



May 3, 2021

Forest Supervisor Christopher Carlton
Plumas National Forest
159 Lawrence Street
Quincy, CA 95971
Via email: comments-pacificsouthwest-plumas-featherrvr@usda.gov

In re: Feather Falls Post-Fire Project

Dear Supervisor Carlton:

Thank you for soliciting public comments concerning the Feather Falls Post-Fire Project. The undersigned organizations are concerned that the Forest Service is rushing into a project to be approved by a Categorical Exclusion (CE) without first identifying and addressing all issues.

Although we understand the intent of the Forest Service to expedite the recovery of the economic value of dead and dying trees, we are concerned that the project as currently described lacks key information, particularly in regard to the potential impacts of the hazardous tree removal and reforestation proposed along 7.3 miles of the Feather Falls National Recreation Trail, which is located in the Feather Falls Scenic Area and Bald Rock Inventoried Roadless Area (IRA).

A Special Place

The Feather Falls Scenic Area and Bald Rock IRA encompasses a segment of the Middle Fork Feather Wild River. The first National Wild and Scenic River established in California, the Middle Fork Feather drains the even larger Middle Fork IRA upstream, which is separated from the Bald Rock IRA by the narrow Milsap Bar Road corridor. In part due to the surrounding roadless land, the Middle Fork watershed has been rated as possessing good biotic integrity. The Wild and Scenic River is also a state-designated Wild Trout Stream.

Because it was one of the first rivers included in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, we don't believe that the Forest Service has formally identified the outstandingly remarkable natural and cultural values of the river, which federal law requires to be protected and enhanced. Fortunately, the National Park Service identified the outstandingly remarkable

values of the Middle Fork Feather Wild and Scenic River in the 1981 Nationwide Rivers Inventory (NRI).¹ The NRI identified the Middle Fork's outstandingly remarkable values to be:

Scenery – The river flows through a spectacular canyon past huge granite outcrops, canyon walls and large boulders. Curtain Falls on the Middle Fork, Feather Falls on the Fall River, Seven Falls on the South Branch Middle Fork, and numerous other waterfalls and cascades add to the outstanding scenery. Little Volcano also provides a rare view of the upper limits of the Middle Fork Wild and Scenic River.

Recreation – The river and its surrounding largely roadless canyon provides a wide variety of outdoor recreation opportunities, including fishing, swimming, camping, and hiking. The river canyon's limited access also offers a unique wilderness experience in a highly scenic setting. Since the NRI was completed, improvements in whitewater technology have made the Middle Fork and some of its tributary streams popular whitewater destinations for expert kayakers and rafters. Also not mentioned in the NRI are three national trails that provide access to the river, canyon, and the undeveloped IRAs, including the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, the Feather Falls National Recreation Trail, and the Hartman Bar National Recreation Trail.

Fish – The Middle Fork possesses one of the most outstanding wild trout fisheries in California. A state-designated Wild Trout Stream, the Middle Fork's abundant pools and riffles provide excellent habitat for native wild rainbow trout.

Geology – In Bald Rock Canyon, the Middle Fork's bedrock riverbed, house-sized boulders, sheer rock walls, rounded eminence of Bald Dome, and the spectacular granite features of the adjacent Big Bald Rock Special Interest Area constitute an outstandingly remarkable geology value. Although not mentioned in the NRI, the diverse geology of upstream segments of the Middle Fork contribute to the outstanding geology value. The unique character of the Little Volcano Special Interest Area on the rim of the Middle Fork Canyon, (including Limestone Point and its caverns), and the rock formation known as Marble Cone, which stretches down to the river, also contribute to the river's outstanding geology (although these formations are not within or near the project area).

Several tributaries of the Middle Fork Feather Wild and Scenic River were identified as eligible for wild and scenic protection by the Forest Service, including the Fall River and the South Branch Middle Fork River in the project area, as well as the Little North Fork, Bear Creek, Onion Valley Creek, McCarthy Creek, and Nelson Creek.² Forest Service planning direction and

¹ To our knowledge, the Middle Fork's outstanding values are found only in the 1981 NRI. Subsequent NRI updates, including the version currently available at <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/rivers/nationwide-rivers-inventory.htm> do not list these values, nor are they listed in the 1988 Plumas Forest Plan or the Middle Fork Feather Wild and Scenic River Management Plan. The Management Plan is an undated document that was apparently published prior to the 1976 passage of P.L. 94-486 by Congress, which amended the Middle Fork's start point to "...the confluence of its tributary streams one kilometer south of Beckwourth, California..."

