



# FOREST NEWS

The Newsletter of Forest Service Employees For Environmental Ethics

Winter 2021

## Saving the Whitebark Pine

### Inside

THE TRUMP LEGACY / THE VALUE OF ROADLESS AREAS / REDEFINING HABITAT / 2020, A RECORD YEAR / FOREST RESTORATION JOBS?



# It's Time to End Tongass Timber Harvesting

In 2021, old-growth forest logging in southeast Alaska's Tongass National Forest should end. The handwriting has been on the wall since Alaska's last pulp mill closed in 1997. The shuttering of Alaska's pulp mill industry, which was the major consumer of Tongass trees, left the Forest Service with few customers wanting to buy its wood. With a wink-and-a-nod from Alaska's congressional delegation, however, the Forest Service tried to build new markets in Asia for its old-growth logs, resulting in 90 percent of Tongass logs now being exported whole to Asia's mills for processing. Notwithstanding its best (and often illegal) efforts, Tongass timber sales have fallen from 152 million board feet in 1997 to 4 million last year.

In January, Sealaska Corporation, an Alaska Native Corporation that owns 362,000 acres neighboring the Tongass, voted unanimously to transition out of its logging operations. For 35 years, Sealaska logged 3.5 billion board feet destined primarily for the log export market. (Sealaska does not own domestic wood

processing mills.) But with the biggest and best trees cut, there's not enough money to be made in logging to offset its environmental harms. Instead, Sealaska is investing in businesses that, in its words, "support healthy oceans," especially fisheries and tourism.

Sealaska CEO Anthony Mallett explains, "Logging created value for our Alaska Native shareholders for decades, and it brought us to where we are today. We're grateful for the commitment and professionalism that led to our success. But we've now built an organization that can thrive well into the future, and that means engaging in activities with more enduring benefits for our communities."

It is time for the Forest Service to acknowledge the same economic and environmental reality—industrial timbering is dead in southeast Alaska. The whopping tax subsidies that have kept the Forest Service's Tongass timber machine on life support, with costs exceeding revenues by 100-fold, have come to an end. There is no "transition to a second-growth

timber economy," as some with rose-colored glasses dream of. Without massive tax subsidies, on a level playing field, southeast Alaska cannot compete with any other timber producing region in the world.

On the other hand, southeast Alaska grows salmon like nobody's business. Lots and lots of salmon. As the pandemic wanes, southeast Alaska will also return to being one of the world's favored tourist destinations. These are the future for our largest National Forest and its communities. These are the keys to a sustainable economic and environmental future.

The Forest Service can choose to lead southeast Alaska toward that future. Or it can be dragged kicking and screaming. To the outside world, the result will be the same—commercial timbering will end. To the Forest Service itself, however, one direction builds a healthy agency rooted in a land ethic to be proud of. The other just continues spitting into the wind.

Sincerely,

  
Andy Stahl

## Inside

### 3 | Featured Forest

Superior National Forest, a canoeing mecca and dark-sky sanctuary

### 4 | In Depth

Will a "threatened" listing make a difference for whitebark pine in National Forests?

### 7 | Briefly

Vilsack back at USDA · Habitat redefined · Toward a National Forest in Hawaii · Jobs bill for National Forest restoration · The value of roadless areas · 2020—A record-breaking year

### 9 | Dispatch

Trump's Forest Service legacy · Forest Service partnerships and volunteers



Superior National Forest in northern Minnesota includes Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, famous for its remote areas accessible only by canoe. The National Forest is home to a wide array of wildlife, including moose, black bears, wolves, bald eagles, and many other species (wildnerdpix, Adobe Stock).

# Featured Forest

## Superior National Forest

**W**edged between the western arm of Lake Superior and the Canadian border, Superior National Forest encompasses more than 3,900,000 acres in northern Minnesota. The Forest Service allows multiple uses in most of the Forest, including logging, mining, and recreational activities.

