



June 10, 2016

Michael Liu, District Ranger
Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest
Methow Valley Ranger District
24 West Chewuch Road
Winthrop, WA 98862

Re: Proposed Mission Restoration Project

Dear District Ranger Liu:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the scoping notice for the “Proposed Mission Restoration Project” in the Methow Valley Ranger District. As conservation and recreation focused non-profit organizations we have a strong interest in current and future management activities since our supporting members live, work, and play in and around the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. Please add our names and organizations to the contact list to receive any future public notices regarding this project.

We are very encouraged to see the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest considering ecosystem restoration on a large scale to address many of the factors that continue to degrade ecosystems. In general, we support ecosystem restoration. This is especially true for the plan components that preserve recreational opportunities, address water quality and aquatic habitats, improve watersheds and forest resiliency, and reduce overall road density by returning expensive and deteriorating forest roads to the wild.

Although there are a number of actions related to this project, our comments are solely focused on the actions related to roads and the transportation system.

We are aware of the many challenges the U.S. Forest Service faces with its oversized and under-maintained road system and have worked to help address some of the funding challenges. The agency’s road system was built decades ago - financed nearly 75% by federal appropriations - to support large-scale timber harvesting. Today, the road network continues to support forest management activities but also supports a strong recreation economy with at least 63% of Washingtonians participating in outdoor activities each year generating \$1.6 billion in local and state taxes¹. But road budgets do not support this change in use as funding levels dropped to 18% of what they were in 1990. The Forest Service is overwhelmed by significant management and ecological problems related to this deteriorating infrastructure. We recognize and support the need to make

¹ Outdoor Industry Association. The Outdoor Recreation Economy FactSheet. 2012.

decisions to adapt to modern day recreational interests, historical tribal and cultural needs, while also reducing aquatic and terrestrial impacts and lining up with realistic budgets. We appreciate your effort in working towards this balance.

I. Consider and apply the Okanogan-Wenatchee’s Travel Analysis Report identifying the Minimum Road System

The impacts from roads to water, fish, wildlife, and ecosystems are tremendous and well documented in scientific literature. Given that the Mission Restoration Project is considering changes to a number of miles of roads, and given its large geographic scale, this is precisely the type of project where the Forest Service should refer to the Travel Analysis Report (TAR) for the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, and identify the Minimum Road System (MRS).² We urge the Forest Service to carefully evaluate the proposed project and its alternatives through this lens. This type of large-scale project is the perfect opportunity to begin making on-the-ground progress towards an economically and environmentally sustainable road network.

To address its sustainable and deteriorating road system, the Forest Service promulgated the Roads Rule (referred to as “subpart A”) in 2001.³ The Roads Rule created two important obligations for the agency. One obligation is to identify unneeded roads to prioritize for decommissioning or to be considered for other uses.⁴ Another obligation is to identify the MRS needed for safe and efficient travel and for the protection, management, and use of National Forest system lands.⁵ The MRS is the road system, determined by the Forest Service, as needed to:

- Meet resource and other management objectives adopted in the relevant land and resource management plan,
- Meet applicable statutory and regulatory requirements,
- Reflect long-term funding expectations, and
- Ensure that the identified system minimizes adverse environmental impacts associated with road construction, reconstruction, decommissioning, and maintenance.

The goal of subpart A is “to maintain an appropriately sized and environmentally sustainable road system that is responsive to ecological, economic, and social concerns.”⁶

The Forest Service’s Washington Office has issued a series of directive memoranda that outline how the agency expects forests to comply with subpart A.⁷ First, each forest was required to submit its TAR by September 30, 2015. Next, pursuant to its own regulations and directive memoranda, the

² 36 C.F.R. § 212.5(b)(1) (“For each national forest . . . the responsible official must identify the minimum road system needed for safe and efficient travel and for administration, utilization, and protection of National Forest System lands.”).

³ 66 Fed. Reg. 3206 (Jan. 12, 2001); 36 C.F.R. part 212, subpart A

⁴ 36 C.F.R. § 212.5(b)(2).

⁵ Id. § 212.5(b)(1). In promulgating its rules, the Forest Service indicated that “[t]he requirement to identify roads for decommissioning is ‘[e]qually important’ as the overall identification of the minimum road system.” *Center for Sierra Nevada v. U.S. Forest Service*, 832 F. Supp. 2d 1138 (E.D. Cal. 2011) (quoting 66 Fed. Reg. at 3207).

