

April 13, 2021

To:

The Honorable Deb Haaland, United States Secretary of the Interior
The Honorable Tom Vilsack, United States Secretary of Agriculture

CC:

Vicki Christiansen, Chief, United States Forest Service
Nada Culver, Acting Director, Bureau of Land Management
Martha Williams, Principal Deputy Director, Fish and Wildlife Service
Chris French, Deputy Chief for National Forest Systems, United States Forest Service
Glenn Casamassa, Regional Forester, Pacific Northwest Region, United States Forest Service
Christine Daw, Director, Ecosystem Management Coordination at U.S. Forest Service
Robert Bonnie, USDA Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and Senior Advisor for Climate
Kate Kelly, Deputy Chief of Staff - Policy, Department of Interior
Barry Bushue, Oregon and Washington State Director, Bureau of Land Management
U.S. Senator Ron Wyden
U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley
U.S. Representative DeFazio
U.S. Representative Blumenauer
U.S. Representative Bonamici

Subject: Raising Serious Concerns About the Vast Scale of — and Lack of Transparency, Analysis and Science Supporting — Post-Fire Roadside Logging Across Oregon

Dear Secretaries Haaland and Vilsack,

The undersigned organizations wish to congratulate you on your respective confirmations to the Biden Administration cabinet, and look forward to working with you to protect and restore our Nation's unparalleled and iconic public lands.

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters, we are writing because we are opposed to the unprecedented size and scope of roadside hazard-tree logging being proposed in fire-impacted forests on federally managed public lands across the State of Oregon by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Forest Service (USFS) — agencies housed within your respective jurisdictions. The agencies are proposing — or in some cases already carrying out — tens of thousands of acres of roadside logging in sensitive areas such as those designated for late-successional reserves or riparian habitat, Wild & Scenic Rivers corridors, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, and other vulnerable public lands.

Both agencies have failed to properly consider the massive impacts that these roadside proposals would have on the climate, local communities and on the ecology of the region. These projects are especially egregious in light of the cumulative impacts of the hundreds of thousands of acres of fire-impacted private and state forest that have been (or will soon be) logged in the wake of 2020's Labor Day wildfires, on top of the extensive post-fire and green timber sales that BLM and USFS are concurrently planning statewide.

Thousands of miles of roadside logging is proposed for roads that are rarely used or have been decommissioned and are now used by recreationists for hiking, wildlife watching, foraging, biking and hunting. This approach is in stark contrast with the lighter touch that the agencies have successfully used in the past. For example, after the 2017 Eagle Creek Fire in the famed Columbia River Gorge, the Forest Service chose to temporarily close low-traffic highways, allowing the area to naturally regenerate. Today, the area is beloved by a myriad of fire-dependent species and recreationalists alike for its unique and intact fire-impacted ecosystems. In stark contrast, after the Labor Day fires of 2020, USFS and BLM seem to be prescribing every road with a one-size-fits-all treatment.

The agencies should look to past management following the Eagle Creek Fire as a template for reducing hazard while preserving habitat, climate mitigation, and recreation values and close rarely used roads until they are safe to use, rather than logging them without analysis or public input. Spurs, roads converted to trails, and decommissioned roads should be entirely left alone to regenerate naturally. Clearcutting massive corridors along these remote, rarely used and decommissioned roads gives the impression that federal management agencies are executing a timber grab disguised as a safety exercise.

It is especially concerning that the BLM and USFS are proposing to carry out most of this historic landscape-scale logging on public lands using Categorical Exclusions (CE) to bypass the required environmental impact analysis and public participation processes mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA is the foremost environmental law ensuring that the public has a voice in decisions that may adversely impact the environment. It is designed to ensure all relevant considerations are fully taken into account and the best available science is followed. The concept of CEs is intended to allow for small projects with *de minimis* environmental impacts to proceed on an expedited schedule, not as an end run around the requirements of NEPA. CEs are intended to be the exception, not the rule. Moreover, the agencies have failed to consider that “extraordinary circumstances” exist that render the use of these CEs illegal.

As is true for the widespread post-fire logging projects being proposed on federally managed public lands in Oregon, a number of “extraordinary circumstances” exist in the areas proposed for hazard-tree removal that require a robust NEPA analysis and preclude utilization of a CE. Post-fire logging has significant environmental impacts including effects to critical habitat for federally protected threatened and endangered species, Wild and Scenic rivers, drinking water sources, and the quality of the human environment ([Karr et al. 2004](#), [Bond et al. 2009](#), [Donato et al. 2006](#), [Reeves et al. 2006](#), [Lee et al. 2015](#), [Hanson et al 2018](#)). Because of the significant impacts of this activity on sensitive landscapes, post-fire logging should only be carried out after full NEPA review, and only when truly necessary to protect human safety. In the context of over 30,000 acres of proposed post-fire timber sales and roadside hazard-tree logging across the state, application of CEs is completely inappropriate.

