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Dear Interested Citizen:

Notice of Opportunity for Scoping and Public Comment on the Proposed Action for Aquatic Restoration in the Pacific Northwest Region of the USDA Forest Service

The Pacific Northwest Region of the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) is proposing the Regional Aquatic Restoration Project, which is a suite of aquatic restoration activities that would be implemented by the Forest Service throughout Washington and Oregon. The type of activities that will be analyzed have previously been authorized by US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and NOAA Fisheries Service (NMFS) under their existing Aquatic Restoration Biological Opinion (ARBO II). ARBO II is a programmatic Biological Opinion as a result of Endangered Species Act (ESA) consultation with these agencies to cover these types of aquatic restoration projects. The list of activity-types is provided under the proposed action section. We would like to invite you to participate in the planning effort and are asking for scoping comments on the proposed action. Scoping is used to identify issues that will drive the depth and breadth of the analysis.

The Pacific Northwest Region of the Forest Service as an Aquatic Restoration Leader:

With decades of experience planning, designing, implementing, and monitoring aquatic restoration projects, the USDA Forest Service is one of the aquatic restoration leaders in the Pacific Northwest. This is primarily due to our focus upon priority projects in priority watersheds, interdisciplinary nature, and our expert restoration advisory teams. Our restoration is focused upon priority watersheds established through the Watershed Condition Framework (https://www.fs.fed.us/biology/watershed/condition_framework.html). Restoration actions come from watershed restoration action plans developed for each priority watershed. These are informed by watershed analysis and ESA recovery plans. We approach restoration with one of our agency's greatest strengths, an interdisciplinary approach, and rely on our partners for additional expertise and support. Over the last decade or so, we have been using expert restoration advisory and planning teams to assist our Forests in their restoration planning, design, and implementation, including the Aquatic Restoration Assistance Team, the Aquatic Organism Passage Design Assistance Team, and the Revegetation Assistance Team. The use of these approaches will ensure informed and quality restoration projects region-wide into the future.

Purpose and Need:

The Forest Service has a backlog of aquatic restoration opportunities essential to the recovery



of rare aquatic species, but has limited resources (both personnel time and funding). An inordinate amount of personnel time and funding is spent on National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) planning for individual aquatic restoration projects covered by ARBO II and featuring similar issues. The purpose of this project is to increase the pace of aquatic restoration by the Forest Service within the region.

The Forest Service recognizes the need to accelerate the pace and scale of aquatic restoration in the Pacific Northwest to address legacy impacts to aquatic and riparian habitat. In Oregon and Washington, the Forest Service lands are key to rare species restoration, as 23 of the 28 Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed fish species and nearly 25 percent of the designated critical habitat in this area occur on National Forest System lands.

We have a responsibility to restore federally listed fish populations, restore water quality, and manage for biodiversity. Management direction in our Forest Plans amended by the Northwest Forest Plan and PACFISH/INFISH does a good job protecting aquatic and riparian habitat, but legacy impacts remain and, in many cases, we will not meet our restoration responsibilities without active restoration.

The Region's restoration needs are extensive. Many streams and rivers are lacking wood from past cleanout efforts, past logging and fire suppression in riparian areas, barriers to downstream wood migration, and streamside roads. Streams and rivers have been channelized and straightened from past agricultural or other drainage activities. Roads and trails encroach upon rivers and streams, restricting their floodplain access while increasing sedimentation and decreasing wood input and shade. Riparian vegetation has been affected by past timber harvest, fire suppression, recreation, livestock grazing, and other past management activities. Fish migration and river hydrology have been affected by legacy instream structures such as culverts, dams, diversions, tide gates, and others.

The backlog of restoration needs is immense. For example, our regional fish migration barrier database indicates we have more than 3,000 fish migration barriers (primarily undersized culverts) in perennial streams within the region and have been fixing them on an average of 40 per year over the last decade. In addition, we estimate at our current pace of restoration, we will complete the essential restoration projects identified in our Watershed Restoration Action Plans for our Priority Watersheds in 100 years. This is an unacceptable pace and needs to be accelerated.

Proposed Action:

The Forest Service proposes to restore aquatic and riparian habitat in the Region by implementing the activities under the categories covered by ARBO II. The projects are essential actions identified in watershed restoration action plans developed for priority watersheds identified through the Watershed Condition Framework and directed at a watershed with ESA-listed fish and/or water quality issues per the Clean Water Act. The project types are in 18 activity categories, which include project design criteria and conservation measures, listed in the programmatic biological opinion from US Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries.