Approximately a quarter of the Forest makes up the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, an unspoiled landscape that extends north of the Canadian border into Quetico Provincial Park. Glaciers carved this landscape from Precambrian bedrock that is now covered by thin soils, boreal forests, and an extensive network of waterways and wetlands.

The wilderness area was recently designated a Level 1 dark-sky sanctuary, one of just 13 such designations in the world and the easternmost Level 1 sanctuary in the U.S. The designation

adds another layer of protection for the wilderness when the Forest Service analyzes proposed projects.

However, the dark-sky designation probably will not help protect the wilderness area from the proposed Twin Metals copper-nickel mine in Superior National Forest. The underground mine would operate for 25 years with a 2-square-mile footprint along the South Kawishiwi River, which flows into the Boundary Waters wilderness area.

Twin Metals officials say the mine design will prevent any contaminated water from escaping into the wilderness—a dubious claim, considering the toxic history of sulfide-ore mining operations. Proposed legislation, the Boundary Waters Wilderness Protection and Pollution Prevention Act (H.R. 5598), would prevent the mining operation if passed by Congress and signed into law.





## In Depth

### Whitebark Pine: Preserving a Keystone Species

In December, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) proposed listing whitebark pine (*pinus albicaulis*) as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), nearly 30 years after protections were first proposed. Native to the mountains of the western United States and Canada, whitebark pine is considered a keystone species, and 75 percent of its U.S. habitat is on National Forest land.

Whitebarks favor subalpine areas of the Sierra Nevada, Cascade Range, Pacific Coast Ranges, and Rocky Mountains from Wyoming north into Canada. Typically the highest-elevation pine tree in its range, whitebark pines often grow as krummholz—trees stunted by exposure to harsh conditions, especially at treeline. In more favorable settings, the trees can

approach 100 feet in height, and they promote water conservation and aquifer recharge. Because of their spreading growth habit—more like a hardwood than a typical conifer—whitebark pines provide plenty of shade, slowing spring snowmelt to provide a more steady, sustained release of water.

But what makes the trees a keystone species are its pine cones, which yield seeds rich in fat and protein and serve as a food source for more than 100 animal species, including grizzly bears, Douglas squirrels, and Clark's nutcrackers. Other species rely on the trees for habitat—northern flickers, mountain bluebirds, blue grouse, elk, sheep—and in Glacier National Park, 40 percent of the understory plants in whitebark forests grow only in those forests.

Without the tree's seeds, the

potential exists for a trophic cascade, in which the loss of a species alters the entire food chain. Given the tree's ecological significance, "the health of the whitebark pine is very closely related to the health of the entire ecosystem," retired Forest Service entomologist Jesse Logan told *The Daily Climate*. Blister rust fungus, introduced from Europe in 1910, has killed roughly 90 percent of the whitebark pines in some northern forests. At the same time, climate change is exacerbating droughts, wildfires, and bark beetle outbreaks, all of which contribute to high mortality rates for the species across its native habitat.

In the 31,000-square-mile greater Yellowstone ecosystem, beetle outbreaks wiped out more than 95 percent of the large trees by 2014. Since whitebark

piners don't reach optimum cone production until they're 200 years old, the loss of so many large trees could be devastating. Researchers point to temperature as the primary driver of recent beetle outbreaks. Warmer temperatures have allowed far greater numbers of pine beetles to overwinter since the 1990s, exposing whitebarks to a threat they rarely experienced in previous decades. A century of fire suppression has only exacerbated the situation as the shade-intolerant trees rely on fire to create open areas where they can flourish. Without fires, trees like subalpine fir shade out the whitebarks.

Before this near-perfect storm of threats converged on whitebarks, the trees commonly lived 1,000 years or more, shaping their ecosystem in ways we may never fully understand. Given these threats, the proposed ESA listing is long overdue. The FWS concluded listing was warranted 10 years ago and said that the tree would go extinct without protections. At that time, however, the agency determined an ESA listing was precluded by higher priority actions due to limited resources, which is a polite way of saying that Congress has not provided adequate funding for ESA protections.

