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COAST ACTION GROUP
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April 23, 2000

USDA-Forest Service, Content Analysis Enterprise Team
Attn: UFP, Building 2, Suite 295
5500 Amelia Earhart Drive
Salt Lake City, UT 84116

Dear USDA-Forest Service Content Analysis Enterprise Team:

We respectfully submit these comments on the February 22 draft version of the Unified Federal Policy for Ensuring a Watershed Approach to Federal Land and Resource Management. Coast Action Group represents 200 members working towards watershed restoration and protection on California's north cost rivers.

Draft policy should adhere to the following goals and objectives:

Ensure that the federal government is held to the same standards as everyone else under federal clean water mandates, protect priority watersheds, allow adequate public participation, and allow for adequate resources to fulfill the goals of this policy. The federal government should not only meet water quality standards as mandated by the Clean Water Act, they should serve as a model for the nation by setting loftier goals such as assuring protection of high quality and sensitive waters, and setting a date for compliance with water quality standards.

To comply with the antidegradation requirements of the Clean Water Act, activities on federal land must also not degrade water quality. Federal agencies should not allow an activity until they first determine that the permit will not degrade water quality. This is often ignored in land management decisions.

Best Management Practices, though useful and a good idea, should be regularly reviewed and revised to met current scientific and watershed standards. The effect of BMPs on water quality is often not measured so their effectiveness is not known. The policy should also require monitoring of BMP compliance and effectiveness with an appropriate feedback loop mechanism.

We recommend that priority watersheds be considered Outstanding National Resource Waters (ONRWs). Federal agencies should recommend to state agencies that priority watersheds, especially those captaining endangered species, be designated as ONRWs. Even before this designation, state and federal land managers should treat priority watersheds as such.

Selection of Watersheds for Priority Targeting Should Include Explicit Mechanism for Public Participation. Non-governmental organizations have a great deal to contribute to establishment of

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criteria and selection of priority watersheds. Members of the public have valuable expertise to supplement that of federal agencies. In addition, the validity and acceptance of the priorities selected depends on allowing the public to have input in the selection. For these reasons, the policy should include an explicit mechanism for citizens to propose selection criteria and to nominate watersheds for priority targeting.

Data collected from all waterbodies on federal lands should be used for water quality reporting under the Clean Water Act and for local watershed analysis projects. The policy should explicitly provide that information gathered by and for federal agencies as part of watershed assessments will be used for Clean Water Act water quality reporting and assessment programs. Data from Water Quality Assessments Should be Collected in Format for Use in Management and Regulatory Decisions.The policy should include a specific commitment to collect information in a format and with a focus that will enable key management and regulatory decisions to be made based on the data collected. In particular, the policy should explicitly provide that information gathered by and for federal agencies as part of watershed assessments will be systematically integrated into water quality reporting and assessment programs under the Clean Water Act, such as requirements under §§ 303(d), 305(b), and 319. This would require effective methods of sharing information between federal agencies and the states that are primarily responsible for water quality reporting under CWA programs.

Federal lands should become models for collaborative data gathering, analysis and information-based decision making. There is an ongoing effort to harmonize federal, state, tribal and private data gathering under the auspices of the Advisory Committee on Water Information (ACWI) and its subsidiary National Water Quality Monitoring Committee. More should be done in this policy to endorse and support those efforts.

Federal agencies should be held to the same 2 year reporting schedule state agencies have to comply with for the biennial review. The policy's ten-year assessment cycle does not satisfy the CWA's biennial reporting requirements and should be changed. The CWA requires states to provide water quality assessments every two years. 33 U.S.C. § 1315(b). A lot happens in ten years. Regular monitoring and evaluation should be required to ensure that actions taken to protect water quality are effective. Federal land management agencies cannot and should not establish a policy that endorses a more leisurely pace for water quality assessment than the law allows. The policy recognizes the need to treat federal entities and non-federal entities alike. Having consistent reporting requirements is necessary to provide equal treatment.

Citizens should be allowed to ask for the selection of watersheds in need of special protection through a public petition process. Current language about the involvement of stakeholders is inadequate and should include a mechanism for the federal agency and state or tribe to respond to a petition in a timely manner.

Each federal agency must commit to asking for adequate funding to ensure likelihood for compliance. Existing federal agency budgets do not contain sufficient funding to implement this policy. Without new funding and a commitment to this policy, the policy is ineffective.

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Sincerely, Alan Levine
For Coast Action Group