

**Statement of
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United States Department of Agriculture**

Before The

**Subcommittee On Forests And Forest Health
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives**

Concerning

The Sierra Nevada Framework Project

January 29, 2000

Madam Chairman And Members Of The Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Administration on the Sierra Nevada Framework for Conservation and Collaboration, and to report on the progress of the environmental impact statement being done to amend the Forest Plans for the national forests that encompass the Sierra Nevada. I am Bradley E. Powell, Regional Forester for the Pacific Southwest Region. Also here as a witness today is Dr. Hal Salwasser, Director of the Pacific Southwest Research Station. We are accompanied today by Dr. Danny Lee, Science Integration Team Leader, and Dr. Kent Connaughton, Project Manager.

The Sierra Nevada Framework is an effort to integrate the best available science on wildlife and sensitive species needs into forest plans covering the Sierra Nevadas to help prevent future federal listings of California spotted owls and other old-growth dependent species as either threatened or endangered. The framework is also an aggressive effort to deal with the serious hazardous fuels and invasive species issues in the Sierra Nevada. The effort will help the Forest Service be sound resource stewards, and will help ensure that there is a more predictable and stable supply of goods and services from national forests in the Sierra Nevadas. It has also helped the Forest Service develop closer collaborative relationships with the public.

Background

Early research on the status and viability of the California spotted owl showed that owl populations in some areas within the Sierra Nevadas were at risk. In response, the Forest Service adopted interim management guidelines to protect California spotted owl populations in 1993, through a Decision Notice for the California Spotted Owl environmental assessment commonly referred to as "CASPO".

We subsequently began developing a long-term management plan for owl habitat and other

issues. A draft EIS (DEIS) for this work was released in 1995. A revised DEIS was scheduled for release in 1996, which was also about the time the Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project (SNEP) report was produced. The Secretary of Agriculture then empaneled a Federal Advisory Committee to review the DEIS as it related to new scientific information contained in SNEP, and provide advice. The Federal Advisory Committee offered recommendations for addressing inconsistencies with the new scientific information, identified shortcomings in some key elements of the DEIS analysis process, and stressed the need for an ecosystem as well as collaborative approach to planning.

In response to the Federal Advisory Committee report, Chief Dombeck instructed the Pacific Southwest Region and the Pacific Southwest Research Station to take an ecosystem approach in developing a conservation strategy for California spotted owls and all forest resources through strong collaboration with partners and researchers. The goal the Chief stated was "to ensure the ecological sustainability of the entire Sierra Nevada ecosystem and the communities that depend on it."

Accordingly, in 1998, the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region, Pacific Southwest Research Station, and Intermountain Region initiated the Sierra Nevada Framework for Conservation and Collaboration (Framework) as a renewed effort to work with other state and federal agencies, tribes and citizens to integrate recent science into the management of national forests in the Sierra Nevada. The Framework is built on two primary principles; 1) to apply the best science to understanding problems and designing solutions for a sustainable environment, and 2) to provide people opportunities to participate meaningfully in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of national forest policy.

Draft Environmental Impact Statement

In November 1998, following a series of well-attended community and statewide public meetings where we received information and advice from agencies, tribes, counties, scientists, and members of the public, the Forest Service issued a Notice of Intent (NOI) outlining initial strategies for future management of the national forests of the Sierra Nevadas. There was an initial 60 day scoping period for comments on the proposed action.

The public helped the Forest Service identify the five problem areas that needed to be addressed for the Sierra Nevadas. The five problem areas outlined in the NOI are; old forest ecosystems, aquatic, riparian and meadow ecosystems, fire and fuels management, noxious weeds, and, lower westside hardwood ecosystems. The alternatives in the NOI addressing these problem areas were deliberately broad, to represent the wide range of public opinion that exists regarding these issues.

In the draft EIS, all alternatives will have an aquatic strategy, an old growth strategy, and a fire strategy. The preferred alternative will balance fire and fuels management with the need to protect and restore the ecosystem in terms of old forests and aquatic, riparian, and meadow ecosystems. The interrelationship of these issues and the degree to which they provide for a long-term management strategy for the Sierra Nevada will be a key focus in this EIS process.