Even without a listing, the Forest Service has been studying ways to rejuvenate whitebark forests and, along with the Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation and American Forests, is engaged in breeding and planting whitebarks resistant to drought and blister rust. Robert Keane II, a research ecologist at the Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station in Montana, has studied



*Clark's nutcrackers rely on whitebark pine seeds as a food source, and in a symbiotic relationship, each bird stockpiles thousands of seeds each year, essentially planting them and ensuring new generations of trees (David Menke, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).*

whitebark pine for more than three decades and is a principal investigator in whitebark pine restoration studies. Keane's work supports the National Whitebark Pine Restoration Plan, which he described as "a joint project between the Forest Service, the Interior Department, American Forests, and the Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation."

"Building rust resistance is the core of the restoration plan, and much of the plan is dedicated to facilitating diverse resistance across all populations of whitebark pine," Keane said. "The Fish and Wildlife Service has been aware of this effort and is hoping that this plan will constitute some or most of the (ESA) recovery plan." That recovery plan is expected to be finalized in about a year, which should help to expedite ESA planning efforts. Given ongoing conservation work by the Forest Service, "I don't see any change in Forest Service policy

on this issue," Keane added.

Speaking of policy issues, wilderness areas, previously promoted as a way to protect whitebarks without an ESA listing, present an ironic complication for restoration planning. By definition, wilderness areas preclude mechanized activity. Since a great deal of whitebark habitat is in wilderness areas, planting sufficient numbers of rust-resistant seedlings presents a significant challenge, and Keane believes the questions about planting resistant seedlings or seeds in wilderness "will probably be decided at the wilderness-area level."

Dr. Diana Tomback, professor of integrated biology at the University of Colorado-Denver, serves as the Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation's policy and outreach coordinator. "Whitebark pine is the poster child for the extreme harms of exotic disease and climate change,"





Dead whitebark pines dominate the subalpine landscape above Esmeralda Basin in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest in Washington (Richard Droker).

she said. “Luckily, we have the tools and capability to make whitebark populations more resilient. The National Whitebark Pine Restoration Plan, which will implement these restoration tools, offers a new model for forest restoration and management.”

Eric Sprague, American Forests vice president of forest restoration, elaborated, “Critical to the species’ survival is finding, growing and planting whitebark pines that are resistant to blister rust fungus. Disease-screening programs have shown tremendous promise. American Forests has already helped to plant 500,000 disease-resistant whitebark seedlings. The threatened listing brings much needed attention and resources to the restoration effort.”

In spite of the dire plight of this iconic species, Tomback and Sprague’s assessments offer a bit of optimism about its future, and that optimism gets a boost from the “paleo” record. Core samples of lake sediments dating back 15,000 years contain enough whitebark charcoal and pollen to indicate the tree thrived under warmer conditions with more frequent wildfires. Cathy Whitlock, a fellow at Montana State

University, led the MSU team that studied the samples. “In the warmest periods, the whitebark pine was really pretty happy,” she told *The Daily Climate*. “The paleo perspective gives you really good insight,” especially when it comes to climate change.



A stand of whitebark pines survives high in the mountains of Oregon (Richard Sniezko, U.S. Forest Service).



# Briefly

## *Biden Picks Vilsack to Head Ag Department*

While President Joe Biden's picks to head the Department of Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency will make history if confirmed, his nomination of Tom Vilsack to lead the Department of Agriculture is considered politically safe.

Vilsack served as Agriculture secretary for eight years during the Obama administration and sailed through his initial confirmation hearing with bipartisan support. Sen. John Boozman, the top Republican on the Senate panel, noted Vilsack's "excellent reputation."

As reported by E&E News, environmental organizations are less enthusiastic, citing a record of favoring big agribusiness and timber companies. "Obviously, anything is better than the insane policies Sonny Perdue has pushed out," said Brett Hartl, government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity, but "it was like pulling teeth" to get Vilsack's Ag Department to back away from old-growth logging.

