum value of each of the three datasets for each raster cell. Results suggest that up to 34,714 acres of land within an EMA or RMZ, representing approximately 12% of the planning unit as a whole, may be capable of reaching the fully functioning stage of development by 2097. The actual attainment value probably falls somewhere between 3% and 12%.

Based on these results, it appears **unlikely** that existing EMAs and RMZs are sufficient to meet fully functional stand structure objectives for the Columbia HCP planning unit. PR 14-004-046 dictates that:

The identification and review of landscape level management strategies to achieve the 10 to 15 percent older forest target will be completed during the forest land planning process that will be conducted for each HCP planning unit.

To date, no forest land plan has been completed for the Columbia HCP planning unit. In the interim, PR-004-046 dictates that any proposal to harvest structurally complex forests **must be accompanied by:** a) an assessment of forest conditions using readily available information; b) an analysis of the known landscape management strategies and; c) role of the structurally complex stand in meeting older-forest targets. DNR made no attempt, in its SEPA checklist or elsewhere, to document how and why the proposed timber sale complies with these procedures.

The FPA indicates that the units of this sale are to be treated as even-aged harvest units. However, PR 14-004-046 dictates that:

*Harvest activities in older forest and other structurally complex stands designated as suitable to meet older forest targets **must enhance the older forest condition.***

As described above, the forests proposed for harvest already contain an abundance of large diameter trees and downed logs. The timber sale as presented in the FPA and SEPA checklist will not enhance older forest conditions or contribute to the development of fully functional forests.

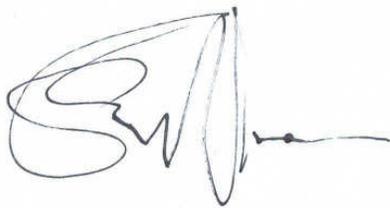
The Policy for Sustainable Forests and associated HCP implementation procedures constitute DNR's plan for implementing the HCP, and also serve as mitigation for timber harvest on lands covered by the HCP. Commercial harvest of the oldest and most biologically diverse native forests remaining in the Columbia HCP planning unit violates Board of Natural Resources approved policies and procedures intended to preserve and promote biodiversity and the development of fully functional forests. Although DNR has not designated the lands included in the Green Thomas timber sale as contributing to older-forest targets, the areas targeted for harvest obviously have the potential to contribute to the attainment of fully functional stand structure objectives in the Columbia HCP Planning Unit.

The clearcutting of forests most likely to contribute to fully functional stand structure objectives is part of a systematic pattern over the year and a half in which DNR has repeatedly ignored similar objections to other timber sales and allowed them to proceed to auction. This pattern suggests a

willful disregard of DNR's obligations to meet stand structure objectives described in the Policy for Sustainable Forests, PR 14-004-046, the Department's incidental take permit, and the Multi-species Conservation Strategy of the HCP. An analysis conducted by Thomas Laxson, the results of which were presented by Mike Buffo to the BNR in June, represents a belated attempt by DNR to demonstrate that the Department is on track to meet its older-forest targets. However, the analysis is deeply flawed, and based on a series of false and misleading assumptions that are easy disproven.⁵ The letter that we submitted to the BNR on July 1, 2021 (attached), which was written before we had time to thoroughly review all of the information that we received from the Public Disclosure Office,⁶ describes a few of the false assumptions underlying Mr. Laxson's analysis.

Because no forest land plan has been completed for the Columbia HCP planning unit in which the Green Thomas timber sale is located, and the SPEA checklist includes no analysis of the direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts of this and other planned timber sales in the Columbia HCP planning unit on DNR's ability to meet the 10 to 15 percent target, DNR has failed to comply with its substantive obligations under SEPA. In the absence of a plan to meet fully functioning stand structure objectives in the Columbia HCP planning unit, the forest practices application for the proposed project should be withdrawn. 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 preserves older forests, accelerates the development of fully functional forests, and is consistent with the requirements 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 blue ink, appearing to read 'SK', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Stephen Kropp
Director

Attachments:

1. Photographs of Green Thomas timber sale
2. Previous letters and responses from DNR Pacific Cascade Region 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

⁵ See attached internal memo written by Allen Estep and Mike Buffo, dated May 11, 2021.

⁶ See attached public records request, dated June 12, 2021.

Photos of Units 1 and 2