The list of project activity types are:

1. Fish Passage Restoration (Stream Simulation Culvert and Bridge Projects; Headcut and Grade Stabilization; Fish Ladders; Irrigation Diversion Replacement/Relocation & Screen Installation/Replacement.)
2. Large Wood, Boulder, and Gravel Placement (Large Wood and Boulder Projects; Engineered Logjams; Porous Boulder Weirs and Veins; Gravel Augmentation; Tree Removal for Large Wood Projects)
3. Dam, Tidegate, and Legacy Structure Removal
4. Channel Reconstruction/Relocation
5. Off- and Side-Channel Habitat Restoration
6. Streambank Restoration
7. Set-back or Removal of Existing Berms, Dikes, and Levees
8. Reduction/Relocation of Recreation Impacts
9. Livestock Fencing, Stream Crossings, and Off-Channel Livestock Watering
10. Piling and other Structure Removal
11. In-channel Nutrient Enhancement
12. Road and Trail Erosion Control and Decommissioning
13. Non-native Invasive Plant Control
14. Juniper Removal
15. Riparian Vegetation Treatment (controlled burning)
16. Riparian Vegetative Planting
17. Bull Trout Protection
18. Beaver Habitat Restoration

More than 3 decades of conducting NEPA analyses for these types of projects in the region has identified and addressed similar issues each time project effects are scoped and analyzed. We have developed and continue to implement Best Management Practices to address those typical issues. This proposal will help us accelerate aquatic restoration by increasing our efficiency in planning. We recognize, in some rare cases, there may be special site-specific localized issues needing to be addressed but not covered by this region-wide decision. Included in this proposal is a NEPA checklist to be utilized at the project level by the local interdisciplinary team to identify and address those special issues. Cultural resource and special status species surveys will occur prior to each project and, if found, will be mitigated for through avoidance in time and space. The public will be notified 60 days prior to each project implementation and after the project is complete.

A preliminary and final environmental assessment (EA) will be prepared to document the environmental effects associated with implementing these projects region-wide, following receipt of scoping comments on this proposed action and preliminary effects analysis.

The region-wide analysis and associated decision starts public coordination regarding our proposed aquatic restoration. After the region-wide decision, additional steps will ensure we account for any possible site-specific issue for each project. These steps include the use of a project-specific checklist, surveys (where required), and public notification to ensure all site specific issues have been addressed. The public would also be notified upon project

completion, as detailed below.

1. **NEPA Check List** – Prior to project implementation, a project-specific locally based interdisciplinary team would complete a check list to identify any project-specific issues not covered under the region-wide NEPA analysis. The check list would be signed by the local responsible official. If the interdisciplinary team determines the project is consistent with the region-wide analysis, the project could proceed. If additional, project-specific issues arise, they would be addressed through supplemental analysis.
2. **Rare Species and Cultural Resource Surveys** – Rare species and cultural resource surveys will be conducted prior to implementation of the project, when needed. A programmatic agreement with both State Historic Preservation Offices that would allow post-decision surveys will be pursued prior to the signing the decision for aquatic restoration. If rare species or cultural resources are observed, they will be mitigated for through avoidance in either time or place.
3. **Project Notification** – Once the NEPA check list has been signed by the local decision-maker, the USDA Forest Service unit would notify the public of the planned restoration project 60 days prior to project implementation, using an online database. The signed NEPA check list would be attached to the notification.
4. **Project Completion Report** – After project completion, the USDA Forest Service unit would submit a project completion report to the public no later than November 30th of each year, even if a project was not implemented.

In addition to the proposed action, the no action alternative will be considered. Under this scenario, aquatic restoration would continue to occur at the current pace and scale, depending upon available funds. Although programmatic agreements exist for ESA consultation and Clean Water dredge and fill requirements, NEPA would be conducted on a project-by-project basis.

Preliminary Effects Analysis on the Proposed Action:

The following summary of effects of the proposed action in terms of context and intensity are described below:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the federal agency believes on balance the effect will be beneficial.