² Letter to the public from Plumas Forest Supervisor H. Wayne Thornton, Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers, Appendix S to the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, June 8, 1994.

guidelines require the protection of the free-flowing character and outstandingly remarkable values of these streams. The also contribute significantly to the good biotic integrity and water quality of the Middle Fork.

No project activities appear to be proposed in the Middle Fork Wild River Zone or any of the eligible tributary streams, but potential cumulative impacts of project activities outside the river corridor on the Middle Fork’s outstanding scenery, recreation, fish, and geology values must be assessed and mitigated. Also, potential impacts on the Middle Fork’s eligible tributaries should be assessed in regard to future projects in response to the North Complex Fire.

Feather Falls Potential Wilderness

There is an extensive history of public support for the establishment of a Feather Falls Wilderness, which encompasses much of the Feather Falls Scenic Area, Bald Rock IRA, and the lowest segment of the Middle Fork Feather Wild River. In the 1979 RARE II process, 55% of all public comments (including petition signatures and form letters) and an astounding 96% of all personally written letters supported wilderness protection for this area. Despite the public support, the Forest Service failed to recommend wilderness. But because of this strong public support, a proposed 9,000-acre Feather Falls Wilderness was included in the various iterations of the California Wild Heritage Act introduced by Senator Barbara Boxer and House sponsors from 2002-2007.³ Any project proposed in this area must recognize and acknowledge the public’s continuing desire to see this area permanently protected. Any project in response to the North Complex wildfire must protect the area’s wilderness qualities and restoration efforts should focus on maintaining and restoring these qualities.

Forest Plan Direction for the Feather Falls Scenic Area and Bald Rock Semi-Primitive Area

The 1988 Plumas Forest Plan provides management direction and standards and guidelines for the Feather Falls Scenic Area, which was administratively established by the Forest Service in the 1960s. Relevant guidance is also provided in the Plan for semi-primitive areas, including the semi-primitive non-motorized area that encompasses the Bald Rock IRA. Guidance relevant to this project includes:

GENERAL DIRECTION	STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES
<u>Recreation</u> : Provide dispersed recreation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the Scenic Area, maintain ROS classes, including Semi-Primitive Non-motorized. • For the Bald Rock Semi-Primitive Area (which includes the Bald Rock IRA), manage all lands basically in accordance with ROS class of SPNM,

³ The wilderness proposal includes the 3,800 acre Bald Rock IRA and the undeveloped wildlands in the Middle Fork Feather Wild River Zone.

	and allow no motorized recreation travel except for over the snow and management access.
<u>Visual Resources</u> : Maintain high visual quality objectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the Scenic Area, meet Retention VQO. • For the Bald Rock Semi-Primitive Area, meet Retention VQO, but provide adequate treatment of damage from catastrophic events.
<u>Cultural Resources</u> : Protect significant cultural properties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the Scenic Area and Bald Rock Semi-Primitive Area, conduct long-term inventory and provide interpretation.
<u>Timber</u> : To protect scenic and recreational values, use appropriate special cutting methods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the Scenic Area, harvest timber only when the scenic quality can be maintained or improved. • For the Bald Rock Semi-Primitive Area, harvest timber only for salvage purposes, to remove safety hazards, or if visual experiences are enhanced; obtain approval of Forest Supervisor for any timber harvest, and construct only temporary roads if needed for salvage operations.
<u>Fire and Fuels</u> : Use prescribed fire to reduce high risk of wildfire and use fire suppression strategy and tactics that least alter the landscape or disturb the land surface.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the Scenic Area, use a control strategy in a manner to minimize landscape alteration and land disturbance, undertake no pre-suppression activities that disturb the land surface, and obliterate disturbances from fire suppression action. • For the Bald Rock Semi-Primitive Area, maintain the semi-primitive character of the area when prescribed fire is employed. • Undertake no pre-suppression activity that significantly disturbs the land surface. • Obliterate disturbances resulting from emergency fire suppression activities.

1988 Plumas National Forest Plan, Rx-3. Feather Falls Scenic Area, pgs. 4-75—4-77, 4-88 – 4-90.

The clear guidance in the plan is to protect the scenic qualities of the area and its semi-primitive non-motorized recreation values. The project is required to adhere to these specific standards and guidelines.

