

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – September 4, 2007

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Lewis County Submits First-in-U.S. Family Forest Habitat Conservation Plan

CHEHALIS – Members of the Washington Congressional Delegation are supporting the goals and objectives of the nation’s first Habitat Conservation Plan for Family Forests, and are urging federal agencies to strongly consider the plan, which covers about 130,000 acres in Lewis County.

Over 10 years, utilizing about \$4 million in federal, state and private funds, Lewis County and the Family Forest Foundation have worked to develop the Family Forest Habitat Conservation Plan (FFHCP) in a collaborative process that also involved federal and state agencies, local Tribes, and two independent scientific peer reviews. Lewis County submitted the plan today to the US Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries offices in Lacey. Consultants working under direction of the Services and funded by the Foundation also submitted an administrative draft DEIS to the Services representing a major milestone toward completion of the NEPA process.

“Lewis County and the Family Forest Foundation have worked tirelessly to develop an HCP tailored to the needs of landowners who manage small tracts of forestland,” U.S. Sen. Patty Murray said. “I applaud their efforts to protect endangered species and to prevent family-owned forestland in Washington state from being converted for development.”

Sen. Murray and Sen. Maria Cantwell have both signed two letters – one of them also signed by Congressmen Norm Dicks and Brian Baird – supporting the goals and objectives of the FFHCP and urging the regional administrators of NOAA Fisheries and the US Fish & Wildlife Service to devote sufficient resources and staffing support to analyze the plan in accordance with the Endangered Species Act.

“Family forests are an integral part of Lewis County’s economy and environment,” said Lewis County Commissioner Lee Grose. “With all the time, effort and participation that has gone into developing this state-of-the-art approach to conserving fish and wildlife habitat on family forest lands, we’re looking forward to what we believe will be a favorable response from the federal agencies, and to the public review and ultimate approval of the plan.”

The objective of the FFHCP is to provide regulatory stability and scientifically credible long-term planning options to family forest owners committed to keeping their lands in forest use while providing essential, quality lowland habitat to 56 fish and wildlife species.

“The FFHCP will assist in preserving our rural lifestyle by helping keep family forests economically viable and environmentally sustainable,” said Steve Stinson, Executive Director of the Family Forest Foundation. “We really applaud Lewis County for their support in this first of its kind planning effort. In doing so, Lewis County is establishing itself as the leader among Washington Counties in the conservation of family forestlands.”

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Family Forest HCP release – Sept. 4, 2007

Page 2

The FFHCP is an incentive-based plan that rewards and encourages the high stewardship ethic of family forest landowners to continue to grow and harvest trees in a responsible way, now and in the future. It will allow Lewis County family forest landowners on a voluntary basis to substitute FFHCP riparian buffers and upland harvest prescriptions for current state forest practices rules.

Stinson of the Family Forest Foundation said the FFHCP would provide at least twice the upland protection required under current state Forests & Fish regulations (FFR) through increased leave tree retention and by limiting harvest size to 60 acres rather than the 120 acres allowed under FFR. He said FFR also increases the pressure on landowners to convert to non-forest use because the current rules disproportionately impact smaller acreages and are so complex that they require costly professional assistance to implement them.

“The family forest landowners of Lewis County need an alternative to the status quo Fish and Forest Agreement broad brush rules that quite frankly don’t work well for small forest ownership,” said Tom Fox, President of the Family Forest Foundation. “If approved, FFHCP will help keep the best stewards of the land – family forest landowners – on the landscape.”

The estimated 130,000 acres of family forests in Lewis County represent the holdings of about 2,400 owners. Stinson said the FFHCP for Lewis County might very well be adaptable for other family forestlands in Washington, which total about 4 million acres.

Rick Dunning, Executive Director of the Washington Farm Forestry Association, said, “We commend the efforts of both the Foundation and Lewis County in developing this historic HCP. It will demonstrate that the Endangered Species Act can truly work for family forest landowners and local governments.”

“With the completion of the FFHCP, family forest landowners will have a more efficient way to ensure the long-term viability of their family forests while providing and conserving habitat for fish and wildlife under the Endangered Species Act,” Stinson said.

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The Family Forest Foundation is a not-for-profit organization of small family forest landowners in Lewis County whose mission is to foster economically and ecologically sustainable family forests.