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June 23, 2020

Jeff Costello, Facilitator
Northern Blues Forest Collaborative
401 NE 1st Street
Enterprise, OR 97828

Dear Jeff,

It is with a heavy heart that, on behalf of our tens of thousands of members in Northeast Oregon and all across the state, I write to inform you that Oregon Wild is withdrawing from the Northern Blues Forest Collaborative (NBFC). As founding members and one of the last two environmental advocacy organizations still willing to participate in this process, we did not make the decision lightly.

Our experience in years of working in public lands collaborative groups across Oregon is that these organizations can only succeed when they focus on areas of consensus, when they require civility and respect among members, when they respect the perspectives of those not able to participate, and when they operate with clear sideboards and respect for the laws and rules that protect America's public lands, rivers, and wildlife from destructive exploitation. Unfortunately, all of those conditions have eroded within the NBFC to the point where it is no longer possible for Oregon Wild to participate in good conscience.

We recognize that the USFS is currently under tremendous local and federal political pressure to expand logging and exploitation of our forests, to rush scientific analysis, and to minimize public input. If it were functioning as intended, the NBFC would be a place where this pressure is balanced by a diversity of viewpoints, including conservationists, and where consensus could be found on projects that support economic activity without degrading America's public lands. However, the NBFC today is not such a place. It is a forum in which conservation voices are often met with hostility by collaborative partners, where legitimate ecological and scientific concerns are ignored, and where there is little appetite for actionable discussion of any land management activities beyond increased logging.

This hostility to conservation is particularly troubling given that the USFS is increasingly turning to collaboration as a substitute for public input and for scientific analysis. Oregon Wild has experienced managers of the Wallowa Whitman NF exploiting the NBFC to circumvent public process and shield logging projects from meaningful scientific and legal scrutiny. Worse, the agency has intentionally misrepresented our collaborative participation, and our conservation concerns, in order to promote aggressive logging within the Lostine Wild and Scenic River corridor and the controversial Lower Joseph logging project. Collaboration is supposed to be a forum in which stakeholders can give input and reduce conflict and controversy over Forest Service management decisions, not a rubber stamp for any logging the agency proposes.

Collaboration is not a quick or easy process. It is based on the idea that a useful way to avoid needless conflict and litigation is to involve people who care about America's public lands up front, and for the agency to listen and use their input to make better decisions with broader community support.

Good collaboratives have clear ground rules that are enforced, respect participants' boundaries, focus on shared goals, meaningfully address all interests, and incorporate and respect the perspectives of those not at the table. As trust grows and a track record of good outcomes is established, and the Forest Service better understands where stakeholders (dis)agree and where they have broad public support, the process becomes faster and more efficient.

However, in recent years we've seen increasing breakdowns at the NBFC including:

- Stakeholders pounding tables, screaming profanity at other participants, and walking out to disrupt meetings,
- Collaborative "partners" blacklisting conservation organizations from participating in public events,
- No accountability for stakeholders publicly attacking collaborative partners by saying things like "they don't deserve a seat at the table" or "they don't care about our communities",
- Collaborative resources being used to advance agendas of individual organizations,
- Moving the goalposts on why the NBFC even exists, with Steering Committee members saying logging our National Forests is now the only actionable item for the Collaborative and that some stakeholders are not welcome,
- Ever dwindling participation and insufficient representation of forest stakeholders,
- Marginalizing the perspectives and roles of stakeholders not in attendance, and
- Pushing conspiracy theories and denial of basic science, including deeming a discussion of "is climate change real?" as an "open question."

While we have regularly raised these and other concerns, the current push by the collaborative to engage in the Trump administration's revision of the 21" Rule and Eastside Screens over the objections of several organizations was the final straw. The insistence of the NBFC Steering Committee to engage in a process on which we have already established that there is no agreement, and that will almost certainly lead to weakened protections for large and old trees, and to repeatedly misrepresent the position of conservation organizations within and outside the collaborative makes our continued participation untenable.

We know what good collaboration looks like. Oregon Wild has been involved in more collaboratives than any other NGO in the state, and we reap no financial benefit from participation in the NBFC. We have been trailblazers in this arena, a fact that has been celebrated by the US Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) with a "Two Chiefs Award" on two occasions. When we helped found this collaborative, we believed we would be able to find common goals and shared purpose. That shared purpose has eroded to the point where it increasingly feels like the NBFC has become a platform for extractive industries and their supporters to advocate against conservation, and for the Forest Service to create cover for controversial decisions.

We still believe in the ideals of collaboration. It is better for everyone when people who care about our public lands come together early to discuss management issues, build trust, understanding, and consensus among themselves, and then inform and guide the Forest Service so that needless conflict and controversy can be avoided. However, when that process breaks down and collaborative groups become a platform for conflict and divisiveness, for misinformation, provide cover for environmentally destructive projects, and marginalize those unable to participate, it makes no sense for conservation organizations to continue to participate and give them credibility.

We will continue to participate in NEPA processes, pursue constructive relationships with USFS staff and other stakeholders, and stand ready to collaborate with anyone willing to do so in good faith. We may also attend occasional meetings and field trips as members of the public.

Unfortunately, after spending thousands of hours working in good faith to find common ground and many more trying to get things back on track, the NBFC has passed the point of no return.

Sincerely,



Robert Klavins
Northeast Oregon Field Coordinator
Oregon Wild

Cc:

NBFC Steering Committee

Tom Montoya, Supervisor, Wallowa Whitman National Forest

Eric Watrud, Supervisor, Wallowa Whitman National Forest

Glen Casamassa, Regional Forester, United States Forest Service

Senator Ron Wyden

Senator Jeff Merkley

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