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William Wells, Olympic Region Manager  
Via: SEPA Center  
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Re: Tree Well timber sale – SEPA comments (File No. 24-060403)

Dear Mr. Wells,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the "Tree Well" timber sale. Units 1 and 2 of the above referenced timber sale are located within four miles of the North Olympic Coastline, and in close proximity to several known occupied marbled murrelet nest sites (Figure 1). Logging of these units would result in the destruction of more than 100 acres of structurally complex, naturally regenerated, mixed hardwood and conifer forest, and the removal of dozens of large, cedar and fir trees that range up to four feet in diameter and more than 160 feet tall.<sup>1</sup>

These stands, which are similar in age and structure to adjacent stands in which murrelet nests were documented, obviously provide suitable murrelet nest sites, and constitute the closest thing to old growth that remains along the North Olympic plateau and northern foothills of the Olympic Mountains. Murrelet populations continue to decline in Washington State.<sup>2</sup> Now is not the time to be clearcutting suitable murrelet habitat, and further fragmenting and building new roads through mature forests, particularly in areas where occupied nests have been documented.

The decision to specifically target these rare forest ecosystems for commercial logging is clearly at odds with FSC standards; defies the objectives of the State Trust Lands Habitat Conservation Plan; violates established Board policies and procedures; and undermines efforts to combat climate change.<sup>3</sup> The continued, systematic destruction of many of the natural, lowland forests in

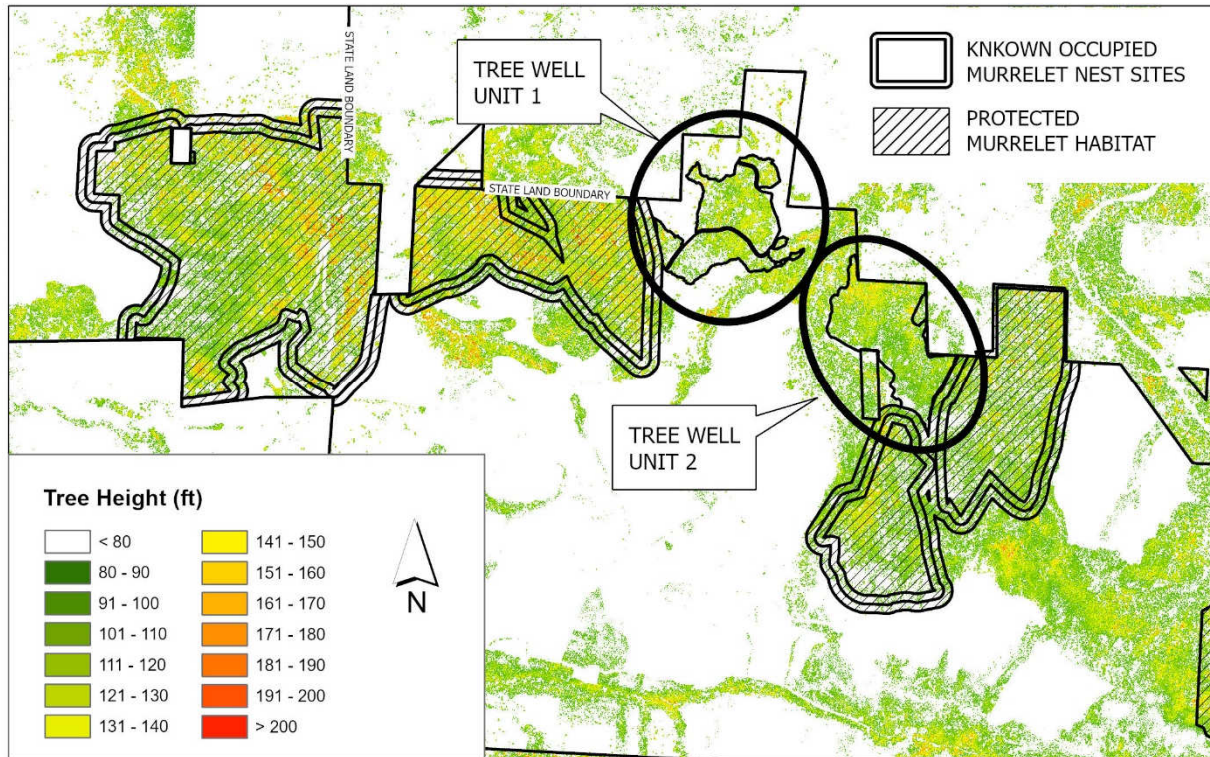
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<sup>1</sup> Based on LiDAR, field observations, DNR forest inventory data, and the SEPA checklist prepared by DNR for the Tree Well timber sale.

