October 2, 2025

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Plains Thompson Falls Ranger District
P.O. Box 429
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RE: Wilkes Cherry Project

Comments submitted electronically through the project webpage comment portal

Center for Biological Diversity and Alliance for the Wild Rockies

Dear Mr. McPhearsonMcNearney,

These comments are submitted on behalf of Center for Biological Diversity and Alliance for the Wild Rockies regarding the Wilkes Cherey Project. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this project.

COMMENTS

The Draft Environmental Assessment (Draft EA) stated, "An Emergency Action Determination (EAD) (IIJA 40807) has been approved for the Wilke's Cherry Project." Your email announcing the Draft EA stated, "The Wilkes Cherry project is subject to emergency authority under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Section 40807) of Public Law 117-58, passed on November 15, 2021. The Secretary in January 2023 invoked the emergency authority provided in section 40807 across 250 high-risk firesheds identified in the January 2022 Wildfire Crisis Strategy. This project is located in within the 241 Thompson Falls fireshed. The selected actions of this project were reviewed and approved by the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service on January 2nd, 2024." Email from Sean.McPhearsonMcNearney@usda.gov, September 24, 3035.

While such a declaration allows the agency to analyze only two alternatives, and eliminates the requirement that the Forest Service provide for an opportunity for interested parties to object to proposed decision, see 16 U.S.C. § 6592c(b)(1)(B), (d), that law does not reduce or limit the agency's duty to solicit meaningful public comment if it determines an environmental assessment is necessary. To the contrary, the law explicitly requires that the Forest Service "shall provide an opportunity for public comment during the preparation of any environmental assessment." *Id*. § 6592c(d).

The 30-day comment period at the Draft EA stage is the only opportunity offered for public engagement on this project. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) emphasizes public participation early in the process. 40 C.F.R. § 1501.2. See also Forest Service Handbook

1909.15, Ch. 11.52 ("Public involvement should occur throughout the [NEPA] analysis process") However, no earlier project information was provided to the public for this project proposal. Early participation by interested members of the public allows the Forest Service to build environmental considerations into the planning processes in order to avoid delay down the road. The timing and singular comment period limits the opportunity for public engagement, and the Lolo National Forest risks ignoring subjects that are important to the public, including input from outside scientists and ecologists, Tribal members, and local communities. With this in mind, and to comply with the spirit of NEPA, we would strongly encourage the Forest Service to hold a second public comment period on any revisions to its EA before signing the decision record and finalizing the project.

I. Emergency action determination

The Emergency action determination for this project should have been included for public review along with the draft EA and other documents associated with this project. Pursuant to 16 U.S.C. § 6598(c)(C) "An emergency situation determination shall be based on an examination of the relevant information." This determination failed to consider several key factors.

First, this project is projected to be implemented over the next decade. It is unclear how a project that may take 10 years to implement constitutes a response to an emergency.

Second, the majority of the project area that is modeled as having a high hazard rating for bark beetle and all hosts is outside of the areas proposed to be logged. Also, there is no support in the EA or disclosure of how much of the Project is modeled as having high probability of severe fire, the primary reason for authorizing this Project. Even if there was an "emergency" there is no indication that the treatments in the project will actually address this "emergency."

Also, there is no mention of support by tribes, communities, or partners. A memorandum written by Chief Randy Moore to the Forest Service National Leadership Council regarding the implementation of the Secretary's direction on authorized emergency actions states, "Our intent is to use these authorities strategically and thoughtfully, in places with tribal, community, and partner support, to plan and implement treatments to reduce wildfire risk around communities and critical infrastructure."

The temporal considerations call into question the emergency status, while the projected modeling calls into question the scale of the project. We propose that if the Forest Service intends to pursue this project as an "emergency," this project be revised to include only the areas identified as high to moderate-high risk, and exclude those identified as low to moderate-low risk. Furthermore, the Forest Service should clearly describe the communities and critical infrastructure that the project is meant to protect, and how the project will supposedly protect those values.

II. Inaccurate historical conditions assumption

The Project's vegetation analysis rests on a flawed assumption about historical forest conditions. The Forest Service relies heavily on *Losensky (1993)*—an unpublished summary of 1930s timber

inventories—to infer that 42.2% of the analysis area historically consisted of non-stocked, seedling, or sapling stands. *Vegetation Report* at 2. This figure has become the analytical basis for authorizing logging on up to 42.2% of the Project area, under the theory that such conditions represent a natural "reference state."

However, this interpretation is unsound. Even *Losensky (1993)* acknowledges that by the mid-1930s, about 16% of the Lower Flathead Climatic Section had already been harvested—mostly on private lands and valley bottoms where 19% of ponderosa pine, 14% of white pine, and 13% of other forest types had been logged. Approximately 7% of Forest Service lands had also been cut. These extensive harvests inflated the proportion of non-stocked and early-seral conditions captured in the 1930s inventories. In other words, the 42.2% figure does not reflect natural ecological processes; it reflects a landscape already altered by industrial logging and rail development.

Moreover, other available reconstructions directly contradict the Forest Service's reliance on this single outlier dataset**.** *Losensky (1994)*—which used the same inventory method but summarized conditions across the Interior Columbia Basin—estimated that only about 20.5% of the area was in non-stocked or seedling/sapling stages. Likewise, *Hessburg et al. (2000)* found roughly 40.9% of the Lower Clark Fork ecological reporting unit (which includes the Wilkes Cherry Project area) in early-seral conditions but cautioned that these figures were derived from aerial photos taken *after*widespread logging of old-growth trees. Collectively, these studies show substantial variability and uncertainty, yet the Project adopts the highest and least reliable value (42.2%) without qualification.

