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**PROTECTING
NATURAL
RESOURCES**

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Hume Lake Ranger District Planner
Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National Monument
35860 E. Kings Canyon Road
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cc: Carol Hallacy
Ara Marderosian
Alison Sheehy
Stephen Montgomery
Joe Fontaine

Subject: Scoping Comments regarding the Hazard Tree Slash Clean-Up Project

Sequoia ForestKeeper (SFK) and the Kern-Kaweah Chapter of the Sierra Club (SC) thank you for the opportunity to comment on the subject proposal.

Thank you for your call-back to answer several questions that relate to our concerns as well as the more detailed map. It is very helpful to keep communications open and dialog ongoing. We would like to encourage continued discussion about our concerns.

Project Description

The Forest Service implemented contracts starting in 2016 and through 2017 to fell hazard trees in the Hume Lake Ranger District along roads and within recreation sites. Those contracts, however, did not include the clean up and/or removal of trees and associated slash. Material was placed in and in the vicinity of several recreation sites and along two portions of fuel breaks, which has resulted in a large build up of fuels that make protection of the facilities and fuel breaks infeasible. The Forest Service now proposes to remove a portion of the accumulated materials from the Giant Sequoia National Monument in accordance with a “clear need” determination for tree removal. Moreover, after a clarification from you, the district planner, the project also would fell additional trees that pose safety or operability concerns during the removal of the accumulated materials using a “clear need” determination for tree felling. The project would also allow Caltrans to completely remove portions trees along highways 180 and 245 left over after crews piled, chipped, or burned much of the tops and smaller trees along those roads.

In total, the project area covers 2,009 acres, would remove almost 23,000 trees and almost 14 million board feet of tree boles from the Monument by various means, including as biomass for burning, wood products, or by burning materials at high heat on site in air curtain burners.

SFK and SC urge you to consider the following specific comments, and because tree removal is proposed from the Giant Sequoia National Monument, that additional NEPA scrutiny in at least an EA is required.

1. Prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) and Consider Alternatives

The size and large volume of wood proposed to be removed from the project area is as large as any timber sale operation the Sequoia National Forest has implemented in the last several decades. Hence, the project likely constitutes a major federal action that could require analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Because an EIS may be necessary, the Forest Service should first prepare an EA and consider alternatives to determine if the effects from the project may be significant and require a full analysis in an EIS.

Environmental effects analysis from the damage to soils and wildlife habitat from felling and moving the hazard trees on the scale described in the proposal has not yet taken place. Presumably, the tree felling was done using a categorical exclusion from NEPA without public involvement. Certainly, neither SFK nor SC were contacted with respect to those earlier proposals. The effects from those actions and the proposed action must now be considered in a comprehensive EA with full public involvement and alternatives before proceeding with further implementation.

2. Proposed Alternatives

Alternatives should include a no-action alternative, the proposed action and additional alternatives that remove less material, move material to other parts of the Monument, and an alternative that doesn't remove by burning. In other words:

- a. No action;
 - b. Proposed action;
 - c. Reduction to no less than 20 tons/acre of the largest trees on site for down woody debris because the standard in the Monument Plan is 10 to 20 tons/acre for wildlife and soils;
 - d. Moving felled materials to areas that don't meet a minimum of 10 tons/acre for down woody materials; and
 - e. Removal of trees and tree boles without burning, thereby mitigating the immediately releases of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere.
- ## 3. Effects from burning on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and climate change must be analyzed

The proposal would remove much of the materials by burning as biomass or on site in curtain burners, which would release tens or hundreds of thousands of tons of GHGs into the atmosphere over a very short period. Leaving the material in the forest to naturally decay would significantly reduce the pulse of GHGs in comparison to the proposal. Moreover, the Forest Service and other private and public entities are likely implementing similar large-scale biomass and other burning activities throughout the Southern Sierra Nevada mountains due to similar levels of tree mortalities from the drought; and in combination, these activities will likely release massive amounts of GHGs into the atmosphere over a very short period of time, compared to natural decay, thus exacerbating contributions to climate change.

Despite efforts to eliminate them, consideration of climate change and GHG emissions are still required by the Forest Service's Washington Office. *See* <https://www.fs.usda.gov/ccrc/topics/nepa> (*see also*, Attachment A, hereto).

Each alternative should discuss and analyze carbon emissions from implementation, and the no-action alternative should also provide information about the potential for carbon storage (or a reduced rate of GHG emissions from natural decay) from foregoing project implementation.

The environmental analysis must disclose the emissions from biomass and on-site burning for each action alternative. For this, the Chief's office of the Forest Service has generated specific direction on how to discuss climate change effects in a NEPA analysis. *See* Climate Change Considerations in Project Level NEPA Analysis (Jan. 13, 2009) (attached as Attachment A). That document includes fuel reduction projects as projects that should disclose direct effects on climate change:

- **The effect of a proposed project on climate change** (GHG emissions and carbon cycling). Examples include: short-term GHG emissions and alteration to the carbon cycle caused by hazardous fuels reduction projects, GHG emissions from oil and gas field development, and avoiding large GHG emissions pulses and effects to the carbon cycle by thinning overstocked stands to increase forest resilience and decrease the potential for large scale wildfire.

Id. at 2. To assist in disclosing these effects, the Forest Service provides tools that can help managers determine the direct contributions of GHG emissions from project burning or treatments. *Id.* at 5 (*FOFEM 5.5, Consume 3.0, and the Forest Vegetation Simulator*). Because the Forest Service has tools or models to effectively calculate emissions, it must disclose these emissions for each of the action alternatives. In addition, the guidance document suggests that the NEPA document include a qualitative effects analysis. *Id.* Such an analysis should include the cumulative effects, quantified in an "individual, regional, national, global" context. *Id.* at 6.

Finally, the guidance suggests that NEPA provides direction on how managers should respond to comments raised during project analysis regarding climate change:

1. Modify alternatives including the proposed action.
2. Develop and evaluate alternatives not previously given serious consideration by the Agency.
3. Supplement, improve, or modify the analysis.
4. Make factual corrections.
5. Explain why the comments do not warrant further agency response, citing the sources, authorities, or reasons which support the Agency's position and, if appropriate, indicate those circumstances that would trigger agency reappraisal or further response.

Id. at 8. At the very least, because this project includes fuel reduction treatments and burning that will contribute GHG emissions, the EA must include an acknowledgment of carbon emissions and must provide a response to this issue.

Moreover, the analysis should account for and quantify (as part of the cumulative effects analysis) not only the emission from prescribed burning on-site and the emissions from any biomass that is removed from the project area and later burned off-site, but also the contribution of emissions from transporting this material for off-site burning, and the contribution of emissions from planning and implementing the project by a contractor and by the Forest Service.

This holistic approach to account for GHG emission is necessary to provide managers and the public with the kind of information under NEPA to make informed choices between alternatives and to mitigate for climate change, and to consider and assess the larger picture of GHG contributions from all projects on the national forests that may contribute GHG emissions.

Finally, if the Southwest Regional Office has or is planning to conduct additional analysis on the effects from the cumulative treatments from similar projects in the Southern Sierras, the analysis should reference and disclose that information.

For Sequoia ForestKeeper and the Kern-Kaweah Chapter of the Sierra Club,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "René Voss". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

René Voss – Attorney at Law