



January 3, 2017

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Northwest Forest Plan Science Synthesis  
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Re: Comments on the Northwest Forest Plan Science Synthesis

The Association of O&C Counties (AOCC) represents 17 Counties that lie within the area managed under the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP). In some of the Counties the majority of the lands are under Federal management. The Counties are affected in many ways by federal management policies, including the effects of those policies on timber harvesting on the "controversial" Forest Service lands and BLM managed O&C lands, the receipts from both of which are shared with AOCC's members pursuant to 43 U.S.C 1181f. The County revenue share from those lands is 50 percent. In addition, almost all of AOCC's members contain large areas of National Forests, the timber receipts from which are shared with Counties for funding schools and roads under the Acts of 1908 and 1911. The County share of receipts from those National Forest lands is 25 percent.

AOCC has a direct stake in how science synthesis characterizes the Forest Service and the BLM lands. Management of these lands generates revenue the Counties utilize to fund essential public services and contribute to the economic well-being of these rural communities. Our comments will address the scientific content of the synthesis and significant omissions.

The socioeconomic section states the key question facing the Forest Service as it revises its plans. "*How to meet the NWFP goal of producing a predictable and sustainable supply of timber in the future to contribute to community socioeconomic well-being.*" In addition to the payments to Counties from the sale of timber from BLM O&C lands, Forest Service controversial lands and ordinary National Forest lands, the Federal timber supply supports the wood products infrastructure that creates jobs critical for the socioeconomic well-being in rural communities. The Forest Service and the BLM have yet to demonstrate that under the NWFP they will deliver on President Clinton's promise of a predictable and sustainable supply of timber. The NWFP has directly and dramatically adversely impacted rural O&C counties.

The socioeconomic section states:

- 1) *“Under the NWFP record of decision, trees older than 80 years cannot be harvested, and the supply of younger trees for harvest through commercial thinning will decline over time. Thus it will not be possible to produce a sustainable supply of timber over the long term from federal lands, or to meet the probable sale quantity (PSQ) stipulated by the record of decision, under current practice and management direction.”*
- 2) *“Under the NWFP, federal timber harvest is focused on plantations within late-successional reserves and matrix lands. Timber harvest prescriptions rely on commercial thinning of stems younger than 80 years.”*
- 3) *“Landscape model projections for western Oregon that account for timber harvest and forest succession and the current distribution of stand age classes on old plantations on Forest Service lands both indicate that the availability of harvestable timber under the NWFP will decline in the coming decades.”*

Nowhere in the 1994 NWFP Record of Decision (ROD) does it state that trees older than 80 years cannot be harvested. The NWFP ROD estimated the annual probable sale quantity of 1.1 billion board feet for the NWFP, which was based on a sustainable strategy of thinning and regeneration harvest entirely from the Matrix land use allocation. Most of the volume in those estimates was from mature forest older than 80 years.

Under the options considered for the NWFP the most conservative was Option 1, which did not permit harvest of stands that were currently (in 1994) over 80 years. Option 1 had a sustainable harvest level of only 100 million board feet. The ROD stated this option was *not* selected because it would not provide an adequate timber supply when compared to the preferred alternative (Option 9). The statement in the synthesis that trees 80 years and older cannot be harvested was outside the range of alternatives even considered for the NWFP because under Option 1 the 80 year old trees of today were only 60 years old at the time of the NWFP. Statement number 2 above correctly states how the Federal agencies have conducted harvest, but this is not what the NWFP called for. Statement number 2 should include clarifying statements that this is a departure from NWFP Matrix management.

Statement number 3 above correctly states that current practices are not sustainable but fails to explain why the Federal agencies have abandoned the principles of sustained yield management. Both the Introduction and Socioeconomic sections state that *“Federal timber harvest in the NWFP area was only 54 percent of plan goals.”* This omits the fact that the agencies have been counting thinning harvest from reserves as meeting the plan goals. The harvest levels for the NWFP were based on the Matrix allocation alone (16% of the NWFP area) and were never intended to include thinning volume from reserves.

The harvest volume from thinning is not comparable to the timber production envisioned under the NWFP. Thinning of small diameter trees involves higher logging costs and the material is of lesser value than mature, larger diameter trees. As stated this thinning-only approach is not sustainable, thus it is not consistent with the NWFP goal for a sustainable harvest. The 20-year

monitoring goes further with misleading spin in stating - "*Volume offered from NFS and BLM lands has fluctuated, but has been on a general upward trend since 2000.*" The NWFP monitoring question to gauge if harvest goals are being met only asks if "*predictable levels of timber and non-timber resources available and being produced*". This omits the question of sustainability, treats all volume as the same in value, and does not show how much volume was harvested from the Matrix. The way this synthesis and monitoring reports the "achievement" of the NWFP harvest goals are incomplete and misleading, at best.