This overreliance on a single, unpublished source is particularly concerning given the Project's stated goal of "restoring" vegetation conditions. The assumption that historical landscapes were nearly half non-stocked leads to a circular justification for widespread clearcutting—treating degraded, post-harvest conditions of the 1930s as an ecological ideal to recreate.

Even if the 42.2% figure were accurate, the Forest Service fails to justify why returning to early-20th-century stand structure is desirable or appropriate under present-day environmental realities. Climatic and disturbance regimes have changed dramatically since that time. The Project does not consider how current and projected climate trends—increased drought stress, altered fire behavior, and reduced snowpack—should inform desired future conditions. Nor does it assess whether maintaining denser forest cover might now provide important ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, temperature moderation, and wildlife habitat connectivity.

In sum, the Project's assumption that early-20th-century inventory data define the "natural range of variability" is methodologically and ecologically flawed. It distorts historical baselines, disregards subsequent scientific work (Losensky 1994; Hessburg et al. 2000), and ignores the modern context of climate adaptation and carbon resilience. The Forest Service must re-evaluate its desired conditions using transparent, peer-reviewed data and a forward-looking framework that reflects current ecological challenges rather than outdated industrial baselines.

III. Failure to consider impacts to and from climate change

The Project's treatment of climate change is cursory and unsupported. The Forest Service repeatedly asserts that regeneration and intermediate harvest will "convert stands to a mix of more shade-intolerant and fire-adapted species," implying that these treatments will enhance climate resilience and reduce wildfire risk. Yet the Vegetation Report provides no scientific basis for this assumption, no quantitative analysis of expected post-harvest regeneration trajectories, and no evidence that similar treatments in the past have achieved such outcomes.

In fact, the Vegetation Report acknowledges that past regeneration harvest has repeatedly produced homogeneous, Douglas-fir–dominated stands rather than the diverse, fire-resilient mosaics the Forest Service claims to seek (Vegetation Report at 4–5). The agency itself notes that "the increase of Douglas-fir appears to be at the detriment of the non-forested areas, and of ponderosa pine and western larch cover types," and that this shift "can create homogenous stands that can uncharacteristically increase the frequency and severity of Douglas-fir beetle outbreaks." In other words, the very logging prescriptions now proposed have historically simplified forest structure, reduced species diversity, and heightened susceptibility to insects and disease—all factors that exacerbate, rather than mitigate, climate vulnerability.

Nowhere does the Project explain why repeating these same harvest methods will yield a different ecological result. There is no modeling or monitoring evidence showing that large-scale clearcuts and "restoration" harvests in the Wilkes Cherry landscape will regenerate the desired mix of fire- and drought-tolerant species. There is also no discussion of seed source limitations, post-harvest soil moisture stress, or regeneration failure under warmer and drier future conditions—issues that are well documented in the scientific literature across the Northern Rockies.

Equally absent is any explanation of why increasing the proportion of "shade-intolerant" or "fire-adapted" species is inherently beneficial. All native conifers in the region have evolved with fire to some degree, and many—such as Douglas-fir, grand fir, and subalpine fir—play critical ecological roles in mixed-severity fire regimes, hydrologic regulation, and carbon storage. The simplistic dichotomy between "good" (fire-adapted) and "bad" (shade-tolerant) species fails to reflect the complexity of natural disturbance dynamics and forest succession in this landscape.

The agency also fails to assess how its proposed treatments may interact with ongoing and projected climate change. There is no analysis of how increased temperature, reduced snowpack, and more frequent drought will affect reforestation success, soil productivity, or the persistence of desired species compositions following harvest. The Vegetation Report's reference to "climate change adaptation and drought resilience" is limited to a few general statements without any site-specific modeling or evaluation of treatment effectiveness under future climate scenarios.

Moreover, the Project does not consider that denser forest cover and mature tree retention may provide important climate benefits. Denser stands store more carbon and moderate local microclimates by maintaining cooler and moister understory conditions. By favoring extensive canopy removal, the Project may actually exacerbate climate-driven stressors—warming soils, drying fuels, and increasing surface wind exposure—thereby heightening the risk of high-severity fire in the short to medium term.

In short, the Forest Service fails to meaningfully analyze either (1) how climate change will affect the outcomes of its proposed treatments, or (2) how those treatments, in turn, may exacerbate climate impacts on the forest ecosystem. The Project treats climate change as a rhetorical justification for logging rather than as a scientifically modeled, quantifiable factor that must inform management choices. Without a transparent, data-driven analysis of climate interactions—such as expected regeneration success rates, species shifts under projected temperature and precipitation trends, or cumulative carbon emissions—the agency's conclusion that large-scale logging will increase climate resilience is speculative and unsupported.

IV. Failure to take a hard look at the Project impacts on wildlife in violation of NEPA and NFMA.

The Forest Service's analysis fails to take a hard look at the adverse effects on wildlife. The project as proposed largely treats these species as check-box species rather than fully accounting for habitat fragmentation, connectivity, and synergistic stressors.

a. Grizzly Bears

i. Inadequate consideration of core habitat and connectivity

The Project delineate and prioritize *core security habitat* or movement corridors for grizzly bears in a way that is driven by empirical telemetry data or cumulative habitat condition (food security, human-bear conflict risk zones, etc.).There is little to know analysis that considers how timber harvesting and associated roads or skid trails would incrementally degrade connectivity, narrowing linkage zones between subpopulations. No analysis is presented to show "with project" vs. "without project" impacts on bear movement across the landscape mosaic, which is critical in assessing population viability in a changing climate.