<sup>2</sup> McIver, et. Al. 2021. Status and Trend of Marbled Murrelet Populations in the Northwest Forest Plan Area, 2000 to 2018. US Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, General Technical Report PNW-GTR-996.

<sup>3</sup> See Forest Stewardship Council, 2015. FSC Principles and Criteria for Forest Stewardship, Principle 6.9, p. 15: "The Organization shall not convert natural forest to plantations" except when that conversion will "produce clear, substantial, additional, secure long-term conservation benefits in the management unit."

**Figure 1. Adjacent Occupied Murrelet Nest Sites**



this and other lowland watersheds of Western Washington constitutes perhaps the most urgent environmental crisis in our state, and is scientifically, financially, and economically indefensible.

The Board of Natural Resources and DNR recognized during the habitat conservation planning process in 1997 that large contiguous landscapes of mature and old growth forest habitat, upon which many sensitive species of concern depend, were absent across much of its forested land base. This is particularly true along the North Olympic coast, where low elevation forests, which once provided thousands of acres of easily accessible, high quality nesting habitat for murrelets, have heavily logged. The North Olympic plateau is now dominated by tree plantations and agricultural fields. Most of the few remaining blocks of natural, older lowland forests near the North Olympic coast are located on lands managed by DNR.

To provide the habitat necessary to avoid further adverse impacts to federally listed, and other sensitive or at-risk species, DNR made repeated commitments to restore old growth forests across 10-15% of each HCP planning unit in Western Washington.<sup>4</sup> For example, DNR is obligated under the Policy for Sustainable Forests, the Department's procedures for Identifying and Managing Structurally Complex Forests (PR 14-004-046), and the Multi-species Conservation Strategy of the HCP to work toward maintaining or restoring "fully functional" or "old growth-like" forests across

<sup>4</sup> DNR's Addendum to the FEIS for the 2007 (page 2) sustainable harvest calculation describes forests in the niche diversification and fully functional stages of stand development as "old-growth like" forests.

10-15% of lands covered by the HCP. DNR commonly refers to the 10-15% target as the "older-forest target". In the Policy for Sustainable Forests FEIS, the Board's preferred alternative "emphasizes that the 10 to 15 percent older-forest targets will be accomplished" within 70 to 100 years.

According to the HCP (Table IV.14), and Table 11 of the 1997 Biological Opinion, at least 150 years is required for a stand to reach the "fully functional" development stage. DNR's own analysis suggests that no more than three percent of state trust lands managed by DNR in Western Washington currently meet this threshold; and no more than 3.5% of forests within any of DNR's five west side planning units (excluding the OESF) may be classified as "older forests".<sup>5</sup>

The 1997 Biological Opinion for DNR's HCP anticipated that the Department would work to maintain or restore a minimum of 12% of lands covered under the HCP within each planning unit to fully functional conditions by 2096. According to the Intra-Service Biological Opinion, it is necessary for DNR to provide a minimum percent of fully functional forest to "ensure that stand structural stages not provided by other conservation strategies of the HCP are present in the HCP area." The agency has abdicated those commitments by clearcut logging thousands of acres of structurally complex forest every year — a class of rare future old growth specifically identified for protection in DNR's Policy for Sustainable Forests.

