



THE JOHN MUIR PROJECT OF EARTH ISLAND INSTITUTE

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August 26, 2018

Jody Noiron, Supervisor
San Bernardino National Forest

Dear Supervisor Noiron,

On behalf of the John Muir Project of Earth Island Institute, we are submitting this supplement to our objection to the proposed “Grass Valley Fire Restoration Project” (Grass Valley Project, or project).

1: In the Response to Comments document, which was only made available yesterday, the Forest Service attempts to dismiss concerns over adverse impacts to imperiled and declining spotted owls by claiming that this project is needed ostensibly to prevent wildland fire near the community. However, on pp. 16-17 of the Grass Valley project Fire/Fuels report, the Forest Service plainly admits not only that this project will not stop wildland fire from reaching the community (as fire is predicted to burn through all areas of the project, at all years after implementation), but also that the project will result in “increasing fire behavior” next to homes in most areas for decades. This finding—that post-fire logging followed by artificial tree plantation establishment increases fire behavior—is consistent with empirical scientific research in actual fires (Thompson et al. 2007—attached). Again, there is no rational connection between the facts found and the decision made for this project. An EIS is required not only to fully analyze impacts to spotted owls, but also to analyze, through a reasonable range of alternatives, the best and most effective way to protect homes from wildland fire in the Grass Valley area.

2: The Response to Comments document claims that “the project would not likely result in permanent abandonment of spotted owl territories” (emphasis added). In other words, the Forest Service is now admitting that the proposed post-fire logging of snags and logging of live trees would be associated with abandonment of the two spotted owl territories in the project area, but claims such abandonment would not be “permanent”. What does this mean? That spotted owls might return in 20 years? 30 years? What is the basis for this assumption/claim? No scientific studies are offered for support.

3: The Response to Comments document claims that the project “would not be expected to render currently suitable habitat unsuitable” and that “acres of suitable habitat would remain the same”, and states that these assumptions are the basis for the conclusion that the project would not threaten the viability of spotted owls. However, this assumption is contradicted by Hanson et al. (2018), which found that higher-intensity fire patches (“snag forest habitat”) are in fact suitable foraging habitat, and that post-fire logging of this suitable foraging habitat—even as little as 5% of a territory (the project proposes far more post-fire logging than this in both occupied spotted owl territories, according to the EA)—reduces acres of suitable habitat and causes loss of spotted owl occupancy. Moreover, the Forest Service’s assumption here is contradicted by the Grass Valley Wildlife Biological Evaluation, which states (p. 141) that, based on current science, higher-severity fire areas “retain suitability for foraging”

for spotted owls and, in fact, the owls often preferentially select such areas for foraging, due to high levels of standing snags and native shrub cover—both of which would be severely reduced if the project is implemented, according to the BE.

4: Since our EA comments were submitted in April 2018, an exhaustive meta-analysis of spotted owls, wildland fire, and post-fire logging was published (Lee 2018—attached), which finds that mixed-intensity wildland fire, including high-intensity fire patches, does not reduce spotted owl occupancy, and in fact higher levels of high-intensity fire increases reproduction. The meta-analysis also reports, again, that post-fire logging removes suitable foraging habitat and harms spotted owl occupancy, exacerbating population declines. This is significant new information that must be fully considered and analyzed in an EIS.

5: The Response to Comments document states: “According to the article, Hanson et al. 2018 used the Forest Service FACTS database to determine post-fire logged areas. The FACTS database is a reporting database and does not include data about intensity and type of treatments within treatment polygons (for example, a 20-acre clear cut treatment unit that and another 20-acre treatment unit that has 3 hazard trees felled would represented the same in the FACTS database).” This is flatly incorrect, and clearly stems from a failure to actually read Hanson et al. (2018), which clearly states that post-fire logged areas were in higher-intensity fire areas, and were identified by a detailed assessment of a combination of all three of the following: satellite imagery; on-the-ground surveying; and the FACTS database. Thus, the Forest Service’s assumption here—that lower-intensity fire areas with only 3 or so snags removed per acre were included in the post-fire logged areas along with higher-intensity fire areas in which most snags were removed—is incorrect.

6: The Response to Comments document cites to pp. 152-153 of the Wildlife BE ostensibly for the proposition that proposed actions would not reduce small mammal prey availability, but the BE only makes this claim with regard to the nesting/roosting habitat (live tree stands), not with regard to the snag forest habitat areas that were created by higher-intensity fire, and which the BE admits are suitable foraging habitat. The BE also admits (pp. 151-153) that, by reducing shrub cover, snags, and downed logs, the proposed action would reduce habitat for small mammal prey of spotted owls in the higher-intensity fire areas (snag forest habitat), but then ignores this in the conclusion about whether the project would threaten spotted owl viability.

Sincerely,



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