Logging causes not just outright loss of habitat area, but increases edge density, which raises human–bear encounters, displacement effects, and avoidance behavior. The project also fails to consider cumulative disturbance for grizzly bears, e.g. how much annual anthropogenic disturbance (roads, human presence) can be tolerated before bears abandon otherwise suitable habitat.

New roads, improved access, and increased human use (e.g. recreation, maintenance) are not adequately analyzed cumulatively. The project should have estimated how access change increases the probability of bear–human encounters and mortality risk. There is no mitigation mortality risk modeling (e.g. increased bear mortality corridors, attractant management) tied to project layout or timing.

Best available science — as acknowledged in the EA — indicates that grizzly bears in this ecosystem require 55–80% secure habitat to maintain occupancy and survival. Yet the project area currently contains only 28% secure habitat, far below scientifically recommended thresholds. The Wildlife Report itself states that the Dry Eddy GBAU contains just 27% secure habitat, but in the Forest Plan Biological Opinion the baseline for that same unit is given as 41%**.** The Forest Service never reconciles this 14% discrepancy, nor does it explain whether conditions

have degraded or whether the current analysis is undercounting secure habitat. Either way, the inconsistency indicates that impacts to grizzly bears are greater than disclosed.

Despite this already deficient baseline, the Project will increase both open and total road densities in all three GBAUs, compounding habitat fragmentation. Although the Wildlife Report claims that "secure habitat will increase by 255 acres," it fails to acknowledge that those acres are small, isolated fragments that do not function as meaningful security blocks for adult females. Fragmented patches separated by active haul roads, skid trails, or logging units do not provide effective refuge and should not be counted as fully functional secure habitat.

Moreover, the project area currently includes 54 miles of "undetermined" roads, yet the Project only proposes to decommission 22 miles while adding 14 miles of new routes, effectively retaining — and in some areas expanding — a large network of unmanaged motorized access. The Forest Service does not analyze how these undetermined roads affect secure habitat or road density, nor does it address the well-established correlation between unauthorized access and increased grizzly bear mortality risk.

Additionally, the Project fails to consider the impact to grizzly bear from amending the Cover: Forage ratios of the Forest Plan. Although these standards apply to elk, they benefit grizzly bears because they limit road density. The Project fails to discuss how this amendment will impact grizzly bears.

Before moving forward, the agency must fully account for the remaining undetermined road mileage, the addition of new road segments, and the fragmentation effects of small "secure" patches**.** Without doing so, it cannot credibly claim that the Project improves or even maintains habitat security for grizzly bears.

In short, the grizzly bear analysis is superficial and fails to engage with core principles of bear conservation (core areas, connectivity, disturbance thresholds, conflict risk).

ii. The EA Fails to analyze whether the Project will prevent grizzly bear recolonization

The Wildlife Report acknowledges that grizzly bears are expected to recolonize the project area within the foreseeable future, estimating potential male grizzly bear presence as soon as approximately 5 years and female establishment as soon as roughly 10 years. At the same time, the Project authorizes 10–15 years of ongoing timber harvest and road use, which directly overlaps with the very timeframe in which recolonization is anticipated.

Despite this temporal overlap, the agency never analyzes whether the intensity and duration of logging activities will *delay* or *prevent* bears from establishing residency in the project area.

Instead, the EA treats grizzly bears as absent and therefore reduces the effects analysis to a generic statement that "no resident grizzly bears currently occur in the analysis area." This approach sidesteps NEPA's requirement to take a hard look and evaluate *reasonably foreseeable future conditions* — particularly those that the agency itself has acknowledged as imminent.

In effect, the agency anticipates that bears will return during the life of this project, yet it conducts its impact analysis as if bears will *not* be present during implementation. This is a fundamental analytical failure.

To comply with NEPA, the agency should have asked:

- *Will 10–15 years of road construction, hauling, and human activity create persistent disturbance that causes grizzlies to avoid the area entirely?*
- *Will new or reactivated roads increase human-bear encounter and mortality risk, inhibiting female settlement?*
- *Will the reduction of hiding cover and increase in open edges make the area less suitable as denning or foraging habitat?*

The EA provides no modeling, no scenario analysis, and no quantitative assessment of recolonization risk. It does not consider whether bears will abandon the area if industrial activity persists beyond the point of initial reentry. It does not examine whether displacement during the first critical recolonization years could push females back into marginal or conflict-prone environments.

Both NEPA and the ESA require agencies to consider conditions expected in the foreseeable future, not merely the present snapshot. By the agency's own admission, resident bears are foreseeable during implementation — and therefore must be treated as part of the affected environment.