## *Trump Administration Redefines 'Habitat'*

In December, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, at the direction of Trump appointees, finalized a rule to limit the government's ability to protect crucial ecosystems by redefining "habitat" as it relates to the designation of areas critical to the survival of threatened and endangered species.

The new rule limits critical habitat designations to areas that could currently support these at-risk species, thereby eliminating historic habitat as well as habitat that would provide for future recovery as climate change shifts the locales where species can survive.

Stephanie Kurose, a senior policy specialist with the Center for Biological Diversity, responded to the new definition: "President Trump has cemented his legacy as the most anti-wildlife president in history. Today's rule will have devastating consequences for some of America's most iconic species, including the grizzly bear, whooping cranes, and Pacific salmon."

## *Hawaii National Forest Bill Advances*

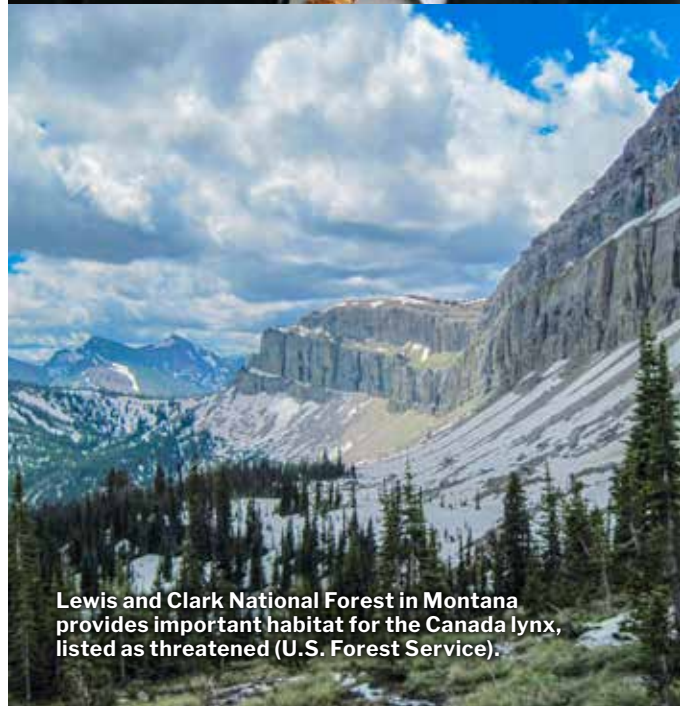
In December, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 7045, a bill that would direct the Forest Service to identify lands on Hawaii, Maui, Molokai, Lanai, Oahu, and Kauai that could be included in a National Forest.

If passed by the Senate and signed into law, the legislation will be the first step toward creating Hawaii's first National Forest. Congressman Ed Case, who proposed the bill along with former Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, said creating a Hawaiian National Forest would help conservation efforts and provide research opportunities.

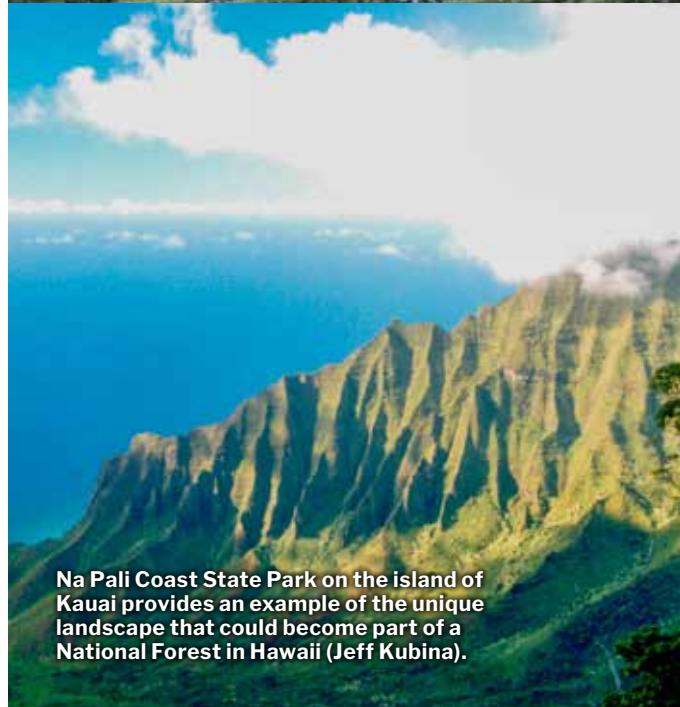
"Despite having some of the most unique and endangered forest lands in the country, Hawaii is one of only a handful of states nationwide without a National Forest," said Case. "Establishing a National Forest in Hawaii would support tropical forest conservation."



