

Walla Walla City Council Meeting
May 28th, 2025
Public Comment Re: Tiger-Mill timber sale

My name is Paul Lynn, and I am a citizen, voter, employer and Walla Walla resident of 16 years. I am not employed by or speaking on behalf of any organization or interest other than that of the general public, to whom I am in service.

I am commenting on the Tiger-Mill timber sale recently discussed in a City Council work session. In an effort to be as informed and knowledgeable about this issue as possible, I have read all of the Tiger-Mill timber sale documents, including the Environmental Assessment in its entirety, the specialist analyses, many of the cited sources, relevant sections of the NEPA and a considerable amount of peer-reviewed scientific literature on the issue of intensive forest management and its impact on water resources.

In consideration of the Council's valuable time, I have carefully culled and distilled this statement to offer the briefest possible summary of my findings. Given the complexity of this issue and its gravity in regard to public health and safety, I respectfully implore that the Council consider this analysis in its entirety.

First, I will submit my finding that this project, as it stands, is currently in violation of federal regulatory procedure. Then I will outline, in brief, the potential adverse short- and long-term impacts this project may have on Walla Walla municipal water supplies, according to data supplied by the project documents. Last, I would like to explain what I believe would be the best course of action for the City to take to address these concerns.

To be clear, I'm not going to argue that all logging is bad, or that prescribed burns aren't an important and effective tool for responsible land management. I'm merely arguing that this is a complex issue with high stakes, and that allowing federal interests and private contractors to short-cut important regulatory safety checks runs the risk of saddling our small community with an irreversible and costly mess, and with no recourse.

Under the National Environmental Policy Act, any federal action that potentially causes significant effects, including social, public health and economic effects, is required to provide an Environmental Impact Statement. This mandate involves multiple public comment periods as well as EPA review. If it is uncertain whether or not a project will have significant effects, a more streamlined Environmental Assessment may be compiled to determine whether a full EIS is needed.

For the Tiger-Mill timber sale, an Environmental Assessment was conducted, following which, Walla Walla District Ranger Johnny Collin made a Finding of No Significant Impact and final project decision.

I have conducted a thorough independent analysis of the Environmental Assessment and have found a number of troublesome omissions, admissions and contradictions. Together, these findings conclusively indicate that this project does in fact carry a high risk of significant adverse effects, particularly to the short-term quality and the long-term quantity of the Walla Walla municipal water supply. Judging solely on the basis of the data presented in the project documents, the FONSI was either made in error or in bad faith. Federal law requires the completion of a full Environmental Impact Statement.

Here are the pertinent sections of the NEPA:

40 CFR §1508.1(i) “Effects” or “impacts” means changes to the human environment from the proposed action or alternatives that are *reasonably foreseeable*.

40 CFR §1508.1(ii) “Reasonably foreseeable” means sufficiently likely to occur such that a **person of ordinary prudence** would take it into account in reaching a decision.

40 CFR §1508.1 “Significant effects” means **adverse** effects that an agency has identified as *significant* based on the criteria in § 1501.3(d) of this subchapter.

40 CFR §1501.3(d) *Significance determination*—context and intensity. In considering whether an adverse effect of the proposed action is significant, agencies shall examine both the context of the action and the intensity of the effect. In assessing context and intensity, agencies should consider the duration of the effect. Agencies may also consider the extent to which an effect is adverse at some points in time and beneficial in others. However, agencies *shall not* offset an action’s adverse effects with other beneficial effects to determine significance.

(Note: the claim that logging will reduce fire severity, which is the basis of the unsupported assertion that this project will have a net-positive effect on water quality, does not exempt this project from examining the impact that the logging itself will have on water quality.)

40 CFR §1501.3(d)(1) Agencies shall analyze the significance of an action in several contexts. Agencies should consider the characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to unique or sensitive resources or communities with environmental justice concerns. Depending on the scope of the action, agencies should consider the potential global, national, regional, and local contexts as well as the duration, including short-and long-term effects.

40 CFR §1501.3(d)(2) Agencies shall analyze the intensity of effects considering the following factors, as applicable to the proposed action and in relationship to one another (the most pertinent of which are):

(i) The degree to which the action **may adversely affect public health and safety**.

...

(iv) The degree to which the potential effects on the human environment are **highly uncertain**.

...

(vi) The degree to which the action **may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat**, including habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

(vii) The degree to which the action may adversely affect **communities with environmental justice concerns**.

(viii) The degree to which the action may adversely affect **rights of Tribal Nations** that have been reserved through treaties, statutes, or Executive Orders.