Instead, the agency engages in analytical sleight-of-hand: *It predicts bear recolonization while simultaneously structuring its effects analysis as if recolonization will not occur until after the project is completed.*

This approach undermines the ESA's recovery mandate and fails NEPA's hard look requirement, which demands an analysis of whether agency action will delay, diminish, or foreclose recovery opportunities. Moreover, this violates the Forest Plan requirement that threatened and endangered species be managed for recovery. This approach ensures that the Project area will not be able to provide grizzly bears the habitat they need to reproduce in this part of the forest.

iii. The Project's Grizzly Bear analysis area is arbitrary and scientifically inadequate

The Environmental Assessment's reliance on the Grizzly Bear Analysis Unit (GBAU) as the sole spatial boundary for analyzing effects to grizzly bears is scientifically indefensible and likely underestimates the project's true impact. The EA assumes that the GBAU boundary is synonymous with the functional range of grizzly bears in the area, including female home ranges. That assumption is flawed for several reasons.

First, GBAUs are administrative constructs, not biologically derived home range boundaries**.** They were never designed to represent actual habitat use patterns for individual bears—let alone reproductive females whose home ranges and movement behavior differ from subadult males or

male dispersers. Treating the GBAU as a proxy for "where bears occur" is therefore methodologically improper. A defensible analysis would be grounded in empirical habitat use data**,** such as telemetry locations, conflict reports, genetic sampling, denning locations, food source distribution, or recent confirmed presence records.

Second, female grizzly bear home ranges in this region frequently extend well beyond the arbitrary GBAU boundaries, especially during critical life history periods such as foraging, denning, and cub rearing. The EA does not acknowledge this possibility, nor does it analyze potential effects beyond the analysis boundary. If female bears are using adjacent habitat *outside* the GBAU—or shifting into new areas as populations expand—the EA's artificial boundary masks potential displacement, fragmentation, or increased human–bear conflict risk in those adjacent zones.

Third, by constraining the analysis to the GBAU without conducting a sensitivity analysis that expands the spatial extent, the agency has failed to consider *reasonably foreseeable* effects on grizzly bears that utilize habitat in adjacent drainages, linkage zones, or travel corridors. Habitat features such as riparian foraging sites, security cover, or huckleberry patches often straddle or fall outside GBAU lines. Yet the project includes road use, logging disturbance, and increased human access that will radiate beyond the mapped GBAU. Noise, scent, dust, traffic, and edge effects do not respect bureaucratic boundaries.

Finally, this artificially constrained analysis area leads to downplaying cumulative effects, because activities just outside the GBAU—whether ongoing logging, recreation use, or grazing pressure—are ignored altogether. This violates NEPA's mandate to take a "hard look" at cumulative impacts across the *actual* ecological landscape used by the species, not merely an administratively convenient one.

b. The EA does not consider sufficient monitoring data for old growth species

The Forest Plan requires that the Forest monitor habitat for management indicator species including elk, goshawk and pileated woodpecker. "As monitoring technology becomes available for the goshawk and pileated woodpecker, population trends will be monitored. In the interim, habitat parameters including old-growth acres and conditions, and snag densities will be monitored as an indicator of population trend."

This mandatory standard obligates the Forest Service to monitor population trends and otherwise collect and analyze data on old-growth and snag conditions as surrogate indicators.

The Wilkes Cherry Wildlife Report acknowledges that no project-specific pileated woodpecker surveys were conducted and that the Forest relies only on observation data from the Montana Natural Heritage Program rather than formal monitoring transects. The most recent population trend data cited are from 2009–2015, meaning there has been no systematic monitoring in a decade, contrary to the Forest Plan's ongoing-monitoring requirement and the acknowledgment that monitoring technology is available for the species.

Similarly, the Wilkes Cherry Wildlife Report notes only three historic nests in or near the project area, the last active in 2017, and one round of surveys in 2024 that found no nests or occupancy. These are presence/absence detections, not part of a standardized population-trend monitoring program. The document also references old regional studies from 2005–2006 to assert stable populations, showing that no current Forest-level monitoring dataset exists.

The Lolo National Forest Plan requires the Forest Service to monitor goshawk and pileated woodpecker population trends once monitoring technology became available, and in the interim to track old-growth condition and snag density as indicators. The Wilkes Cherry Wildlife Report shows that the Forest Service has not conducted population monitoring for either species since at least 2015, and relies solely on incidental observations and outdated regional analyses. Such anecdotal data do not meet the Forest Plan's monitoring mandate. The Forest Service's failure to implement or disclose current monitoring violates the Forest Plan and renders its conclusion of compliance arbitrary and capricious under NFMA.

c. Pileated Woodpeckers

i. The EA fails to demonstrate adequate habitat for pileated woodpeckers

The Wildlife Report acknowledges that only approximately 3% of the Project area contains suitable nesting habitat for the pileated woodpecker, a Management Indicator Species under the Lolo Forest Plan. Yet the Forest Service concludes that the Project "would not have a measurable impact" on the species without any explanation of how such a limited amount of nesting habitat can sustain a viable population.

This conclusion is scientifically unsupported and inconsistent with both the species' known ecological requirements and the Forest Plan's mandate to maintain viable populations of indicator species.

1. Pileated woodpeckers require large home ranges and old forest structure

Pileated woodpeckers are area-sensitive species that depend on large tracts of mature and old-growth coniferous or mixed-conifer forests with high snag density, downed wood, and large trees suitable for cavity excavation. Numerous studies document that:

- Individual males defend home ranges averaging 1,000–4,000 acres, often overlapping with 1–2 females.
- Nesting territories typically require multiple stands with suitable foraging and roosting sites in close proximity.
- Habitat fragmentation, particularly from logging or road construction, substantially reduces occupancy probability and nesting success.