The Socioeconomic section states: "*Although the Secure Rural Schools Act was initially set to expire in 2006, it has been reauthorized and extended several times, most recently on April 16, 2015 for two more years.*" This misleadingly describes the status of program. We suggest the following, more correct statement: "Although the Secure Rural Schools Act was initially set to expire in 2006, it has been reauthorized and extended several times, most recently on April 16, 2015. That 2015 reauthorization provided SRS payments for FFY 2014 and FFY 2015. SRS has now expired with no SRS payment authorized for FFY 2016 or after."

Procedurally, the Federal agencies have adopted the NWFP differently. Both the BLM and Forest Service Region 5 revised their management plans directly after the NWFP EIS to use forest-specific information. Revised harvest levels for Region 5 and BLM were publically declared through NEPA and lowered from the NWFP estimates. Region 6 only amended their plans and did not revise the NWFP harvest estimates.

The BLM has conducted three plan evaluations since adopting the NWFP to publically disclose if the plans expectations were being met, and if there was new information that affected the expected outcomes. This is the first step in the BLM regulations to determine if plans need to be revised or amended and to focus on the issues to be addressed. It is a step taken by the BLM to identify problems that has not been taken by the Forest Service and is not adequately handled by the NWFP monitoring program.

The introduction section states: "*Nearly all existing old-growth forest on federal land was protected from timber harvest (although 100 percent protection was not part of the original plan).*" So what are the reasons there is currently more protection than called for under the plan?

The Survey and Manage (S&M) provisions of the plan have been the subject of three NWFP level EISs, all of which identified S&M single species management as being more impactful to timber harvest than the NWFP assumed. The USF&WS has issued a Recovery Plan that calls for management of individual owl sites. This again takes a single species management approach that is not consistent with the NWFP ecosystem management approach. Spotted owl critical habitat has been designated, which further limits lands assumed to be available for sustainable harvest under the NWFP.

Chapter 3 of the synthesis states: "*The congressional reserves and late successional reserves represented 28.1 percent (15.8 million ac) of all public and private forest lands in the NWFP area, which probably made it one of largest reserve systems for any temperate forested ecoregion in the world.*" As it is reported in the synthesis, the NWFP Matrix appears to be managed like the Reserves despite the NWFP starting off with one of the largest reserve systems

in the world. The BLM has recently revised their plans and has changed the configuration and management of their part of the NWFP Matrix, yet this is not mentioned in the report. BLM under their new plans has developed an alternative sustained yield management approach for their land, which although far below what is possible or legally required by the O&C Act, has at least made a commitment to sustained yield management. The Forest Service is not conducting a plan evaluation to report why the NWFP Matrix goals have not been achieved and this is a significant omission. Such an evaluation and problem identification step would help focus issues to be addressed in the synthesis report. It is also a necessary public disclosure that would distinguish clearly what the NWFP promised versus how it has been implemented.

The process diagram indicates this science synthesis is part of a pre-assessment step prior to the Forest Service conducting plan revisions, which take another 3-4 years. This linear approach is not integrating the planning process with the assessment of what new information is actually relevant for revising the Forest Service plans. This stove-pipe linear approach spanning such a long time frame does not facilitate efficient engagement with the public. The participation by very few members of the public at the synthesis forum is a reflection this process is not inviting active public participation.

The *Social and Economic Goals in Federal Forest Management Law and Policy* section does not adequately describe the laws related to sustained yield management. It is vague and misleading to only say "*the BLM's Federal Land Policy and Management Act, ... strengthened environmental goals and planning requirements,*" with no mention of section 701b in which FLPMA specifically defers to the O&C Act for the management of timber resources. The O&C Act is the foundation for managing the O&C lands under the principles of sustained yield. This section of the synthesis also does not reference the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act, which defines sustained yield requirements for the Forest Service.

The *Contributions of Federal Forest Management to Socioeconomic Well-Being in Rural Communities* section does not adequately describe the relationship of Federal forest management and how county services are funded and provided to rural communities. The Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program is described in the report as having an uncertain future. SRS payments have been declining for years, the program has expired and there are no bills before Congress that would renew it. Absent the SRS payments Counties are once again, as they did historically, slated to receive payments based on timber sale receipts.

Under the new BLM plan, if it is ever fully implemented, payments would be only 19% of historic payments. Recent BLM implementation (thinning only) would return only 8% of historic payments. In the rural O&C Counties commissioners are faced with closure of libraries, jails, and elimination of sheriff patrols, none of which is mentioned in the synthesis. The socioeconomic section never describes the level the Federal contribution to jobs and infrastructure if the NWFP implemented the sustainable harvest strategy for the Matrix as a baseline for the Federal contribution to community well being. The BLM's recent EIS establishes this baseline (No Action Alternative / NWFP) as well as recent implementation (thinning only) in terms of jobs and revenues that show the impacts Federal forest management makes to communities. The recent BLM EIS for revising their plans contains a discussion of "Distressed Areas" which the State of Oregon business department has developed and that makes

the connection between Federal land management and current community well being. None of this very current and relevant published BLM work is cited in the synthesis report even though parallels can be drawn from it for the Forest Service.

