15 December 2017

Jim Paul, Director

Oregon Department of State Lands

Salem, Oregon

RE: Habitat Conservation Plan for the Elliott State Forest

Dear Director Paul:

The Elliott State Forest (ESF) is one of Oregon’s natural treasures, and we applaud the State Land Board’s unanimous decision to keep it in public ownership, and to seek divestment of the ESF from the Common School Fund (CSF) to ensure lasting conservation of this precious forest and freshwater resource. Now that the decision to keep the ESF in public ownership has been made, and the Oregon Legislature has provided $100 million in state bond funds to begin divestiture, we can all turn to finding a lasting conservation solution for the ESF.

The first major step towards achieving the goal of lasting conservation of the ESF is the completion of a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) between the Department of State Lands (DSL), on behalf of the State Land Board, and the federal endangered species managers, the US Fish & Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries. If we are ever to permanently move away from past management activities that led to habitat loss, species decline, social conflict and litigation, the HCP must ensure that existing and potential habitats on the ESF for Coho salmon, Marbled murrelet and the Northern spotted owl are effectively and permanently conserved.

There are three key elements specific to the successful drafting and completion of the HCP that we recommend the DSL pay close attention to: broad use of the best available science; qualified, independent drafting of the HCP; and interim management of the ESF that supports HCP goals.

The most important of these elements is the use of best available science. It is paramount that the State and the federal resource managers use the best available science in drafting the HCP, especially in the design and analysis of management prescriptions and protections, to ensure federally-listed and other at-risk species and their habitats are adequately protected.

DSL should seek and ensure utilization of the best available science and science policy, drawn from scientific research papers, species recovery plans, nearby federal land management plans, etc., including recent species surveys and analyses undertaken by third parties with longstanding involvement in species conservation on the ESF. For example, to ensure the HCP fully protects the Northern spotted owl, Marbled murrelet, and Coho salmon, this would include scientifically-based prescriptions like, but not limited to:

(a) a no-cut stream buffer of one site-potential tree-height (~200’ in the case of the ESF), including around seeps, springs and other water features;

(b) putting lands with highly erosive soils and/or unstable slopes off limits to logging and road construction;

(c) conserving all older (mature and old-growth) forests; and

(d) not allowing salvage logging after any disturbance.

We also recommend that the previous unfinished HCP for the ESF be used judiciously in drafting a new HCP, in that while it may contain valuable scientific data and analyses, it also called for management prescriptions that did not provide reasonable protections for the imperiled species on the ESF.

Coupled with best available science informing the HCP, to further ensure a successful effort, i.e. an HCP with strong conservation measures, we support the SLB relying on experienced third parties—overseen by DSL—with a history of completing effective HCP’s and expertise in coastal forest ecosystems.

In this interim period prior to the completion of the HCP, it is important that management of the ESF contributes to the design of an effective HCP, and limits controversy that could disrupt the HCP process. Thus, until the HCP is completed we urge DSL to suspend all harvest activities, e.g. logging, road building, etc. on the ESF.

In summary, a successful HCP is one that fully addresses the needs of federally listed species, minimizes conflict, ensures accountability, and provides the best opportunity to reach lasting agreement.

We look forward to working with DSL to ensure that a fully divested ESF remains in public ownership and is protected, restored and managed to ensure lasting conservation of this natural resource treasure. We stand at the ready to provide the scientific, policy and public support needed to secure outcomes that support robust conservation. Please contact us for any assistance, questions or concerns as the process for conserving the ESF moves forward.

Yours in conservation for this and future generations,

Bob Sallinger, Conservation Director, Audubon Society of Portland
Noah Greenwald, Endangered Species Director, Center for Biological Diversity
Nick Cady, Legal Director, Cascadia Wildlands
Teresa Bird, Coast Range Forest Watch
Steve Pedery, Conservation Director, Oregon Wild
Rhett Lawrence, Conservation Director, Oregon Sierra Club
Andy Kerr, The Larch Company
Cameron La Follette, Executive Director, Oregon Coast Alliance

CC: The Honorable Governor Kate Brown, Chair

 The Honorable Secretary of State Dennis Richardson

 The Honorable State Treasurer Tobias Read