⁶ See 2012 Weldon Memo at 1 (“The national forest road system of the future must continue to provide needed access for recreation and resource management, as well as support watershed restoration and resource protection to sustain healthy ecosystems.”). See also Memorandum from Joel Holtrop, U.S. Forest Service Washington Office, to Regional Foresters *et al.* (Nov. 10, 2010) (hereafter, 2010 Holtrop Memo) (“Though this process points to a smaller road system than our current one, the national forest road system of the future must provide needed access for recreation and resource management and support watershed restoration and resource protection to sustain healthy ecosystems and ecological connectivity.”).

⁷ 2010 Holtrop Memo; 2012 Weldon Memo; Memorandum from Leslie Weldon, U.S. Forest Service Washington Office, to Regional Foresters *et al.* (Dec. 17, 2013) (hereafter, 2013 Weldon Memo) (supplementing and reaffirming the 2012 Weldon Memo).

Forest Service should consider the valid portions of its TAR and begin to determine the MRS in its analysis of site-specific projects of the appropriate geographic size under NEPA.⁸ By analyzing whether a proposed project is consistent with the relevant portions of the TAR, and considering the MRS factors under 36 CFR 212.5(b)(1), the Forest Service expects each forest to identify the MRS for particular forest segments.⁹

Now is the time for the Forest Service to take the next step under subpart A: identify the MRS through site-specific projects subject to NEPA.¹⁰ As you move forward with developing your draft Environmental Analysis, we urge you to consider the findings and recommendations from your Travel Analysis Report, identify the MRS, and incorporate appropriate actions that improve watershed and aquatic health in this area.

II. Ensure overall watershed restoration objectives are met and are in-line with economic constraints

As forest road users and conservationists, we do understand that a strategic reduction in road miles does not necessarily equate to a loss of access. There are some roads that are already functionally closed, either due to washouts, lack of use, or natural vegetation growth. There are other roads that receive limited use and are costly to maintain. It is our belief that resources can be better spent on roads we use frequently instead of spreading resources so thin to all roads. This is why we support the careful analysis and decision to decommission or close specific roads.

The National Forest road system is in a serious state of disrepair. The Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest is no exception, with nearly 8,000 miles of system roads (almost as many miles as going from Seattle to London and back), the required maintenance need of \$10.2 million per year which far exceeds annual maintenance budget of \$1.8 million per year.¹¹ This results in a significant backlog of deferred maintenance needs of over \$158 million on this forest. The existing road system is not reflective of current or long-term funding expectations and is not sustainable.

Figure 3 shows that there are 136 miles of road in this area (including unauthorized and closed roads) of which 33 miles will be decommissioned post-project. This is a 24% reduction in the overall road footprint in this area. We encourage you to outline in your Draft EA, how this reduces overall road density in this area resulting in specific benefits to terrestrial and aquatic species and water quality. It will also be helpful to show how this helps bring the road system more in balance with your road maintenance budget.

We did note that there are 4 miles of currently closed roads and 1 mile of unauthorized road that will be opened to the public post-project. We would like to see more information about these roads in order to understand the benefit of upgrading these roads for use.

We are pleased to see that six locations for fish passage will be restored and look forward to learning more about these benefits in the draft EA.

⁸ See 2012 Weldon Memo at 2 (directing forests to “analyze the proposed action and alternatives in terms of whether, per 36 CFR 212.5(b)(1), the resulting [road] system is needed”).

⁹ Id. (“The resulting decision [in a site-specific project] identifies the MRS and unneeded roads for each subwatershed or larger scale”).

¹⁰ See 2012 Weldon Memo (“The next step in identification of the MRS is to use the travel analysis report to develop proposed actions to identify the MRS . . . at the scale of a 6th code subwatershed or larger. Proposed actions and alternatives are subject to environmental analysis under NEPA. Travel analysis should be used to inform the environmental analysis.”).

¹¹ Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest Travel Analysis Report, July 2015

We will also be looking in the draft EA for a detailed description of the roads that will be upgraded and used during project implementation, the duration that these additional roads (if any) will be used, and the sequence for restoration and maintenance.

III. Ensure that roads targeted for storage or decommissioning do not provide recreational access or infrastructure

According to Figure 3 in the Scoping Notice, there are currently 56 miles of roads open to the public. Post-project, 56 miles of roads continue to be open to the public – zero net loss of access miles. However, five mile of currently open roads (maintenance level 2 or higher) will be either closed or decommissioned.