Under a 1918 agreement between the City of Walla Walla and the Department of Agriculture, the Forest Service can conduct logging in the watershed *only insofar as* they do so without **injury** to the City's water supply. I understand the notion of "injury" here to indicate a condition equivalent to a "significant adverse effect" as defined in the NEPA. There is legal precedent for injunction of reconsideration of a federal agency decision if based on false findings. The City has standing to request reconsideration and indeed, I argue, a duty to its citizens to do so.

I want to note here that there are two separate proposed actions, logging and prescribed fire. There are provisions in the project Monitoring Plan to collaborate with the City to monitor and respond to changes in water quality resulting from the burning, but *not* from the logging, which will happen first.

According to the Assessment, the slopes of over 85% of the project area are 35% or greater. That's steep. As stated in the Assessment, "Mechanical actions on steep slopes pose greater risk to soil erosion due to mineral soil exposure and increased energy potential of surface flow." (EA p.42)

"Thinning" is defined as a 58% basal area reduction of the timber and vegetation. (EA p.85)

Of the 12,438 acres slated for "thinning," 4,944 acres are directly within the Mill Creek Watershed Inventoried Roadless Area (pg. 8). Excluding helicopter logging, 927 acres of which are in the IRA, this leaves over 4,000 acres of logging within the Watershed alone, the majority of which involves tethered machinery due to the extremely steep terrain.

For anyone who isn't familiar with the nature of logging equipment, the pitch of 35-50% slopes and the average spacing of trees in a mature, moist-type Douglas Fir, spruce and mixed-conifer forest, even with cable-haul and "hand-thinning", 58% removal of over 4,000 acres will require significant "mechanical action," and thus, **significant soil erosion**.

Walla Walla does not have a membrane-filtration water treatment facility. Our water comes straight off the mountain. Even a small increase in sedimentation will result in significant disruption to the municipal water supply, increase in chlorination (a public health issue), groundwater reliance, ASR, watershed ecology and wastewater treatment demand. In this very unique case, 4,000 acres of soil disruption will indeed cause a "significant impact."

The Assessment does not include any data reflecting this potential impact, or provide provisions for recourse should safe thresholds be exceeded. The Project Design Criteria do not establish soil erosion or sediment loading thresholds resulting from *logging* activities, only for sedimentation resulting from road use, nor does it account for the impact of logging on snow melt and precipitation runoff, a far more troubling long-term concern.

As restated in the final Decision, the primary basis of the “Finding of No Significant Impact Assessment” rests on the following claim on page 101 of the Assessment, which was taken directly from the Hydrology Analysis: “There would be no measurable increase in water temperature, streamflow, or sediment from this project which could degrade downstream beneficial uses when the prescribed water quality Project Design Criteria (PDCs) [in addition to PDCs prescribed by the soil scientist and fisheries biologist] are implemented, monitored, and adjusted (if needed).”

“No measurable increase.” That’s a strong claim that should be supported by relevant data. Let’s go find the pertinent Project Design Criteria (PDC), listed in Appendix A.

The only times the PDC specifies any sediment loading criteria refer 1. to minimization of sediment from roads (not from the actual logging activities), and 2. standards for stream buffering in consideration of riparian habitat. It does not provide actual sediment loading thresholds, nor do any of the PDC or other analyses account for the impact of sediment loading or turbidity on municipal water treatment.

The only place that accounts for this potential adverse effect is in the Monitoring Plan, which goes as far as to say that, by casual observation (not quantitative monitoring), the Forest Service sale administrator and the logging contractor “will identify areas of concern where additional slash will be placed,” and that “additional PDCs or alterations to project PDCs will be made as necessary to keep soil in place and within the activity unit.”

In other words, the plan is to consider solutions to this foreseeable problem after it occurs.

The hydrology specialist analysis *clearly contradicts* its own findings at numerous different points, explaining that, “in general, increased site disturbance will result in increased erosion and [stream] sedimentation.” (HSA p.1) Nowhere does it present any actual data on what this increase might be.

The only quantitative water quality threshold mentioned in the Hydrology Analysis defers to a vague but official-sounding metric of the ECA percentages. This methodology, the “Equivalent Clearcut Area” model, is by nature reductivistic. While it may be helpful for understanding potential impact thresholds, by the admission of its own creators, it is not an effective methodology for establishing accurate implementation criteria, especially for statistically outlying applications. That’s because its data is aggregated from a large number of projects across numerous ecotypes that have little to no similarity or bearing on the anomalous topography or unique ecology of the Tiger-Mill project, an exceptionally steep-sloped mature forest that hasn’t been touched in nearly a century and a half.