In this context, 3% nesting habitat across a roughly 20,000-acre project area (i.e., ~600 acres) is insufficient to sustain even one breeding pair, let alone a viable local population, especially if that habitat is scattered or degraded by adjacent treatments. The Wildlife Report provides no

analysis of habitat patch size, configuration, or connectivity—all of which are critical to supporting pileated woodpeckers' spatial needs.

ii. The EA fails to analyze male woodpecker home range and movement ecology

Male pileated woodpeckers are territorial and strongly site-faithful, requiring continuous tracts of mature forest to meet foraging needs year-round. Studies show that males may use multiple cavity trees spread over hundreds of acres, and that they avoid fragmented or open areas between patches. The EA and Wildlife Report, however, make no attempt to assess whether sufficient contiguous forest exists to support male home ranges, or how ongoing and proposed logging would further fragment those limited nesting patches.
By failing to model or map functional habitat networks—including patch size, distance between nesting sites, and interior forest conditions—the Forest Service cannot reasonably conclude that the remaining 3% nesting habitat will remain viable.

The Forest Plan requires that old-growth habitat be maintained and monitored for condition, including snag density and down woody debris as surrogates for woodpecker population trends. Yet the Wildlife Report does not disclose snag densities within the remaining nesting habitat, nor whether large-diameter (>20" dbh) snags suitable for cavity excavation exist in sufficient numbers. Without these data, it is impossible to determine whether the "3% nesting habitat" is functional or simply mapped based on canopy age class without structural verification.

Given that only 3% of the Project area supports nesting habitat; that habitat is likely fragmented and degraded; the species' male home range requirements greatly exceed the size of available habitat patches, and the Forest Service has not monitored population trends or surrogate metrics such as snag density, the conclusion that the Project will have no measurable effect on pileated woodpeckers is unsupported and inconsistent with the Forest Plan's wildlife viability mandate and fails to take a hard look at the Project impacts on the speices.

The Forest Service must conduct spatial analysis of pileated woodpecker habitat, quantify snag and down-wood availability within mapped nesting habitat, and evaluate whether proposed treatments will further reduce or fragment functional nesting areas, especially those necessary for male home ranges.

d. Elk

The Wilkes Cherry Project's analysis of elk impacts is seriously deficient and fails to meet NEPA and NFMA's requirements for site-specific, science-based analysis. The Project would reduce elk cover below Forest Plan standards. After implementation, elk cover would fall to only 39 percent—well below the Lolo Forest Plan's 50:50 cover-to-forage standard, which requires that the majority of cover be thermal. The EA itself acknowledges that the Project will reduce elk habitat by nearly 3,000 acres, yet it contains no meaningful discussion of how this habitat loss and reduction in cover will affect elk herds using the project area or public lands more broadly.

The analysis of elk population trends is also incomplete and unsupported by data. The Project area includes Elk Herd Units (EHUs) 123 and 124. While the EA acknowledges that there is no population data available for EHU 124, it assumes without evidence that population trends there mirror those in EHU 123, which are "within or slightly below objectives." This extrapolation lacks any empirical foundation and undermines the site-specific analysis required by NEPA and NFMA. Compounding this issue, the Project relies on herd delineation data from a 1993 Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks report—information that is now more than thirty years old and outdated given the extensive habitat and access changes that have occurred in the region since that time.

The EA also asserts that the Project would maintain 43 percent "security" for elk, claiming this exceeds the 30 percent threshold identified in Hillis et al. (1991). However, the analysis fails to evaluate the spatial configuration of secure habitat—such as its connectivity, fragmentation, or proximity to critical winter range—and does not assess how temporary and seasonal disturbances from logging, hauling, and road construction would diminish effective security. Without this analysis, the conclusion that elk security will remain adequate is unsupported.

The cumulative effects analysis is similarly deficient. The EA fails to quantify cumulative road density or assess landscape-level habitat fragmentation across the project area and surrounding lands. It does not consider overlapping effects with adjacent projects, ongoing logging on state and private lands, or increasing rural development pressures. Nor does it evaluate the compounding effects of repeated disturbance and displacement on elk distribution, movement patterns, or use of public versus private lands.
Finally, the EA acknowledges that elk displaced by Project activities would likely move onto nearby private lands but does not analyze the consequences of that displacement. In western Montana, this pattern has become increasingly common as public-land habitat quality declines, leading to growing concentrations of elk on private property where hunting access is limited. The Project fails to examine the resulting energetic costs to elk, potential reductions in calf survival, or changes in hunter opportunity and vulnerability associated with displacement from public to private lands. In sum, the EA's elk analysis fails to meaningfully address habitat loss, security, displacement, and cumulative impacts, leaving the Forest Service's conclusion of "no significant effect" without scientific or analytical support.

e. Bull Trout

The Project's analysis for bull trout is deeply deficient. Despite acknowledging that bull trout occur in Prospect Creek, the Fisheries Report provides only a cursory, qualitative discussion and fails to include the hydrologic or thermal modeling necessary to understand how large-scale vegetation removal, road construction, and stream crossings could affect bull trout habitat. The report presents no reach-scale hydraulic or temperature modeling to evaluate changes in stream temperature, fine sediment loading, or hyporheic exchange. Given the extensive proposed logging and burning in multiple watersheds, along with more than 15 miles of new temporary and 13 miles of new system roads, the absence of any modeled projections of increased sediment or temperature regimes in bull trout spawning and rearing reaches represents a serious analytical gap. Simply stating that "best management practices" will be implemented is not an adequate substitute for quantitative analysis. The Project should have modeled baseline, mitigation, and

worst-case conditions to show expected changes in sediment delivery, summer maximum temperatures, and redd survival probabilities.