Based on the Draft Proposed Transportation Plan for the project (5/25/16), it appears that none of the road segments listed as changing from open to closed or decommission provide any existing recreational access.

IV. Treatment of Non-System Roads

The scoping notice identifies 15 miles of unauthorized roads in the project area. We agree with the proposal to decommission 11 of those miles. Our understanding is that these roads have been obliterated by design or by nature over the past several decades and no longer provide vehicle access. It is reasonable to assume that absence regular maintenance, these road segments pose aquatic risks to the watershed. Decommissioning these segments not only addresses any aquatic risks but also does not add to the already significant maintenance backlog for the Forest.

We are concerned to see that 3 miles of unauthorized roads are proposed to be added to the road system as Level 1 (closed/storage). No rationale for this action is given in the scoping notice. We can only assume that the rationale for adding roads to the system is for future timber access. However, given the scope of vegetation management as part of this restoration project, any timber related actions should be done as part of this project. These three miles of unauthorized roads should be decommissioned to address aquatic risks and avoid future maintenance costs.

We are also concerned that 1 mile of unauthorized road is proposed to be open to the public post project. There is no justification for this action in the scoping notice and for the same reasons above, we believe this unauthorized road segment should be decommissioned rather than added to the road system. In rare circumstances, such as mitigating aquatic risks or improving habitat connectivity for wildlife, it may make sense to add a small section of an unauthorized road, but the justification should be very clearly spelled out in the upcoming draft EA.

V. Clarify conflicting data for Transportation Proposal Summary

We would like to point out that the *Figure 3 Transportation Proposal Summary (in miles)* in the scoping document (Pg. 4) does not correspond with the Draft Proposed Transportation Plan dated 5/26/16 and available on the agency's web site. We assume that both documents are calculating system

and unauthorized road segments within the project area. However, almost none of the totals correspond:

Transportation Proposal Summary (Scoping Notice vs. Proposed Transportation Plan)				
Road Type	Existing	Post Project Status		
		Open to Public	Closed to Public	Decommissioned
Open NFS Roads	56 (34)	51 (27)	3 (4)	2 (3)
Closed NFS Roads	65 (12)	4 (4)	41 (8)	20 (.2)
Unauthorized Roads	15 (25)	1 (6)	3 (5)	11 (15)
Total:	136 (71)	56 (37)	47 (16)	33 (18)

Black = Data from Figure 3 of the Scoping Notice (Pg 4)

Red = Data from [Draft Proposed Transportation Plan](#) on Agency website

Depending on which data is accurate these numbers tell very different stories. It will be essential that the agency clarifies the summary and road segment break down of these numbers before the EA is released. The comments in this letter assume that the data in Figure 3 of the scoping notice is correct.

The following questions arise based on the two different sets of numbers:

- Are the total miles of roads decommissioned in this project 33 or 18?
- Is the net difference of open roads in the project area 0 or +3?
- Are the total miles of unauthorized roads in the project area 15 or 25?
- Are 4 or 11 miles of unauthorized roads planned to be added to the road system?
- Is there 1 or 6 miles of unauthorized roads planned to be opened and maintained for public use?

VI. Provide detailed description of how “high risk” roads will be addressed and whether there are any changes to road objective maintenance levels.

The Travel Analysis Report should have determined, across the forest, which roads are “high risk” for aquatic and terrestrial resources. If these “high risk” roads have “low benefit” (i.e. access need), then they should be decommissioned. If these “high risk” roads have “high benefit”, then they should be prioritized for strong maintenance, storm proofing, BMP installations, and/or mitigation. Measures need to be taken that ensure the risks to aquatics is eliminated or significantly reduced. “Medium risk” roads should not be overlooked, either. For years, the Forest Service has failed to meet its obligations under the Clean Water Act and Washington’s Forest and Fish Regulations for addressing water quality impacts from roads¹². Now that the risk information is available and analyzed, we would expect to see actions to address the problem areas identified with the goal of minimizing adverse environmental impacts.