The closest that the Hydrology Analysis comes to presenting actual data on logging and sedimentation rates is the claim on page 18 that “Harvest, thinning and prescribed burning would produce lower short- and long-term sedimentation rates than a higher severity wildfire based on WEPP model runs and assumed background levels.”

This claim makes two tacit assumptions: (1) that a wildfire is likely to be of high severity and (2) that the logging and burning would, in fact, produce at least a “measurable increase” in sedimentation. However, the analysis does not provide any documentation of its WEPP model runs or offer data on what these short- and long-term sedimentation rates might be.

As we already learned from 40 CFR §1501.3(d), this has no bearing in NEPA significance determination. It is also misleading. Saying that “a severe wildfire would be worse than logging” does not supplant **the need to assess how bad the logging would be.**

According to the Analysis, in October 2024, the prescribed-turned-wild Tiger Creek fire burned 314 acres in and around the Upper Mill Creek Subwatershed. Less than 1% burned with high severity (3 acres), and less than 3% burned with moderate severity (8 acres). If adjusted for reasonably anticipated burn severity based on this data, the total sediment loading of the proposed actions may in fact be many times higher than that of a low- to moderate-severity wildfire, as we could expect in the project area.

As reassuring as it is to hear that the logging will cause “no measurable increase in sediment, temperature or streamflow,” this claim quickly erodes under even a cursory examination of the evidence provided.

85-90% of Walla Walla’s water comes from the Mill Creek Municipal Watershed. Walla Walla Public Works Director Ki Bealey offered the City Council reassurance that Walla Walla can fall back on its deep basalt aquifer wells while logging and burning operations cause sediment runoff. As much as this is an acknowledgement that these activities have the potential to disrupt normal City water service, the extent of this disruption is neither measured nor indeed even mentioned in the Environmental Assessment.

Director Bealey also informed us that his office did hire an outside consulting firm, Northwest Management, Inc., to conduct an independent analysis of the project. However, they did not examine any environmental impacts or their effects on municipal water infrastructure, stating: “The Environmental Assessment and FONSI provide an in-depth analysis of all environmental impacts that these projects may have and therefore those potential impacts were not analyzed for this summary opinion.” They only analyzed the project for compliance with local, state and federal standards, regulations and legislative priorities.

While the municipal wells are a reassuring short-term stopgap, they are not a long-term solution to water shortage resulting from logging activities.

The Hydrology Analysis also states: “Changes in forested stand and canopy density caused by harvest, fire, or insect and disease can change the distribution of the snowpack, increase the rate of melt of the snowpack, and cause the timing of the melt to be earlier. These factors may lead to changes in peakflows. In addition, reduction of stocking density reduces the overall vegetative use of water, increasing the amount of water available for runoff. Changes in water

yield and in peak flows have the potential to destabilize channels, causing increased erosion and sedimentation in channels. Changes in these parameters would be of concern for aquatic habitat and biota, downstream water users, and for channel morphology.”

Page 85 of the EA describes the total vegetation mass reduction as 38% of total carbon. It states soil carbon accounts for 35% of total carbon stocks. This means the logging activity involves a 58% reduction in total vegetation biomass. Forest vegetation retains and slows the release of water from precipitation.

Contrary to the Assessment’s claim that there will be “no measurable increase in water temperature, streamflow, or sediment,” there is an obvious and high likelihood of sediment increase, stream temperature increase and peak streamflow, especially during snowmelt and rainfall, for at least 15-20 years after the logging concludes. Combine this with the project design criteria pertaining to soils, which allows for up to 55% mineral soil surface exposure following logging activities.

Despite all of the fear of fire, none of these analyses account for the very real risk of devastating mass movement in steep-sloped, logged forests during such a flood event.

These facts must be understood within the context of the Climate Change Specialist Analysis, which states, “Increasing temperatures will result in shifts in precipitation from snow to rain and watersheds like those in the project area ... are most sensitive to these changes. This will also lead to increasing risks from flooding driven winter rain events, including rain-on-snow events. With increasing atmospheric and ocean temperatures, atmospheric rivers and rain events will become more intense, delivering more precipitation per system, though there may be longer dry periods in between storms. Earlier snow melts with warmer temperatures and increasingly rarer summer precipitation, low flows during summer months will become even lower.”

Our deep basalt wells are refilled by a combination of the slow infiltration of water from the watershed area and the active Aquifer Storage and Recovery methods used to pump excess surface water underground for use in drier months. With high turbidity and sediment loading due to erosion during intense precipitation events, the water that washes down during these periods of intense precipitation will be unusable for municipal water use and ASR. A sharp reduction in snowpack and snowpack retention means we will be leaning more heavily on groundwater during the majority of the year, which we will not be able to restore.