We expect potential short term impacts, but long term benefits to some resource areas as a result of the proposed action. Aquatic and riparian restoration is generally ground disturbing. In most actions, the proposed restoration projects would be expected to contribute low amounts of sediment to water bodies during implementation. Best management practices such as sediment barriers and working in drained channels would be expected to minimize sedimentation. Water quality may also be impacted in the short term during aquatic invasive plant treatments by using EPA approved herbicides consistent with label direction.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety. The proposed action would have no effect on public health or safety. Effects to water quality would be minimized, localized, and short term. If water quality is slightly impacted, any contaminant would be substantially diluted as it moves downstream.
3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, Wild and Scenic Rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The proposed action is region-wide, so it may be in proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and ecologically critical areas. However, the intent of these proposed restoration projects is to protect historic/cultural resources through avoidance and benefit the other geographic areas by improving the same characteristics for which they were designated. For example, some restoration techniques would improve the natural qualities of park lands, improve water availability and water table elevations for prime farmlands and wetlands, improve associated outstandingly remarkable values for Wild and Scenic Rivers, and restore the natural state of ecologically critical areas. If a project would occur in a Wild and Scenic River Corridor, a Section 7 Analysis will occur prior to project implementation.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Past analyses of aquatic restoration in the region have identified and addressed similar issues each time project effects are scoped and analyzed and the effects have not been scientifically controversial. The intent of the proposed action is to improve the human environment through restoration. The results of the proposed actions will improve the availability of resources for human use, including water quality and quantity, recreational opportunities, and fisheries.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The region has been implementing and monitoring the effects of the proposed types of restoration projects over the last few decades, so uncertainty and risks are unlikely.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The region has been implementing aquatic restoration projects for decades and significant effects have not been identified, so establishing a precedent for future actions with significant effects is not expected.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but

cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.

Significant cumulative effects are not expected with the implementation of the proposed action, based on monitoring of past projects, even considering the long term nature of the proposed action.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

All projects would be surveyed prior to implementation to avoid adverse effects to historic properties. The proposed action would not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places and won't cause destruction to significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. Any potential effects would be mitigated for through avoidance.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The proposed action is intended to benefit endangered and threatened species and their habitat. The proposed restoration actions are categories under ARBO II, approved by USFWS and NMFS to improve ESA listed species within aquatic and riparian habitats. The biological opinions are available upon request.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The intent of the proposed action is to restore the environment where it has been affected by past management actions, so actions would be consistent with Federal, State, or local environmental laws.

Scoping and Comment Period:

You or your organization were/was identified in the scoping process as someone who might be interested in this planning effort. Public input is a vital part of the planning process. As part of planning we invite your comments on the proposed action. Your specific written comments will be used to determine if there are any issues that need to be addressed in the environmental analysis. Project documents will be posted to the following website: http://data.ecosystem-management.org/nepaweb/nepa_project_exp.php?project=53001

Specific written comments as defined by the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) at 36 CFR 218.2 should be within the scope of the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the

proposed action, and must include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider. It is the responsibility of all individuals and organizations to ensure that their comments are received in a timely manner. While comments will be accepted any time during the process, to establish standing for objection eligibility, we would like your scoping comments no later than January 19, 2018.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on these proposed actions and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents and anonymous commenters will not be considered as eligible objectors. A 30-day Notice and Comment period will be provided at a future date (§218.24). Only those who respond to this request for comments will remain on the mailing list for this project.

Specific written comments must be submitted to: Jim Peña, Regional Forester, in care of James Capurso, Regional Fisheries Biologist. Comments can be written and mailed to the address noted below (or to PO Box 3623, Portland, OR 97208). You may also hand-deliver your comments during normal business hours, which are 8:00 to 4:30 Monday through Friday, excluding Federal holidays, to the Regional Forester, 13th Floor, 1220 SW 3rd Avenue, Portland, OR, 97204. Comments may be submitted electronically to comments-pacificnorthwest-regional-office@fs.fed.us.

An objection period, if required, will follow the regulation found in §218.7. For objection eligibility (§218.5), only those who have submitted timely, specific written comments during any designated opportunity for public comment may file an objection. Issues to be raised in objections must be based on previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project and attributed to the objector, unless the issue is based on new information that arose after a designated opportunity to comment (§218.8(c)).

If you have any questions or would like additional information, please contact James Capurso, Regional Fisheries Biologist, at 503-808-2847 or jcapurso@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

/s/ JAMES M. PEÑA
REGIONAL FORESTER