Based on their proposals and the evidence we have seen from ongoing logging, the agencies are removing far too many trees in their application of these roadside logging projects, many of which are not remotely hazardous, and many that would otherwise live past the spring. The 300-foot or 350-foot corridor along all roadways evaluated for hazard-tree logging is exorbitant. Only trees that are imminently hazardous to public safety should be felled, particularly in the reserve allocations (including late successional reserves,

riparian reserves, district-designated reserves, and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern). Trees within these corridors that lean away from roads should not be felled, even if they appear to be dying, as many of these trees will recover; those that do not will become snags which offer myriad ecological benefits and can stand for hundreds of years. And trees on a downhill gradient that could not fall uphill into the road should also be left as snags. Over 100 feet from the road, the chances of a tree falling in precisely the correct angle (out of the 360 degrees available to it) to land in the road are very slim. Again, especially in the reserve areas, the agency should take a conservative approach to felling trees that are not clearly within the zone of danger and are not clearly primed to fall toward the road.

In the areas that do truly merit extensive hazard tree removal, such as those along high traffic thoroughfares, the agencies should plan to leave a significantly increased number of felled trees as downed woody material. The benefits of large-coarse woody debris in ecosystem recovery processes are substantial and include maintenance of soil, mycorrhizal mats, “nurse logs,” woody debris for fish, microclimate for seedling establishment, and habitat for insect eating species ([Acker et al. 2017](#), [Dunn et al. 2020](#), [Johnston et al. 2018](#), [Kauffman et al. 2019](#), [Larson et al. 2005](#)). The agencies overstate the future fire risk of leaving downed woody material after tree felling. While we agree that slash and small-diameter materials should be disposed of, larger diameter downed wood provides a very low fire risk and a very high ecological value. Additionally, a wide variety of wildfire-dependent species rely on residual woody debris and snags in fire-impacted forests that would be irreversibly harmed by this logging ([Cobb et al. 2010](#), [Clark et al. 2011](#), [Kronland et al. 2012](#), [Thorn et al. 2018](#)).

Leaving burned trees on the landscape is also an effective form of ensuring carbon remains in the forest, rather than being released into the atmosphere. While fire-killed trees may take several decades or even centuries to decompose if left to naturally decay, during the logging and milling process, most of the carbon that they contain is rapidly released into the atmosphere ([Smith et al. 2006](#), [Gower et al. 2006](#)). Post-fire logging undercuts the natural carbon sequestration and storage capacity of post-fire forests and contributes to carbon emissions that worsen climate change. The combined impacts of post-fire logging disrupt forest health, degrade habitat, harm forested watersheds, and impact aquatic ecosystems by driving erosion and removing potential habitat in the form of woody debris ([Karr et al. 2004](#), [Donato et al. 2006](#), [Reeves et al. 2006](#)).

As such, the undersigned organizations request that the agencies reconsider the landscape scale roadside logging proposals currently moving forward across Oregon. We urge you to seize the opportunity to close rarely used logging roads and work to rein in the excessive logging road network that is causing untold negative impacts on our public forest lands. For any roadside logging that is deemed necessary, such as along high traffic thoroughfares, we encourage the agencies to abandon the inappropriate use of CEs and conduct full scientific analyses — including public notice and review — of the environmental and human health impacts of all proposed hazard tree removal as mandated by NEPA.

We further encourage the agencies to consider the below alternatives to managing hazards from falling trees:

- Close rarely used roads, and analyze whether spurs or overgrown roads truly receive public use that justifies hazard tree removal;

- Temporarily limit the use of roads that cannot be permanently closed until the risk of falling trees is naturally reduced;
- Top trees, rather than kill them, if shortening them would reduce the chance they would reach the road if they fell;
- Place signage warning people of post-fire hazards, particularly on roads that are little-used for public access;
- Prohibit cutting live, green trees, since all surviving trees are helping to rebuild the below-ground ecosystem, stabilize soils, and serve a valuable role as legacy structure and a recruitment pool for future large trees and snags;
- Focus tree removal on imminent danger or hazard trees located within striking distance of high use areas, such as developed sites, parking lots, and paved roads. Wherever possible, use hazard trees for restoration of streams and placement in nearby stands that lack large wood;
- Where they do not pose an immediate threat to safety, all trees presumed to be dying should be treated as live until they are dead, so as to not lose the ecological benefits of those trees that may survive;
- Take measures to stabilize impacted slopes in areas where roadside logging is unavoidable; and
- Analyze the cumulative impacts of all post-fire sales and roadside logging projects across agency jurisdictions.

We ask that you adopt these suggestions into a science-based regulation applicable to post-fire road and riverside hazard tree removal across your respective agencies — pursuant to the proper notice and comment rulemaking process — to provide clarity, transparency and consistency across the public lands network.

We hope this letter opens a dialogue about how best to ensure public participation in the science-based management of public forests. We look forward to scheduling a meeting to discuss our concerns and a path forward with you at your earliest convenience. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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