DNR is required under the terms of its Policy for Sustainable Forests to manage structurally complex forests to meet older forest targets.<sup>6</sup> Although DNR anticipates that they will meet their older forest target in the Straits HCP planning unit by 2090, data obtained from DNR's Public Disclosure Office indicates that DNR has only set aside 5,836 acres of structurally complex forest in the Straits HCP planning unit for conservation, which represents **less than 5% of the Straits HCP planning unit** that has protected, structurally complex forests that are excluded from commercial timber harvest.

There are many wildlife species that depend on structurally complex habitat for survival. For example, the conservation of suitable breeding, foraging, and nesting habitat for the northern goshawk, Vaux's swift, pileated woodpecker, myotis bats, Pacific fisher, and olive-sided flycatcher, are dependent upon the "large contiguous landscapes of mature and old growth forest" that the 1997 HCP is "expected" to provide.<sup>7</sup> Other representative species that require structurally complex forest habitat include the brown creeper, northern pygmy owl, Townsend's warbler, red tree vole, northern flying squirrel, and black bear.<sup>8</sup> DNR's "cut it now" and "grow it later" approach to habitat conservation defies common sense, and jeopardizes the viability of species that are already at risk of becoming listed as threatened or endangered.

DNR's PR 14-004-046 directs DNR to develop landscape level management strategies to achieve the 10-15% older forest target during the forest land planning process that will be conducted for

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<sup>5</sup> See Table 5, Estep & Buffo. 2021. Identifying Stands to Meet Older Forest Targets in Western Washington.

<sup>6</sup> See Policy for Sustainable Forests, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> See DNR. 1997. Final Habitat Conservation Plan, pp. III-78 – III-99.

<sup>8</sup> See DNR. 2019. Alternatives for the Establishment of a Sustainable Harvest Level for Forested State Trust Lands in Western Washington, Final Environmental Impact Statement.

each HCP planning unit. PR 14-004-046 is the mechanism DNR developed to ensure compliance with the 10-15% older and fully functional forest objectives of the Policy for Sustainable Forests and its related State Trust Lands HCP. The Procedure lays out a step-by-step plan, which entails identifying existing structurally complex forest stands that will grow into older forests, designating those forests in a mapping database, and protecting them from logging until the planning area's forest goals are met. Only after the 10-15% target is met may structurally complex forest stands be considered for harvest activities. DNR completely ignored these procedures, and never identified, mapped, designated, or protected structurally complex forests as required.

DNR is planning the Tree Well timber sale as an even-aged, commercial timber sale, that would involve the clearcutting of most of the existing forest. However, PR 14-004-046 dictates that:

*Harvest activities in older forest and other structurally complex stands designated as suitable to meet older forest targets must enhance the older forest condition.*

The above referenced timber sale, as described in the SEPA checklist, will not enhance older forest conditions or contribute to the development of fully functional forests.

The Policy for Sustainable Forests and associated HCP implementation procedures constitute DNR's plan for implementing the HCP, and also serve as mitigation for timber harvest on lands covered by the HCP. Commercial harvest of the oldest and most biologically diverse lowland forests remaining in Western Washington is inconsistent with Board of Natural Resources approved policies and procedures intended to preserve and promote biodiversity and the development of older or fully functional forests. Although DNR has not designated the lands included in this timber sale as contributing to older-forest targets, DNR's own analysis indicates that structurally complex forests that have been designated for this purpose represent less than 5% of all forestlands managed by DNR the Straits HCP planning unit, as noted above. The stands proposed for harvest obviously have the potential to contribute to the attainment of older forest targets and should be managed for that purpose.