We need only look at our neighbors to the south in California to see what happens when these factors converge. The future of our water supply is at risk.

Now, mind you, I’m only presenting data, or the lack thereof, from the Environmental Assessment and project documents. If given an opportunity, I would present a much more nuanced and detailed account of the way that forest ecology draws, stores, retains and releases water, why forests like those in the Tiger-Mill sale are among the most important resources we

have in the world to meet the mounting impact of climate and land-use driven desertification, and how logging will further reduce the climate-related decrease in total watershed output.

I would offer peer-reviewed evidence, including from Forest Service scientists, that the wildfire prevention narrative is largely based on misrepresented and contentious data; that mature, old-growth, multi-aged and diverse forests like Tiger-Mill are far more resilient to fire than managed forests, and that commercially “thinned” forests burn with much higher speed and intensity.

I would show you compelling evidence that forests are the primary terrestrial drivers of cloud formation and therefore rainfall, that forest soil diversity is immeasurably vast and that we are tinkering with systems we don’t yet understand, at a scale we can’t comprehend, with intricate interrelationships we will perhaps only appreciate when they’re gone.

As much as I would love to go point-by-point and pick apart the whole debate surrounding intensive forest management strategies such as outlined in the project documents, it’s fair to say that these things are simply not as cut and dried, so to speak, as “logging reduces wildfire risk.”

Regardless, what’s at issue now is whether Walla Walla should get to have a say in a decision that will likely impact our municipal water supply for decades to come.

Could the Tiger-Mill timber sale possibly cause “significant environmental effects”, and therefore require a full EIS per the NEPA? Again, “‘effects’ or ‘impacts’ means changes to the human environment from the proposed action or alternatives that are reasonably foreseeable.” Again, “‘reasonably foreseeable’ means sufficiently likely to occur such that a person of ordinary prudence would take it into account in reaching a decision.”

I would argue that, presented with a proposal to *log in the municipal watershed*, a person of ordinary prudence might take into account the question of the impact this might have on the water supply of said watershed.

The opening lines of both the Soil and Hydrology Specialist Analyses ask: “Is there potential for a significant environmental effect to your resource from the proposed activities?” The answer, in both cases, was “YES.”

I have scoured dozens of documents and can find nowhere any reasonable appraisal, monitoring thresholds or data regarding how the proposed actions will affect the Walla Walla Municipal water system. It’s almost as though no one thought to ask.

What I could find was a robust array of scientific literature that shows the adverse short- and long-term impact of logging on water supplies. I found a list of towns and cities who have faced billions in cumulative damages and years of lawsuits due to logging in and around their watersheds. I found that logging-related sediment loading leads to high turbidity, strain on municipal water infrastructure, and an increase in biological contamination, thus requiring more

chlorination, more groundwater use and a subsequent marked increase in wastewater treatment demand.

Unless someone reading this happens to have an extra \$50 million lying around for a new water filtration facility, I think it's fair to say that we deserve to have the chance to put pause on this project until we have a chance to come up with a decent plan.

As it happens, this is not a new concern for our community. A sweeping, collaborative endeavor, the Walla Walla Watershed Resilience Master Plan has long been in the works, weighing input from dozens of federal, state and local agencies and organizations, including the Forest Service, the City of Walla Walla and its neighbors, the Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council, the Walla Walla 2050 Strategy group and Basin Advisory Committee members and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. The proposed logging is slated to begin well before this Master Plan is completed or implemented.

Given the long history of collaboration on water issues between the City, the Forest Service and countless other organizations, groups and agencies, I believe all parties would like to avoid adversarial disputes. The first course of action should be a good faith effort to engage the Forest Service in a reconsideration of the FONSI, a reopening of the Project Decision and the preparation of a full EIS. It may be prudent to invoke Environmental Collaboration and Conflict Resolution (ECCR), a provision of the NEPA, to involve an impartial third party.

The City and the Forest Service could then collaboratively reexamine the relevant aspects of this Project that may affect City water. This would also allow the City the time to adequately assess the risks inherent in commercial logging and come up with a more appropriately detailed plan.

For one thing, we need independent project monitoring, and it should be in the project plan. The Monitoring Plan (Appendix G in Project Documents) says that "a detailed monitoring plan would be developed in cooperation with City of Walla Walla during development of the *burn* plans." It does *not* mention that any such plan would be developed to monitor the impact of *logging* activities, which, inferring from project timelines, would likely happen first.

If that fails, lengthy and costly litigation will no doubt be the only recourse left to the citizens and taxpayers of Walla Walla, to whom the liability ultimately falls.

Thank you for your consideration.