In the Draft EA, we recommend that the Agency take a second look at risk analysis from the Travel Analysis Report to determine if there are additional high/medium risk roads with low/medium benefit that should be considered for closure or decommissioning. In addition, the specific measures that will be used to eliminate and/or reduce the “high risks” should be clearly outlined. To the extent that the

¹² The USFS signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Washington State Department of Ecology to meet responsibilities under the Federal and State Water Quality Laws in 2000. By 2005, all Forest Service roads in Washington State should have had completed (1) road management plans based on road analysis or road assessments to determine water quality effects and (2) an implementation schedule to address those issues.

final decision in this project differs from what is recommended in the Travel Analysis Report, the Forest Service should provide an explanation for that inconsistency.

The Forest Service should prioritize road decommissioning in this project to enhance landscape connectivity and ecological integrity based on:

- Effectiveness in reducing fragmentation, connecting un-roaded and lightly-roaded areas, and improving stream segments, with a focus on inventoried roadless areas, important watersheds, and other sensitive ecological and conservation areas and corridors;
- Benefit to species and habitats, including restoring aquatic and terrestrial habitats and habitat connections;
- Addressing impaired or at-risk watersheds;
- Achieving motorized route density standards; and
- Enhancement of quiet recreation experiences.

The Forest Service should use the National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on National Forest System Lands (Volume 1, April 2012) to guide road management in determining the MRS. The BMP program “was developed to improve agency performance and accountability in managing water quality consistent with the Federal Clean Water Act (CWA) and State water quality programs” and “[c]urrent Forest Service policy directs compliance with required CWA permits and State regulations and requires the use of BMPs to control nonpoint source pollution to meet applicable water quality standards and other CWA requirements.”¹³ It directs forests to:

- Design the transportation system to meet long-term land management plan desired conditions, goals, and objectives for access rather than to access individual sites.
- Limit roads to the minimum practicable number, width, and total length consistent with the purpose of specific operations, local topography, geology, and climate to achieve land management plan desired conditions, goals, and objectives for access and water quality management.

The Forest Service should continue working to reduce sediment delivery from roads, improve or remove road crossings, and close or decommission roads that cannot be adequately maintained.

VII. The Forest Service should consider climate change impacts and forest roads.

A robust analysis under NEPA of the forest road system and its environmental and social impacts is especially critical in the context of climate change. As the CEQ’s recent draft guidance on addressing climate change in NEPA analyses recognizes, “[c]limate change can increase the vulnerability of a resource, ecosystem, human community, or structure, which would then be more susceptible to climate change and other effects and result in a proposed action’s effects being more environmentally damaging.”¹⁴ The draft CEQ guidance makes clear that “[s]uch considerations are squarely within the realm of NEPA, informing decisions on whether to proceed with and how to design the proposed action so as to minimize impacts on the environment, as well as informing possible adaptation

¹³ National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on National Forest System Lands (Volume 1, April 2012)

¹⁴ CEQ, Revised Draft Guidance for Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Climate Change Impacts (Dec. 18, 2014), page 22

measures to address these impacts, ultimately enabling the selection of smarter, more resilient actions.”¹⁵

Climate change intensifies the adverse impacts associated with roads. The Forest Service should consider the risk of increased disturbance when analyzing this proposed project. For example, as the warming climate alters species distribution and forces wildlife migration, landscape connectivity becomes even more critical to species survival and ecosystem resilience.¹⁶

Climate change is also expected to lead to more extreme weather events, resulting in increased flood severity, more frequent landslides, altered hydrographs, and changes in erosion and sedimentation rates and delivery processes. Many National Forest roads are poorly located and designed to be temporarily on the landscape, making them particularly vulnerable to these climate alterations. Even those designed for storms and water flows typical of past decades may fail under future weather scenarios, further exacerbating adverse ecological impacts, public safety concerns, and maintenance needs. The Forest Service should analyze in detail the impact of climate change on forest roads and forest resources.

The President’s Executive Order 13,653 (Nov. 2013) provides direction on “Preparing the United States for the Impacts of Climate Change.” The Order recognizes that “[t]he impacts of climate change – including an increase in prolonged periods of excessively high temperatures, more heavy downpours, an increase in wildfires, [and] more severe droughts . . . – are already affecting communities, natural resources, ecosystems, economies, and public health across the Nation,” and that “managing th[o]se risks requires deliberate preparation, close cooperation, and coordinated planning . . . to improve climate preparedness and resilience; help safeguard our economy, infrastructure, environment, and natural resources; and provide for the continuity of . . . agency operations, services, and programs.”¹⁷ To that end, the Order requires agencies to take various actions aimed at making “watersheds, natural resources, and ecosystems, and the communities and economies that depend on them, more resilient in the face of a changing climate.”¹⁸ For example, “recognizing the many benefits the Nation’s natural infrastructure provides, agencies shall, where possible, focus on program and policy adjustments that promote the dual goals of greater climate resilience and carbon sequestration.”¹⁹ Agencies also should develop and implement adaptation plans that “evaluate the most significant climate change related risks to, and vulnerabilities in, agency operations and missions in both the short and long term, and outline actions . . . to manage these risks and vulnerabilities.”²⁰

