

NEWS RELEASE: Collaborative Partners in North Central WA demonstrate their support for the Mission Restoration Project

The Mission Restoration Project is a landscape-scale restoration project on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest located near Twisp, WA, with a focus on restoring forest and aquatic conditions and safely returning fire to the landscape. The Mission Project planning area is approximately 50,000 acres and encompasses the Libby Creek and Buttermilk Creek watersheds in the Methow River Basin. The project was developed and designed over a four-year period and is now ready for implementation, but it has recently come under litigation.

In response, members of the North Central WA Forest Health Collaborative (NCWFHC) are working together to provide amicus briefs and declarations to the Court expressing their unanimous support for the scientific analysis and environmental review of the restoration actions and explaining the importance of the Mission Project in restoring forest and aquatic habitat. Four complementary legal briefs in support of the Mission Project were filed on Friday by Chelan County, the Yakama Nation, three environmental organizations, and other NCWFHC members. Okanogan County is participating through a declaration by Commissioner Chris Branch as part of the NCWFHC members' brief.

The NCWFHC is a forest collaborative made up of 24 member organizations working together since 2013 to help the U.S. Forest Service increase the pace and scale of forest and watershed restoration on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest in Okanogan and Chelan counties. The collaborative is a diverse set of stakeholders and governments that encourage and actively support quality forest and watershed restoration projects based on scientifically rigorous landscape evaluation and thorough environmental and public review.

Collaborative members have engaged on every step of the Mission Project -- from hiring a scientist to conduct landscape evaluation and identify specific areas needing restoration to hosting community meetings in Twisp. Members also organized volunteers to collect road survey data, completed a scientific watershed assessment, and raised funds and implemented several restoration projects authorized by the Mission Project.

The Methow Valley Ranger District accommodated input and adjusted plans accordingly, especially with respect to significant prescribed fire treatments and road maintenance and decommissioning. As a result, the Mission Project will commercially thin about 1,800 acres, including on frozen ground to protect soils, non-commercially thin about 8,300 acres, burn 10,000 acres with prescribed fire, decommission 34 road miles, and complete several other aquatic restoration projects. The project has been estimated to potentially generate more than \$3.2 million in timber value, depending on market timing.

The collaborative project planning works to ensure good ecological and social outcomes, supporting local jobs such as skilled equipment operators. Restoration employs people in thinning the forest, maintaining and decommissioning roads, milling timber byproducts from

forest thinning, restoring habitat for fish and wildlife, and returning much needed fire to the landscape. The Collaborative has an open-door policy for their membership and welcomes participation by those interested in supporting forest and watershed restoration in our national forest.

Mike Liu, Conservation Northwest's Okanogan Forest Lead and former district ranger at the time of the Mission Project planning, stated, "At the time, NCWFHC helped the Forest Service stay on schedule by providing not only the helpful landscape evaluation and assessment tools for the Mission Project but also community engagement meetings to share the science behind the restoration project."

"The Wilderness Society strongly supports science-based, collaborative forest management, and the Mission Restoration Project exemplifies this approach," said Mike Anderson, Senior Policy Analyst for The Wilderness Society and current co-chair of the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative.

"Fire exclusion over the past 100 years has allowed forest fuels to build-up to unmanageable levels. Since these landscapes are fire dependent, fire exclusion is not an option. How do we help wildfires provide positive effects on these landscapes? The Nature Conservancy recognizes that proper vegetation and fuels management will return these uncharacteristic wildfires back to a more manageable level and allow the good effects that fire provides to co-exist with our communities, and that is a vital part of what the Mission Project will accomplish." said Lloyd McGee, Washington Forests Program Manager for The Nature Conservancy and past co-chair of the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative.

"Okanogan County is made up of over 80% public land which is a valuable economic asset if managed properly. It takes a great deal of respect and patience to work our way through the diverse interests and values of all participants in the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative. I am proud to know that all Collaborative members are willing to remain united in defense of our efforts," says Chris Branch, Okanogan County Commissioner and co-chair of the Collaborative.

"Trout Unlimited (TU) wholeheartedly supports the Okanogan Wenatchee National Forest's Mission Project and the science-based Forest Restoration Strategy for improving ecosystem health in North Central Washington's critical watersheds. We have invested hundreds of staff hours and leveraged hundreds of thousands of dollars to implement aquatic habitat restoration elements of the Mission Project because of the benefits they provide to threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead in the Methow River sub-basin. TU is proud to be a founding member and active participant in the North Central WA Forest Health Collaborative - we recognize the high value of stakeholders uniting with the common purpose of advancing essential restoration work to improve the health of these watersheds that are so critical to the survival of Washington's wild fish," said Crystal Elliot-Perez, Washington State Habitat Director for Trout Unlimited.