**Tom Vilsack, President Biden's nominee for Secretary of Agriculture (official USDA portrait).**



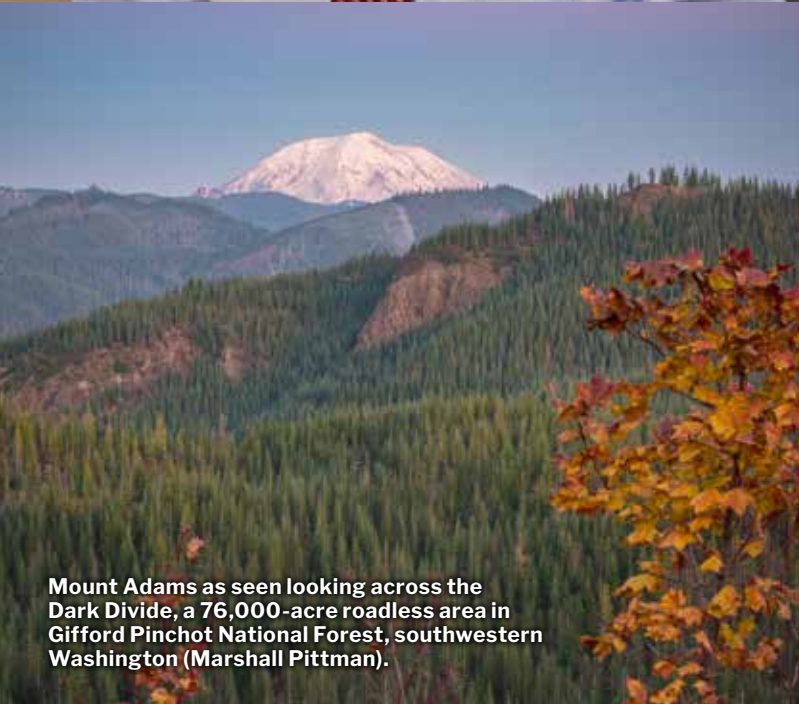
**Lewis and Clark National Forest in Montana provides important habitat for the Canada lynx, listed as threatened (U.S. Forest Service).**



**Na Pali Coast State Park on the island of Kauai provides an example of the unique landscape that could become part of a National Forest in Hawaii (Jeff Kubina).**



Colorado U.S. Senator Michael Bennet (official U.S. Congress photo).



Mount Adams as seen looking across the Dark Divide, a 76,000-acre roadless area in Gifford Pinchot National Forest, southwestern Washington (Marshall Pittman).



Smoke from California's 2020 North Complex fire settles over San Francisco, darkening the daytime sky (Christopher Michel).

## *Senator Introduces Forest Restoration Jobs Bill*

---

In a move to “create and sustain jobs in the outdoors” through “forest and watershed restoration and resilience,” Sen. Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) introduced the Outdoor Restoration Force Act in the waning days of the 116th Congress.

“For years, Congress has failed to invest in the outdoors—undermining our forests and watersheds, which sustain our economy and Western way of life,” said Bennet. “The Outdoor Restoration Force Act begins to change that with an injection of funding to create new, good-paying jobs in the outdoors while reducing the risk of wildfire and other natural disasters.”

