

August 23, 2019

Dear USFS,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on proposed rule 36 CFR 220 – a revision to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA.) I am a citizen and trained biologist/ecologist currently involved in public lands management as a volunteer advocate and stewardship project leader. I am currently engaged in a BLM Resource Management Plan, a USFS Forest Plan revision, and a piece of federal legislation encompassing multiple designations. I know the value of public input when it comes to federal land management, and I vehemently oppose any revisions to NEPA that would reduce community involvement or curtail environmental analysis during planning processes. The proposed changes to the NEPA would, in fact, result in just that – less public input and less environmental analysis resulting in deleterious effects on natural resources including water and air quality, erosion, wildlife corridors and habitat (aquatic and terrestrial) and sensitive species. The proposed rule could cause negative impacts on human health given lower air and water quality and increasing gas emissions while lowering the earth's capacity to sequester carbon. Furthermore, diminished recreation opportunities would result from increased roads and extractive activities on our public lands.

The following components (among others) of the proposed rule are unacceptable and devastating to our public lands:

- **Adoption of seven new categorical exclusions (CEs) and expansion of two existing CEs** to shield from any environmental review or public process a wide array of projects. The Forest Service estimates that up to 3/4 of decisions that currently receive public input could proceed under CEs in the future. These include, but are not limited to:
 - Broadly defined “ecosystem restoration and/or resilience activities” on up to 7,300 acres, including commercial logging of up to 4,200 acres, as long as it includes at least one restoration add-on (e.g., replacing a culvert to restore fish passage). The CE could be used to authorize up to 6.6 square miles of logging with *no* public input or environmental analysis;
 - Converting illegal off-road vehicle (ORV) routes to official Forest Service System roads or trails – contrary to decades of Forest Service travel and transportation management policy designed to make more ecologically and fiscally sustainable the agency's bloated transportation system and ensure that any ORV route designations “minimize” impacts to resources and conflicts with other recreational uses; and
 - Construction of up to 5 miles or reconstruction of up to 10 miles of Forest Service System roads – also contrary to long-standing policy that the agency is no longer in the business of building permanent system roads and that projects may be implemented via construction of only temporary roads that must be decommissioned.

- **Elimination of the requirement to conduct public scoping** for 98% of all proposed actions, including those covered by CEs. The agency would be required to provide notice of CE projects only in its Schedule of Proposed Actions or SOPA, which may not be published until after the decision has been made and the project completed. Without an opportunity to weigh in on proposed CE projects, the only option for the public to have its voice heard would be to resort to the federal courts.

- **Removal of Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) and potential wilderness areas from the classes of actions that normally require preparation of an EIS.** The proposed rule reasons that the Roadless Area Conservation Rule provides adequate protections for IRAs. A robust body of case law demonstrates that damaging projects are often proposed in IRAs, despite the Roadless Rule. Moreover, the Roadless Rule itself is under significant threat. The proposed rule would similarly remove projects in potential wilderness areas (i.e., areas identified in a Forest Service wilderness inventory) from increased public scrutiny and environmental analysis.

For these reasons (among others) I totally, unconditionally oppose 36 CFR 220 and urge the USFS to eliminate this proposed rule from further consideration.

Thank you for your consideration of my comments.

Robyn Cascade