Social and economic effects for each alternative are also issues of concern to the public, especially those who live in or near the Sierra Nevada. The EIS process is looking at the

effects of each alternative on indicators such as number of jobs and wages related to national forest timber, estimated County receipts, and potential impacts on minority and low-income populations, for example. The analysis considers various scales, from local communities to Counties and larger geographic regions.

Timeline and Costs

The EIS project has taken longer than expected. The original timeline was for a final EIS by July 1999. One of the lessons learned from this is that the public involvement and collaboration process, when done as extensively as has been done for this effort, takes time. On the plus side, the last year-and-a-half has given us a tremendous opportunity to engage people with a variety of interests, which is reflected in the draft EIS alternatives. Additionally, there have been efficiencies gained by taking a regional approach to this plan, as opposed to having 11 separate planning processes going to revise each Forest Plan covering the Sierra Nevada.

After the draft EIS is issued in the near future, we will engage the public in many different ways for comment and input to the draft EIS. We expect to review the public comment and issue the final environmental impact statement and record of decision by fall of 2000.

In the last two years, the Forest Service has expended approximately \$6 million on the Framework project. Our estimate is that it will take about \$2 million more to complete the final EIS this year. We think this investment is minimal compared to the vast number of benefits that this management effort will bring to the region, such as having a cohesive framework for addressing the hazardous fuels issue.

Public Involvement and Collaboration

Public involvement in the Sierra Nevada Framework is an enormous ongoing effort. Starting in February 1998, the Forest Service engaged potential collaborators in other federal, state, county and tribal governments with interests and responsibilities in the Sierra Nevada.

Since then we have held nearly 70 public meetings and workshops in California and Nevada. We have received and considered the ideas offered in some 8,000 pieces of correspondence from approximately 6,000 people and organizations. We have participated in meetings with tribes, and have met with County Boards of Supervisors throughout the Sierra Nevada. Groups as diverse as the California Forestry Association, California Cattlemen's Association, the Sierra Forest Protection Campaign, the Quincy Library Group and the Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics have provided input.

The collaboration and public involvement effort was so good that people understand the issues and have engaged us in a very detailed and direct way. For example, a number of organizations submitted fully developed alternatives for our consideration in the process, and these alternatives and the information and ideas that they represent are reflected in the range of alternatives in the draft EIS. They actually made our job easier in developing the EIS because we understood what they wanted, and they understood that several key resource issues had to be addressed.

Collaboration with the science community is a key, ongoing process. Scientists and managers from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, the Environmental Protection Agency, universities and research stations continue to work closely with us.

Relation to the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery Act

The Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery Act (QLG) was enacted into law on October 21, 1998, as Title IV of the Omnibus Appropriations Act of 1999. A final EIS was completed, and a Record of Decision (ROD) was signed on August 20, 1999, to implement the Act. One of the decisions within the ROD required that all treatment of suitable owl habitat within the area covered by the Act would be deferred until such time as new direction was issued as part of the Sierra Nevada framework EIS project. The Sierra Nevada project, in turn, has incorporated the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery Act into the analysis for all of the alternatives being considered.

Relation to the Rulemaking Process Proposing the Protection of the Remaining Roadless Areas within the National Forest System

There are approximately 2.4 million acres of inventoried roadless area within the 11 national forests in the Sierra Nevada. A Notice of Intent to prepare an environmental impact statement for a proposal to protect remaining roadless areas within the National Forest system was published in the Federal Register on October 19, 1999. Science gleaned from the Sierra Nevada process will help guide the roadless rulemaking. Also, it is important to remember that the QLG Act prohibits entry into roadless areas during the 5 year pilot project timeframe.

Summary

The Sierra Nevada Framework is an ongoing process, and will continue beyond the record of decision for the final EIS. The EIS is an important milestone, as it will deal with significant issues related to five problem areas in the Sierra Nevada. We will continue to integrate the best science into natural resource management and work collaboratively with others, to ensure sustainable environmental, economic and social conditions in the Sierra Nevada to meet the needs of people both now and in the future.

This concludes my written statement. Dr. Salwasser and I would be happy to answer any questions you or members of your subcommittee may have at this time.