The legislation would commit \$60 billion to create or sustain more than 2 million jobs supporting forest and watershed restoration and resiliency work. According to Bennet’s calculations, the bill would generate more than \$156 billion in economic output.

## *‘Conservation Value of National Forest Roadless Areas’*

---

In 2001, the Roadless Area Conservation Rule prohibited road construction and timber harvesting on more than 90,000 square miles of inventoried roadless areas (IRAs) in National Forests. Since these areas are not protected by legislation, 40 percent of these lands are no longer protected.

“Conservation Value of National Forest Roadless Areas,” a study copublished by the Forest Service and The Wilderness Society, identified significant benefits provided by IRAs. They protect watersheds that deliver drinking water to hundreds of thousands of people, capture large quantities of carbon, and enhance carbon capture in areas protected as wilderness and national parks.

“Protecting these places is a vital step toward ensuring a healthy, sustainable future, said ecologist Travis Belote, one of the scientists who contributed to the study.

## *As if 2020 Wasn’t Bad Enough Already*

---

The U.S. set a record that may have escaped notice at year’s end, given the distractions of an accelerating pandemic. 2020 brought a new wildfire record—10.3 million acres burned—breaking the 2015 record by 200,000 acres.

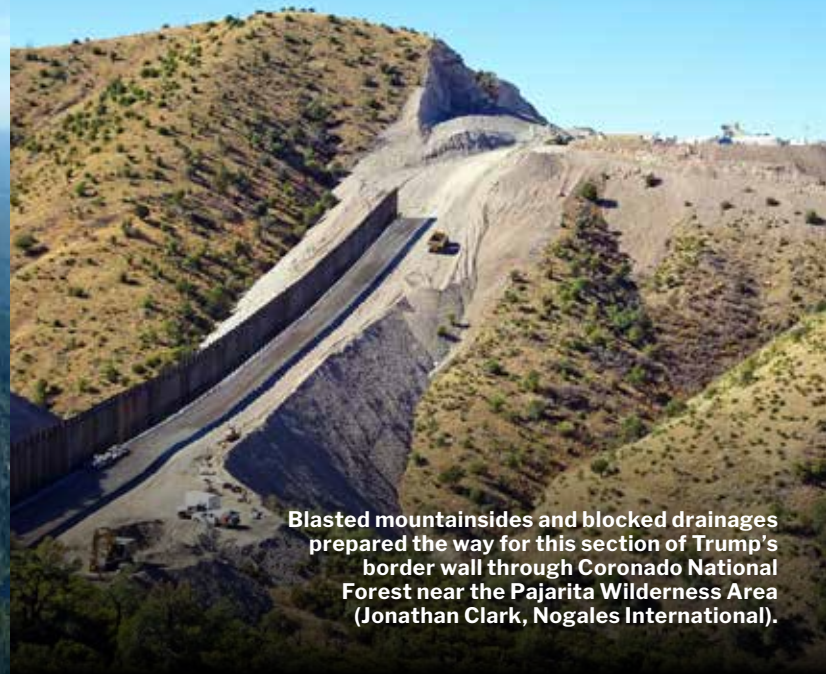
“In 2020, we saw some of the hottest months on record, and large portions of the western U.S. were in severe drought,” said University of Colorado fire scientist Jennifer Balch.

According to records dating back to 1983, 2020 marks the third year that wildfires have burned more than 10 million acres in the U.S. All three of those occurred in the last five years.

“We can no longer ignore the link between warming and wildfires,” Balch said.



An aerial view shows a portion of the Tongass National Forest near Ketchikan, Alaska (Justin, Adobe Stock).



Blasted mountainsides and blocked drainages prepared the way for this section of Trump's border wall through Coronado National Forest near the Pajarita Wilderness Area (Jonathan Clark, Nogales International).