Furthermore, data obtained from DNR's Public Disclosure Office suggests that half of the lands that DNR has designated as contributing to fully functional stand structure objectives in the Straits HCP planning unit are located within riparian buffers. While riparian buffers serve many important functions, a management strategy that relies so heavily on riparian corridors and unstable slopes to meet older-forest and fully functional stand structure objectives results in a fragmented landscape that is subject to edge effects, lacks interior forest habitat, lacks large conifers, and is often dominated by alder and other early successional or invasive species. We believe this approach is both unrealistic, and inconsistent with the intent of the Multispecies Conservation Strategy and the objectives of the Policy for Sustainable Forests.

There is still much we do not understand about the ecology of native Pacific Northwest forests and the organisms that are found there. According to Lindenmayer and Franklin (2002):

*"Effects of human disturbance on biodiversity are poorly known, and some impacts may be irreversible. Others such as synergistic and cumulative effects can be extremely difficult to quantify or predict.... [and] for some species will probably never be known..."*

*Ultimately, this makes large ecological reserves valuable as 'safety nets' relatively free from human disturbance."*

It is well established that rotting snags and logs found in older forests provide tunnels, dens, and nesting cavities required by many organisms, from spotted owls to land snails and springtails. Dead and dying trees are used by a broad array of both vertebrates and invertebrates for foraging and nesting, and roosting. They also provide essential habitat for many species of mushrooms. A study of Douglas fir forests in western Oregon found that large logs in advanced stages of decay had the richest bryophyte flora of any forest substrate.<sup>9</sup> These features are very difficult to restore in managed forests. Despite our best efforts to retain these structures during harvest, much of this habitat is lost when these forests are logged. Natural forests also contain significant components of non-commercial tree species such as silver fir, spruce, cottonwood, alder, and big leaf maple. Some wildlife species have been found to be either strongly associated or dependent on specific tree species.<sup>10</sup> When these species are logged and replaced with commercial nursery conifer seedlings, the species that depend on them may be lost as well.

Older, native forests can also contribute to the productivity of working forests or plantations. For example, small mammals including voles, shrews, and squirrels that find refuge in older forests may disseminate spores of mycorrhizal fungi to forests managed for timber production. Natural parasites and predators found in mature or structurally complex forests may also play an important role in preventing or limiting pest outbreaks in managed stands.

It is unlikely that beneficiaries will be dependent on timber revenue 20 years from now in the same way they are today. A new carbon market is rapidly emerging, and it may soon be more profitable to leave these older trees in the ground than cut them down. New laws and policies intended to combat climate change are likely to create many more jobs in restorative forestry, fire risk reduction, and ecologically-based forest management 20 years from now on state forest lands than there are in timber sale contracts today. DNR took an encouraging first step toward transitioning to a carbon-based model with their recent "carbon project", which will "protect some of our most ecologically and culturally valuable forests, while generating millions of dollars in revenue for the schools, colleges, and critical local services that state trust lands support."

DNR's commitments to restore old growth forests in Western Washington, along with the threats posed by climate change, demand that the agency move away from the antiquated practice of targeting the oldest and most carbon-dense forests that remain for commercial harvest. Instead of logging these rare, older forests, we recommend that DNR focus on developing a management strategy to generate revenue for trust beneficiaries that conserves older forests, accelerates the development of fully functional forests, and is consistent with the requirements of DNR's Habitat Conservation Plan, the Intra-Service Biological Opinion for the HCP, PR 14-004-046, the Policy for Sustainable Forests, and the state's commitment to combat climate change.

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<sup>9</sup> See Rambo, T. R. 2001. Decaying logs and habitat heterogeneity: implications for bryophyte diversity in western Oregon forests. *Northwest Science* 75: 270-277.

<sup>10</sup> See Hagar, Joan C. 2007. Wildlife species associated with non-coniferous vegetation in Pacific Northwest conifer forests: A review," in *Forest Ecology and Management*, Vol. 246, pp. 108-122.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'SK', with a horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.

Stephen Kropp  
Director