The Fisheries Report also ignores cumulative downstream effects and fails to analyze how incremental degradation could affect habitat connectivity across the Clark Fork and its tributaries. The analysis treats stream segments in isolation and does not aggregate effects across watersheds to assess whether multiple crossings, road networks, and channel realignments could collectively reduce habitat quality or increase fragmentation. Bull trout depend on cold, connected headwater and mainstem habitats for their migratory life cycle, yet the Project does not evaluate whether the proposed new crossings and culvert replacements would maintain adequate passage under varying flows, or whether temporary increases in sediment and turbidity would impair downstream connectivity or spawning gravels.

In addition, the analysis provides no reference to quantitative thresholds or species-response data that would allow a reasoned conclusion about the magnitude of effect. There is no reference to empirical dose–response relationships for bull trout, such as how increases in fine sediment or water temperature correlate with reduced embryo survival or juvenile recruitment. Nor does the report identify any threshold at which mitigation would fail to prevent adverse effects. Assertions that effects are "insignificant or discountable" are unsupported by any quantitative evidence. The Fisheries Report also fails to evaluate uncertainty or provide a sensitivity analysis of the assumptions underlying the sediment model (GRAIP_Lite).

In sum, the Project's bull trout assessment is underpowered and fails to meet NEPA's hard-look requirement or the Forest Plan's direction to maintain the "minimum impact on the aquatic ecosystem." Qualitative assurances of BMP implementation cannot replace quantitative, site-specific analysis of sediment, temperature, and hydrologic connectivity effects to bull trout and their critical habitat.

i. Failure to conduct required watershed cumulative effects analysis

The Lolo Forest Plan requires that "[a] watershed cumulative effects analysis will be made of all projects involving significant vegetation removal prior to these projects being scheduled for implementation. These analyses will also identify existing opportunities to mitigate adverse effects on water-related beneficial uses, including capital investments for fish habitat or watershed improvement."

The Wilkes Cherry Project authorizes more than 6,000 acres of commercial harvest, over 13,000 acres of prescribed burning, and extensive road construction and reconstruction—clearly constituting "significant vegetation removal." Yet, neither the Draft Environmental Assessment nor the Fisheries Report provides the watershed-scale cumulative effects analysis required by the Forest Plan.

The Fisheries Report's brief "Cumulative Effects to Aquatic Indicators" section merely offers a qualitative narrative asserting that no cumulative effects are expected. The analysis is limited to general statements about land ownership, a list of historical and ongoing activities, and an unsupported conclusion that "no cumulative adverse effects to aquatic indicators are expected."

It fails to: 1) Quantitatively evaluate additive effects of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions on watershed condition or aquatic indicators such as sediment yield, channel stability, or water temperature; 2) Analyze effects across the entire watershed scale, as the Forest Plan explicitly requires; and 3) Identify or discuss specific opportunities to mitigate existing or anticipated adverse effects on water-related beneficial uses (e.g., fish habitat improvement, road removal, or riparian restoration).

This omission violates the Forest Plan's mandatory direction to conduct a watershed cumulative effects analysis prior to project implementation. Because the Forest Plan forms part of the governing legal framework under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), the agency's failure to comply with this requirement renders the Project inconsistent with the Forest Plan and therefore unlawful under 36 C.F.R. § 219.15(e).

In addition, by omitting any quantitative or spatially explicit cumulative watershed analysis, the Environmental Assessment fails to take the "hard look" required by NEPA, 42 U.S.C. § 4332(C), and its implementing regulations, 40 C.F.R. §§ 1502.14–1502.16. Without this analysis, the public and decisionmaker cannot meaningfully evaluate whether the Project—combined with ongoing and past management across these watersheds—may degrade aquatic resources or water-related beneficial uses.

The Forest Service must therefore prepare a full watershed-scale cumulative effects analysis consistent with Forest Plan standards and reissue the EA for public review and comment before proceeding.

f. Canada Lynx

i. Habitat suitability and fragmentation mistreatment

The Project fails to meaningfully identify, map, or prioritize actual lynx habitat—dense spruce-fir or subalpine forests with high canopy closure and adequate snowshoe hare prey base—at the scale of lynx home ranges. Instead, the Project treats all mapped "vegetation types" as equally relevant to lynx without distinguishing between primary, secondary, and non-habitat areas. By neglecting this distinction, the Forest Service cannot determine where logging will remove or degrade the high-quality habitat most critical to lynx survival.

The EA also does not overlay proposed treatment units on mapped patches of high-suitability habitat to disclose the extent of overlap or quantify the loss of core habitat. Without spatial analysis of lynx habitat patches, the public cannot discern whether proposed 6,000+ acres of regeneration harvest and over 20,000 acres of prescribed burning would disproportionately fragment the remaining high-elevation spruce-fir forests that sustain lynx.