The Forest Service’s 2014 adaptation plan recognizes that the wide range of environmental and societal benefits provided by our national forests “are connected and sustained through the integrity of the ecosystems on these lands.”²¹ The plan highlights USDA’s 2010-2015 Strategic Plan Goal 2 of “[e]nsur[ing] our national forests . . . are conserved, restored, and made more resilient to climate

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Exhibit C at 9-14. See also USDA, Forest Service, National Roadmap for Responding to Climate Change at 26 (2011), available at <http://www.fs.fed.us/climatechange/pdf/Roadmapfinal.pdf> (recognizing importance of reducing fragmentation and increasing connectivity to facilitate climate change adaptation).

¹⁷ Exec. Order 13,653, § 1.

¹⁸ *Id.* § 3.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* § 5(a).

²¹ See USDA Forest Service, Climate Change Adaptation Plan, page 58 (2014).

change, while enhancing our water resources.”²² And consistent with section 5(a) of Executive Order 13,653, the plan identifies numerous climate change risks – including increased wildfire, invasive species, increasing water temperatures, extreme weather events, and fluctuating precipitation and temperature – that “pose challenges to sustaining forests and grasslands and the supply of goods and services upon which society depends, such as clean drinking water, forest products, outdoor recreation opportunities, and habitat.”²³ With respect to transportation infrastructure specifically, the adaptation plan recognizes that, “[w]ith increasing heavy rain events, the extensive road system on NFS lands will require increased maintenance and/or modification of infrastructure (e.g. larger culverts or replacement of culverts with bridges).”²⁴

The Forest Service’s Climate Change Adaptation Plan points to a number of actions to address the risks of climate change to our forests, and in particular to forest roads. For example, the plan highlights the 2012 Planning Rule as a mechanism to ensure that “National Forest System . . . land management planning policy and procedures include consideration of climate change.”²⁵ The final directives to the planning rule echo the importance of designing plan components “to sustain functional ecosystems based on a future viewpoint” and “to adapt to the effects of climate change.”²⁶ The adaptation plan also points to Forest Service Manual 2020, which provides “Ecological Restoration and Resilience” directives designed “to restore and maintain resilient ecosystems that will have greater capacity to withstand stressors and recover from disturbances, especially those under changing and uncertain environmental conditions, including climate change and extreme weather events.”²⁷

Conclusion

The Forest Service’s current road system is over-sized and unaffordable. Identifying a sustainable road network is one of the most important endeavors the Forest Service can undertake to restore aquatic systems and wildlife habitat, facilitate adaptation to climate change, enhance recreation, and lower operating expenses. As noted in the beginning of our letter, we have not commented on all components of this project, yet we do support increasing the pace of restoration activities to implement a right-sized road system. This is incredibly important and long overdue.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

Tom Uniack
Executive Director
Washington Wild
tom@wawild.org

Marlies Wierenga
Pacific Northwest Conservation Manager
WildEarth Guardians
mwierenga@wildearthguardians.org

²² *Id.* at 58.

²³ *Id.* at 60-64.

²⁴ *Id.* at 62.

²⁵ *Id.* at 73.

²⁶ FSH 1909.12, ch. 20, § 23.11.

²⁷ USDA Climate Change Adaptation Plan at 73.

Yvonne Kraus
Executive Director
Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance
yvonne@evergreenmtb.org

Andrea Imler
Advocacy Director
Washington Trails Association
aimler@wta.org

Harry Romberg
Chair, National Forest Committee
Washington Chapter of the Sierra Club
HBRomb@aol.com

Kitty Craig
Washington State Deputy Director
The Wilderness Society
kcraig@twc.org

Gus Bekker
President
El Sendero Backcountry Ski & Snowshoe Club
gwbekker@charter.net

Tom Hammond
President
North Cascades Conservation Council
tphammond@gmail.com

Katherine Hollis
Conservation and Advocacy Director
The Mountaineers
katherineh@mountaineers.org