The Roadless Area Conservation Rule and The Bald Rock IRA

Within the Feather Falls Scenic Area is the 3,850-acre Bald Rock IRA.⁴ IRAs are protected from road building and logging by the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (RACR).⁵

According to section 294.12 of the Rule, a road may not be constructed or reconstructed in an IRA with limited exceptions such as when a road is needed to protect public health and safety in the cases of an imminent flood, fire, or other catastrophic event that would cause loss of life or property.

We appreciate that the Forest Service is not proposing in the Feather Falls Post-Fire Project to build roads in the IRA. However, the Project description notes that removal of hazard trees may be accomplished using “conventional ground logging equipment” along the 7.3 miles of trail. In addition, the description indicates that feller bunchers and tracked chippers may be used within the IRA.

Logging in the IRA is restricted under RACR Section 294.13, which states that timber may not be cut, sold, or removed in IRAs with limited exceptions. In particular, the cutting or removal of generally small diameter timber is allowed to improve habitat for at-risk species or to reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire effects, as long as it will maintain or improve one or more *roadless characteristics*, which include:

- high quality or undisturbed soil, water, and air;
- sources of public drinking water;
- diversity of plant and animal communities;
- habitat for threatened, endangered, or sensitive species dependent on large undisturbed areas of land;
- primitive, semi-primitive non-motorized, and semi-primitive motorized classes of dispersed recreation;
- natural appearing landscapes with high scenic quality;
- traditional cultural properties and sacred sites;
- and other locally identified unique characteristics.

⁴ The Bald Rock IRA is actually much larger than 3,850 acres. For some unknown reason, the Forest Service in RARE II excluded nearly six miles of Middle Fork Feather Wild River Zone, which divides the IRA in half. Including the roadless acreage within the Wild River Zone increases the Bald Rock IRA acreage to approximately 5,770 acres. The Bald Rock IRA is also separated from the larger Middle Fork IRA upstream only by the narrow Milsap Bar Road corridor.

⁵ 36 CFR Part 294, Special Areas; Roadless Area Conservation, Fed. Reg. Vol. 66, No. 9, Jan. 12, 2001.

It is clear under the RACR that logging in IRAs has to maintain or improve roadless characteristics. In response to comments on the draft RACR concerning exemptions or exceptions from the RACR's road building prohibition, the Forest Service provided this clarification: "The public health and safety exception at paragraph (b)(1) in the final rule applies only when needed to protect public health and safety in case of an imminent threat of a catastrophic event that might result in the loss of life or property. It does not constitute permission to engage in routine forest health activities, such as temporary road construction for thinning to reduce mortality due to insect and disease infestation."⁶

The project description states that motorized feller bunchers will be used to carry felled hazard trees out of the IRA along "...approximately 0.15 mile at the beginning of the (Feather Falls) trail..." In addition, hazard tree removal along the trail will utilize a tracked chipper to chip and broadcast slash. Tracked chippers can be quite large. Use of a large industrial chipper could result in significant soil disturbance in the IRA, Scenic Area, and along the Feather Falls National Recreation Trail.

Regardless of its relatively limited footprint along the first 0.15 miles of the Feather Falls NRT, feller bunchers not be used within the IRA. The project already requires hand removal of hazard trees along 7.15 miles of the NRT. The area subject to hand removal should be expanded to include the initial 0.15 miles of the NRT to avoid motorized equipment impacts on the IRA. In any event, the use of feller bunchers and tracked chippers must be assessed in terms of improving one or more roadless characteristics as required by RACR Section 294.13. In addition, the use of feller bunchers, tracked chippers, and other "conventional ground logging equipment" must comply with the Plumas Forest Plan direction to maintain the semi-primitive non-motorized recreation opportunities and retain visual quality. We urge the use of less intrusive methods of hazard tree removal within the IRA.

Reforestation

We assume that the Project's reforestation component applies to areas within the IRA/Scenic Area subject to hazard tree removal and to the adjacent area targeted for salvage logging. Although we support reforestation along the NRT within the IRA and Scenic Area, it must be done in a manner that protects and maintains the scenic and semi-primitive recreation qualities of the area.

Standard reforestation practices have emphasized establishing dense conifer cover with gridded planting, sometimes called "pines in lines." It also requires shrub control and thinning over time – funding for this kind of intensive management has become increasingly limited, reducing the capacity for young plantations to develop early resilience to fire and drought.⁷

⁶ Ibid, pg. 3255.