The statement *“National forest managers cannot ensure community economic stability through their management actions alone, particularly if such stability is assumed to arise from a consistent flow of timber”* describes a circumstance that was never expected. In multiple places expectations of the Federal Government was to “contribute” to community stability not to “ensure” it. *“With federal timber harvests declining in recent decades, forest managers and policymakers may want to consider whether timber once supplied from federal forests can continue to be substituted by private forestlands.”* As reported, the private lands have partially filled the void of harvest reductions from the NWFP. The Forest Service has not fulfilled either the volume promised under the NWFP nor its commitment to providing a sustainable supply. The State of Oregon statewide planning goal 4 for forest lands states “Comprehensive plans and zoning provide certainty to assure that forest lands will be available now and in the future for the growing and harvesting of trees.” Federal managers need to consider how to do their proper share given the capability of the land and the laws so all forest lands within the state are contributing.

The socioeconomic synthesis describes how economic activity is generated through recreational activities, restoration work, commercial and noncommercial forest products, and ecosystem services. All of these other sources of economic activity from Federal land can be achieved in a complimentary fashion with sustained yield management. These are complimentary and should not be characterized as replacements for the Federal government's obligations to manage for sustained yield timber production. None of these economic activities generate revenue the Counties can use to provide essential services for the well being of rural communities.

The synthesis report in Chapter 3 address late-successional reserve management and Chapter 7 describes management under the Aquatic Conservation System. Just as the Regional Ecosystem Office never had a Matrix management working group, this synthesis report lacks a section on application of sustained yield management as part of achieving the NWFP goals. It is the most significant shortfall in the NWFP, yet receives little scientific synthesis as to why the Forest Service has not implemented sustained yield management. Sustained yield management can take many forms, such as uneven aged management in the drier forest to maintain resiliency, silviculture treatments to develop and maintain complex forest conditions, very long rotation ages and a range of post-harvest retention strategies that return stands to habitat conditions rapidly after harvest.

Chapter 3 states *“the broad goals of forest biodiversity conservation would not be scientifically viable if they focused only on one stage of a dynamic system all developmental phases and ecological processes must be considered”*. Sustained yield management can produce and maintain all forest successional stages including complex early seral conditions. There are a wide range of silvicultural strategies to achieve sustained yield objectives and achieve ecological goals simultaneously. This synthesis report is lacking in addressing the most significant shortfall of the NWFP, sustainable harvest, and providing the managers grounding in how sustained yield management can meet the goals for both a sustainable and predictable supply of timber.

Dr. Duke stated the goals of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) in conducting this review are to: strive for expertise, balance, independence, and avoid any conflicts of interest. Susan Jane Brown, a lawyer and one the ESA reviewers, lacks independence and objectivity and has a direct conflict of interest with her current representation of parties in litigation on the BLM lands. The ESA listing of reviewers cites her as affiliated with Lewis and Clark College when in fact her primary affiliation is as an attorney for the Western Environmental Law Center. Paul Henson cannot be viewed as independent in his role with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has imposed policies on top of and in conflict with the ecosystem approach of the NWFP. These policies have imposed a second layer of a reserve<sup>1</sup> system, and have required single species management provisions that are some of the primary reasons why the NWFP Matrix strategy has never been implemented. AOCC also has concerns with the involvement of Drs. Norm Johnson and Jerry Franklin. In recent years they have become policy advocates in promoting an approach to forest management that treats economic objectives as mere byproducts. This is direct conflict with the goals of the NWFP. While they have extensive scientific experience, given their recent policy advocacy roles others with “fresh eyes” should be considered.

The direction for the peer review states that the process “enables public input” to the review team. AOCC requested a written record of the criteria used for peer reviewer selection, an explanation of how each peer reviewer meets those criteria, the credentials of each peer reviewer, and which synthesis sections they will be reviewing. The names of the peer reviewers have since been provided with very limited bullet points on the selection criteria. The credentials and which sections each reviewer is assigned were not provided.

The introduction section in describing the NWFP allocations states - *Matrix (for ecologically sensitive timber production)*. The "ecologically sensitive" statement needs a citation, if that terminology can be found in the NWFP.

These comments were prepared by AOCC staff, including Chris Cadwell, retired BLM employee after 33 years. Mr. Cadwell has significant expertise and involvement with harvest estimates for the NWFP including; FEMAT team and NWFP EIS, wrote timber effects sections for two of the Survey and Manage EISs, and lead analyst for the BLM in three land use planning efforts designing sustainable strategies for the BLM portion of the NWFP.

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<sup>1</sup> Reserve defined as precluding sustained yield management.