

March 26, 2025

Comments and Considerations from the Priest River Watershed Group (PRWG) Regarding the Proposed "Outlet Mountain Dew" Timber Sale, Priest Lake State Forest

Dear Mr. Brown,

The PRWG is a local collaborative of many distinct interests committed to protecting, maintaining, and improving the health and integrity of the Priest River watershed. Supporting local, native, cold-water fish populations is of critical importance to the PRWG. To learn more about the PRWG and view the steering committee membership, please visit www.priestriverwg.org

Lower Priest River has been recognized by the Idaho Water Resources Board as a Recreational River, it is designated as bull trout critical habitat, and also is habitat for westslope cutthroat trout *Oncorhynchus clarkii lewisi*, a species identified as an Idaho Panhandle National Forest sensitive species. Lower Priest River is listed as impaired with existing Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL) for sediment and temperature. There was a significant cool water fish kill, primarily mountain whitefish *Prosopium williamsoni* with other salmonids, along the entire length of lower Priest River during the late June 2021 heat bubble over the Pacific Northwest.

The proposed FY 2026 Outlet Mountain Dew timber sale consists of two logging units, one of which extends approximately 0.8 miles along and adjacent to lower Priest River. This area holds significant ecological, recreational, and aesthetic values and is adjacent to bull trout *Salvelinus confluentus* critical habitat in lower Priest River. Our comments and suggestions propose modifications to this unit to reduce the potential to degrade the fisheries, aquatic and riparian habitat.

PRWG urges the Board to consider a 300-foot riparian buffer laterally extending from the river's edge for Unit 1 of the Mountain Dew timber sale. Our reasoning follows.

Importance of a Substantial Riparian Buffer:

1. The rate of Large Woody Debris (LWD) Recruitment:

Mature riparian forests are sources of LWD, which enhances habitat complexity, provides cover for fish and stabilizes stream channels. Reduced LWD can lead to habitat degradation thereby negatively impacting fish populations.

2. Stream Shading and Temperature Regulation:

Riparian vegetation provides essential shade which helps to regulate water

temperatures which is crucial for cold-water species like the threatened bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. The Lower Priest River has a temperature TMDL and recent years have shown increasing summertime stream temperatures. Implementing a 300-foot buffer would help to maintain cooler water temperatures thereby supporting aquatic life.

3. Sediment and Nutrient Control:

Riparian buffers act as filters, trapping sediments and nutrients before they enter water bodies and reducing the risk of landslides and erosion. The lower Priest River has a sediment TMDL, highlighting concerns about sedimentation. A 300-foot buffer would reduce sediment and nutrient influx from logging activities which will help in maintaining and improving water quality.

4. Wildlife Habitat Conservation:

Riparian zones are important habitats for wildlife species including deer, elk, songbirds, and eagles; providing nesting sites, food resources, and migration corridors.

5. Visual and Recreational Impacts:

The lower Priest River is an Idaho Recreational River and has been proposed for National Recreational Wild and Scenic River Status. Visual impacts could impact dispersed campsites on US Forest Service lands near Binarch Creek and rafters that utilize the US Forest Service raft slide just upstream from Unit 1.

PRWG offers this proposal to minimize impacts to lower Priest River and adjacent riparian habitat.

PRWG respectfully recommends that the Idaho Department of Lands implement a 300-foot riparian buffer laterally extending from the river's edge for the "Outlet Mountain Dew" timber sale. We also recommend excluding the catchment basin at the lowermost extent of the unit. These measures would assist in protecting water quality, aquatic habitats, wildlife, and the scenic and recreational values of the lower Priest River.

PRWG members are eager to work with the Idaho Department of Lands to assist in making timber sales compatible with riparian, fish and wildlife habitats and work towards reducing Priest River temperatures and sedimentation. We trust that the Board will take the necessary steps to ensure the sustainable management of *all* of Idaho's valuable natural resources.

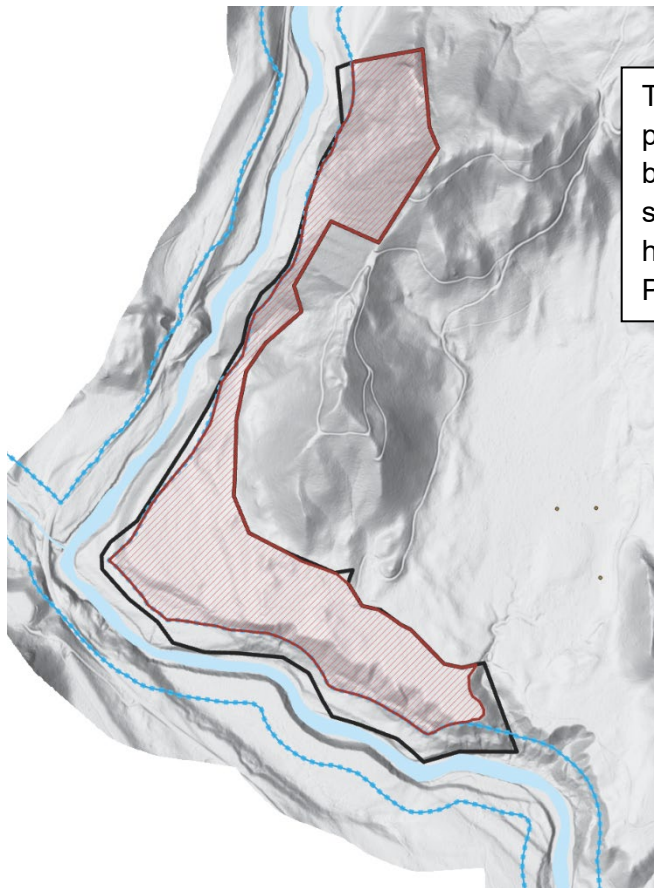
Respectfully,

The Priest River Watershed Group

CC:

Dustin Miller

Jake Garringer



This image shows the IDL proposed Unit 1 logging unit in the black polygon. The blue dotted line shows a 300' buffer. The red hatched polygon represents the PRWG proposed harvest area.

This LiDAR image shows the IDL proposed logging units with taller trees (over 100ft) distinguished in red.