⁷ Tamm Review: Reforestation for resilience in dry western U.S. forests; North, M.P. et al., Forest Ecology and Management, Sep. 2018.

Dense, un-thinned plantations have contributed to increasingly destructive wildfires in California and throughout the West. Reforestation along the NRT within the IRA and Scenic Area must avoid establishing a 7.3-mile-long densely planted tree farm. Not only does this not meet the Forest Plan direction to maintain and protect visual quality and semi-primitive recreation values, it can potentially lead to further catastrophic fires in the future, particularly if the Forest Service does not have the future funding to control competing vegetation and thin dense plantations.

North et al. recommend a “three zone” approach to reforestation within large areas of contiguous tree mortality. This approach works with natural recruitment from live seed trees around the periphery, a second zone encompassing accessible areas using a combination of planting clustered and regularly spaced seedlings that varies with microsite water availability and potential fire behavior, and a third zone defined by remote, steep terrain that limits reforestation efforts to the establishment of founder stands. The three zone approach includes the early use of prescribed fire to build resilience in developing stands subject to increasingly common wildfires and drought.

According to North et al., “Spatial pattern matters. Planting all seedlings on a regular spacing does not have an ecological analog, fails to account for microsite variability, and creates a uniform density lacking a gradient of resource competition. Ultimately, such a strategy depends heavily on costly additional treatments to create more natural patterns.”

We believe that allowing areas with existing seed trees to reforest naturally and clustered reforestation planting in other areas is more likely to produce a landscape that meets the Forest Plan direction to protect the area’s high visual quality and semi-primitive non-motorized recreation opportunities. In addition, reforestation should focus on re-establishing the diversity of the mix conifer and hardwoods forest using seedlings and cuttings from the site or region.

Categorical Exclusion for Reforestation

The project notice cites 36 CFR §220.6(e)(11) in regard to using a Categorical Exclusion for the reforestation component of the project within the Bald Rock IRA and Feather Falls Scenic Area. This component will include hand-cutting of trees and shrubs, yarding by carrying or dragging, hand or machine piling for burning during the winter months, establishment of research plots, release treatments to free young trees from competing vegetation, pruning, digging fire control lines by hand and application of future prescribed fire, and maintenance activities as needed on multiple entries over three years to maintain desired conditions.

We note a number of restrictions in 36 CFR §220.6(e)(11), including limiting post-fire rehabilitation activities to 4,200 acres or less, requiring consistency with Agency and Departmental procedures and applicable land and resource management plan, prohibiting the use of herbicides or pesticides, prohibiting construction of new permanent roads or other permanent infrastructure, and completing all project activities within 3 years following the fire (August 2023).

We have already outlined the pertinent forest plan management direction for the area. In addition, we particularly support the prohibition on the use of herbicides and pesticides in this sensitive area. We also understand the need to create fire control lines for future prescribed fire, but the Project Notice should provide a map as to where these fire control lines will be established, particularly within the Bald Rock IRA and Feather Falls Scenic Area, and within view of the Feather Falls National Recreation Trail, to allow for public comment.

Summary

The project should:

1. Recognize the Bald Rock IRA, Feather Falls Scenic Area, Feather Falls Wilderness proposed by the public, and the Feather Falls National Recreation Trail as key attributes of a special place requiring protection and restoration.
2. Assess, avoid, and mitigate potential cumulative impacts on the Middle Fork Feather's outstandingly remarkable scenery, recreation, fish, and geology values from project activities outside of the Wild River Zone.
3. Fully comply with the national Roadless Area Conservation Rule and Forest Plan direction for the Bald Rock Semi-Primitive Area, and Feather Falls Scenic Area.
4. Avoid establishing a linear 7.3-mile-long tree farm along the Feather Falls National Recreation Trail. Instead, the "three zone" restoration approach suggested by North et al should be used, particularly in regard to planting clustered and regularly spaced seedlings that vary with microsite water availability and potential fire behavior.
5. Permanent fire control lines for future prescribed fire should be mapped and shared with the public for comment. Fire control lines should not adversely impact the semi-primitive recreation values and outstanding scenery of the area.
6. No herbicides or pesticides should be used in the reforestation component.

We also strongly support the establishment of research plots that will help inform future restoration activities. In addition, we appreciate and are looking forward to the Feather Falls Post-Fire Project field trip with the Forest Service proposed on Friday, May 14, 2021.

Please inform us of any decision concerning the Feather Falls Post-Fire Project. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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