

## **Conservation Group Challenges Massive Timber Sales on the Salmon-Clearwater Divide**

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On April 28, 2021, Friends of the Clearwater filed suit in the U.S. District Court of Idaho, challenging the U.S. Forest Service decisions authorizing two massive timber sales next to each other on the Nez Perce National Forest. Represented by Advocates for the West, the lawsuit challenges the “End of the World” and “Hungry Ridge” timber sales over violations of the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the National Forest Management Act.

Together, the projects would result in 47 miles of new logging roads on the Salmon-Clearwater Divide—the mountainous, forested ridge separating the Salmon River and the South Fork Clearwater River southeast of Grangeville, Idaho. Over 26,000 acres of the Divide would be logged, including 6,785 acres of clearcutting. Forty-one clearcuts are so big they would exceed the generally accepted maximum set by the National Forest Management Act size of 40 acres.

Over 1,000 acres of old growth would be logged, more than half of which would be clearcuts. The Forest Service claims logging old growth will make the forest healthier and more resilient. “Old growth is an amazing and fascinating expression of diversity by ecosystems that have evolved for thousands of years,” states Jeff Juel, Friends of the Clearwater Montana Policy Director. “For the Forest Service to claim they can improve old growth is a sign of how far this agency has strayed from its stewardship mission.”

"In the face of climate and biodiversity crises, protecting old growth forests is more important than ever," said lead attorney on the case Bryan Hurlbutt at the public interest environmental law firm Advocates for the West. "Old growth is a biodiversity hotspot. It sequesters carbon, it is resilient to fire, and it provides refuge to fish and wildlife facing a changing climate."

Friends of the Clearwater Ecosystem Defense Director Gary Macfarlane said, “Extensive logging in this region has already left a legacy of environmental damage. It’s been 24 years since the Snake River Basin steelhead were listed as ‘threatened’ under the Endangered Species Act, yet steelhead numbers have continued to decline due to hydroelectric dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers and widespread habitat degradation caused by the kind of clearcutting and bulldozing of new logging roads featured in these two misguided timber sales.”

The Forest Service admits steelhead populations in the area are at “high risk”, multiple streams already fail to meet Forest Plan fish habitat objectives, and streams will be further damaged by these timber sales.

The lawsuit also warns that two logging projects will take a major toll on rare and sensitive wildlife species that rely on old growth. Fisher, a large and reclusive member of the weasel family, need older forests, according to research conducted in and around the Salmon-Clearwater Divide.

“Mature and old-growth forest habitat are crucial for species like fisher. Already in the Nez Perce National Forest fisher has lost habitat with and what currently exists likely falls below what they need for long-term survival,” states Friends of the Clearwater Staff Attorney Katie Bilodeau. “Despite the commitments the Forest Service made in the Forest Plan to monitor population trends of fisher and other old-growth associated species such as the northern goshawk, pileated woodpecker, and American marten, this agency has failed to gather the data,” added Bilodeau.

The lawsuit also raises the alarm over the iconic grizzly bear, listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. “Grizzlies were confirmed in the End of the World analysis area in 2019 and 2020,” said Macfarlane. “They are trying to inhabit their historic range, including the high-quality habitat in the Salmon-Clearwater Divide. However, the Forest Service is obstructing recovery with all the logging and roadbuilding—management actions which conflict with habitat needs of the grizzly,” he adds. “If the Forest Service continues to approve these massive logging projects, they might just manage to extinguish a threatened species they are legally required to protect and restore under the Endangered Species Act, and we simply cannot allow that to happen.”

Katie Bilodeau concluded, “Climate change is already applying stress to our ecosystems, which is only exacerbated by logging operations that impede the ability of forests to sequester carbon—especially in large, old trees. We need our forests to function naturally, sequestering carbon, and mitigating the warming of our planet. These two massive logging operations take us in the wrong direction.”

Please find the complaint attached.

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