There is no meaningful analysis of how these extensive treatments would carve large blocks of mature conifer forest into smaller, edge-dominated fragments. Increased edge habitat benefits lynx competitors such as bobcats and coyotes while reducing interior snow conditions and prey density that lynx require. The EA thus ignores the best available science showing that habitat

fragmentation and loss of structural complexity are among the primary threats to lynx persistence in the Northern Rockies.

ii. Snow-compaction, road network effects, and connectivity ignored

Lynx are highly sensitive to snow compaction from grooming, logging, and motorized recreation, which allows coyotes and bobcats to expand into lynx habitat and increases interspecific competition. The Project adds new roads and trails, proposes seasonal openings for motorized use, and increases access for winter recreationists, yet contains no analysis of how these changes would alter snow compaction patterns or affect lynx habitat use.

The EA relies on general statements that resource protection measures will prevent impacts without supporting analysis or data. This omission directly conflicts with the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction (NRLMD) requirement to evaluate how changes in access and winter use affect snow compaction and competitor species.

Furthermore, the Project entirely omits any connectivity or movement analysis for lynx. There is no modeling of least-cost paths, movement corridors, or linkage zones connecting the Cabinet, Bitterroot, and Coeur d'Alene ranges. Because the Wilkes Cherry area lies within a potential dispersal corridor between known lynx habitat blocks, the Forest Service must analyze whether extensive canopy removal, new roads, and prescribed burns could sever this linkage or reduce functional connectivity for dispersing lynx.

iii. No temporal or cumulative impact modeling at territory scale

The Project evaluates lynx effects only at the stand scale, failing to assess how successive harvest entries and prescribed burns across decades will reshape habitat patterns at the territory or landscape scale. Lynx require large, contiguous blocks of mature forest for denning and winter foraging; fragmented and shifting habitat mosaics cannot meet these needs if disturbance intervals exceed lynx' ability to recolonize regenerating stands.

There is no scenario-based modeling (e.g., high versus low harvest intensity) to estimate how cumulative vegetation treatments will alter the spatial arrangement of suitable lynx habitat through time. Without such modeling, the EA cannot determine whether repeated vegetation projects across the Plains–Thompson Falls Ranger District are collectively eroding the overall extent of mature spruce-fir forest below viability thresholds.

The Forest Plan explicitly requires the Forest to maintain the quantity, quality, and connectivity of lynx habitat across home range scales consistent with the NRLMD; by failing to analyze fragmentation, snow compaction, or cumulative habitat loss, the Project violates this standard.

iv. Failure to demonstrate compliance with the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction (NRLMD) standards VEG S1–S6

The Wildlife Report's brief summary of "NRLMD compliance" is inadequate and fails to demonstrate that the Project meets the mandatory standards VEG S1 through S6 adopted in the

2007 Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction Record of Decision (NRLMD ROD). These standards are binding forest plan components under NFMA, not discretionary guidelines.

1. Partial analysis of VEG S1, S2, S5, and S6

The Wildlife Report includes limited numerical discussion of VEG S1, S2, S5, and S6. It calculates the percentage of lynx habitat in Early Stand Initiation (ESI) condition for each Lynx Analysis Unit (LAU) and concludes none exceed the 30% S1 threshold. It also asserts that no ESI acres have resulted from regeneration harvest in the last 10 years (S2), and it identifies small amounts of precommercial thinning (S5) and multistory mature structure (S6) that purportedly fall within Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) exemptions.

However, the analysis fails to show that these determinations are based on current, mapped lynx habitat or that the Forest has applied the required administrative-unit and cross-LAU accounting checks. Specifically, the NRLMD requires that WUI exemptions under S1, S2, S5, and S6 may not collectively exceed 6 percent of the administrative unit's total lynx habitat and may not cause three adjacent LAUs to simultaneously exceed the S1 30-percent cap. The Wildlife Report contains no administrative-unit-level accounting or confirmation that these constraints are met. Without this documentation, the Forest cannot demonstrate compliance with the numerical sideboards that prevent incremental degradation of lynx habitat across the Lolo National Forest. The report also does not disclose whether previous or concurrent projects on the Lolo have already used portions of the 6-percent WUI exemption allowance. This omission prevents the public from verifying compliance with cumulative NRLMD limits.

2. No analysis of VEG S3 or S4

The Wildlife Report completely omits analysis of VEG S3 and S4, both of which address the availability and protection of denning habitat.

VEG S3 requires that each LAU maintain at least 10 percent denning habitat, and that when an LAU falls below this threshold, the agency must defer further reduction until additional habitat develops. The Wildlife Report provides no calculation of the percentage of denning habitat within each LAU, no description of how denning habitat was identified, and no statement verifying that each LAU meets the 10-percent minimum. Instead, it relies on Guideline VEG G11 and a conclusory statement that denning habitat "is not limiting." This substitution of a discretionary guideline for a mandatory standard violates NFMA's requirement that projects be consistent with forest plan standards.

VEG S4 restricts salvage harvest where denning habitat is limited. The report never addresses whether any salvage logging is proposed or whether S4 applies. Even if no salvage harvest is proposed, the agency must affirmatively document that S4 is not triggered.

3. Inadequate documentation of mapping and methodology

The NRLMD standards are applied to "lynx habitat" as mapped in each LAU, yet the Wildlife Report does not include or reference the actual habitat maps used to derive its

calculations. Without spatial data showing where ESI, multistory, and denning habitats occur, the Forest cannot demonstrate that its calculations reflect on-the-ground conditions at the LAU scale required by the ROD.

In sum, while the Wildlife Report purports to "comply" with the NRLMD, it fails to: Provide quantitative analysis or findings for VEG S3 and S4; Demonstrate compliance with the administrative-unit 6-percent cap and three-adjacent-LAU constraint under S1–S2–S5–S6; and present transparent mapping or data supporting its conclusions.

Because these standards are mandatory forest plan components, noncompliance constitutes a violation of NFMA and the Lolo Forest Plan as amended by the NRLMD. Before proceeding, the Forest Service must revise the Wildlife Report to include full LAU-scale habitat mapping, denning-habitat calculations, cumulative WUI-exception accounting, and explicit findings for each VEG S standard.

V. Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) mapping

The project's handling of the Wildland–Urban Interface (WUI) is deeply flawed and compounds the risks to Canada lynx and other wildlife. The WUI map appears to rely on overly coarse buffers around developed areas without considering local topography, fuel types, ignition probability, or fire-behavior models. As a result, the delineation of WUI zones is likely exaggerated or misplaced. Because the logging plan defers or prioritizes treatments based on these zones, such spatial misalignment risks leaving critical lynx habitat adjacent to WUI areas either untreated or overtreated, increasing habitat fragmentation and mortality risk for wildlife.

The project also creates a false sense of security by framing WUI zones as "no logging" or "limited logging" areas, implying they provide de facto protection for adjacent habitat. If the WUI boundaries are mismapped, however, that protection may fall in the wrong places—leaving key habitat unshielded or, worse, pushing logging pressure into ecologically sensitive areas beyond the true fire-risk perimeter. Compounding this problem, the WUI mapping is never meaningfully integrated with the project's species-habitat analyses. The agency fails to overlay WUI boundaries with high-value habitat zones for lynx, grizzly bear, or trout, and provides no spatial crosswalk showing where WUI buffers intersect or abut these critical habitats. Without this integration, tradeoffs between fuels reduction and habitat conservation remain invisible, and high-value patches just outside WUI buffers may be more sensitive to disturbance than the zones themselves.

Equally problematic is the project's reliance on static mapping methods. A credible WUI delineation should incorporate dynamic fire-behavior modeling—accounting for slope, wind, ember cast, and projected climate change effects—but the analysis shows no evidence of such modeling. This static buffer approach misclassifies areas of actual high fire risk, leading to misallocation of logging and fuel-treatment priorities while inadvertently increasing wildlife impacts. The project also appears to apply uniform buffer widths around all developed areas, ignoring site-specific variables such as slope, fuel load, and exposure. In practice, variable buffer widths are essential to balance effective wildfire protection with ecological integrity. Applying a

one-size-fits-all buffer leads either to overprotection—reducing treatment where it would be safe and appropriate—or underprotection, leaving high-risk edges untreated.

These mapping deficiencies have direct implications for compliance with the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction (NRLMD). The NRLMD allows certain exceptions for fuel-reduction projects in the WUI under VEG S1, S5, and S6, but limits such exemptions to no more than six percent of the administrative unit's total lynx habitat and prohibits actions that would cause more than three adjacent Lynx Analysis Units (LAUs) to simultaneously exceed the S1 threshold. The Wildlife Report fails to show how the project's WUI delineation relates to these mandatory constraints or whether the Forest has accurately tracked cumulative WUI exemption use across the Lolo National Forest. If the WUI mapping is spatially inaccurate or inflated, it may artificially expand the area eligible for WUI exemptions—thereby violating the quantitative caps and undermining the protective intent of the NRLMD standards.

Because of these fundamental mapping flaws, the project's rationale for where logging should or should not occur is scientifically unsound. This in turn undermines the credibility of the agency's claims that it has "avoided sensitive areas" or "protected buffer zones." If the project cannot reliably map the spatial relationship between WUI zones, fuel treatments, and lynx habitat, it cannot credibly demonstrate compliance with VEG S1, S5, and S6 or fulfill its obligations under NFMA and NEPA to ensure consistency with the Forest Plan as amended by the NRLMD.

VI. Conclusion

The Wilkes Cherry Project, as currently analyzed, fails to meet the procedural and substantive requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), and the Lolo National Forest Plan. The Environmental Assessment (EA) does not take the required "hard look" at environmental impacts, omits essential quantitative analyses for wildlife and aquatic resources, and relies on outdated or incomplete data. As detailed in the sections above, these deficiencies prevent the public and decisionmakers from understanding the full scope of the Project's effects on forest health, fish and wildlife habitat, and ecosystem resilience.

To comply with NEPA and ensure a transparent and informed decision-making process, the Forest Service must:

1. Prepare a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that rigorously evaluates reasonable alternatives, including a reduced-scale alternative that avoids critical wildlife habitat and high-risk watersheds.
2. Reanalyze and disclose impacts to listed species, including Canada lynx and bull trout, in compliance with the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction and Forest Plan standards.
3. Conduct a watershed-scale cumulative effects analysis consistent with Forest Plan requirements, integrating past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions across ownerships.

4. Revise WUI mapping and fire-risk modeling to incorporate dynamic fire behavior, topographic, and climatic factors, and ensure consistency with wildlife conservation obligations.

Provide a meaningful opportunity for public participation by reissuing a revised EA or EIS for public review and comment prior to any decision.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Alliance for the Wild Rockies respectfully request that the Forest Service withdraw the Draft EA and prepare a revised analysis that fully complies with NEPA, NFMA, and the Lolo Forest Plan. Doing so will ensure that management actions are grounded in sound science, transparent public engagement, and a genuine commitment to conserving the ecological integrity of the Lolo National Forest.

Respectfully submitted,

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