# Dispatch

## Trump's Forest Service Legacy

*Donald J. Trump's environmental legacy will be remembered as one of the most destructive in the nation's history. While he and his enablers unleashed a preponderance of their environmental attacks through the Bureau of Land Management and the Environmental Protection Agency, the Forest Service did not escape the last four years unscathed.*

### Tongass National Forest

Under Trump's leadership, the Forest Service targeted the country's largest National Forest, the Tongass, in southeastern Alaska. The administration exempted 9.2 million Tongass acres from the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. The Trump action allows construction of new roads to facilitate commercial logging and mining in the most pristine areas of the Tongass, which includes much of the world's largest temperate rainforest.

Exploitation of natural resources implies financial gain, yet opening the Tongass to industrial development has already proven to be a losing enterprise. A study by the nonpartisan Taxpayers for Common Sense found that, since 1980, Tongass timber sales have cost taxpayers \$1.96 billion while generating just \$227 million in revenue, a net loss of \$1.73 billion.

The Trump action also played fast and loose with federal law. A study by the Congressional Research Service determined that the Forest Service skirted the law by not analyzing the effects on natural resources, such as fish populations, wildlife habitat, and water quality. An audit by the Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General found that the Forest Service also illegally allowed the State of Alaska to

use federal funds to lobby for the exemption. Now that Trump has left the building, the White House has ordered a review of the action.

### Coronado National Forest

Some of the most visible, long-lasting damage to come out of Trump's presidency occurred in southern Arizona's Coronado National Forest. Trump declared a national emergency in 2019 and renewed it in 2020, empowering himself to divert military funds to build his border wall.

The Trump administration also weaponized the Real ID Act of 2005, which granted the Department of Homeland Security the authority to bypass environmental and cultural protection laws to ramp up border wall construction in California. Because the waiver authority approved by Congress was not limited to a specific time and place, the Trump administration used it to accelerate border wall construction in Coronado National Forest.

Under this Bush-era legislation, the Trump administration waived 62 laws, including the National Environmental Policy Act, which requires a multi-year assessment of environmental impacts for any project of this size.





A northern spotted owl perches on a Douglas-fir branch in a stand of old-growth forest in Oregon (PKZ, Adobe Stock).

## The Northwest Forest Plan

In 1994, the Clinton administration implemented the Northwest Forest Plan in response to over-harvesting of old-growth forests, which threatened northern spotted owl populations. While the plan was criticized by both environmentalists and timber industry representatives, it de-escalated the Spotted Owl Wars, prompting stakeholders to collaborate on public forest management instead of confronting one another, sometimes violently, on public lands.

An ongoing point of contention has been the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) critical habitat designation for the owls, listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Timber harvesting is curtailed in critical habitat, and even with 9.6 million acres protected since 2012, owl populations have continued to decline. As a result, the FWS ruled in December that the northern spotted owl should be reclassified from threatened to endangered,

but the agency declined to act on that ruling because of “higher priority actions.”

In January, amid a barrage of last-minute attacks on environmental protections, the Trump administration pushed the FWS in the opposite direction, slashing more than 3.4 million federal acres from the northern spotted owl’s critical habitat. The New York Times reported that the action was implemented at the direction of Trump Interior Secretary David Bernhardt and was not supported by the agency’s own analysis.

In August 2020, the FWS had proposed excluding 204,653 acres from the owl’s critical habitat. Expecting this smaller exclusion, environmental groups expressed shock and outrage at the move—widely viewed as a parting gift from Trump to the timber industry—and vowed to challenge the designation in court. Susan Jane Brown, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center, said the move undermines

collaboration that has “increased the pace, scale and quality of forest restoration in our region, resulting in not only improved forest health but also community socioeconomic resilience.”

The FWS acknowledged, “It does not appear that designation of critical habitat in 2012 had a significant incremental depressive effect on subsequent Federal timber harvest.” In spite of this lack of adverse economic impacts, the Trump administration justified the decision by prioritizing “the needs of the local tax and economic base” and “the custom and culture of the citizens most impacted by a critical habitat designation.”

“We absolutely can, and do, have a sustainable timber industry and protections for wildlife where successful collaborative efforts have made that possible,” Brown said. “But reigniting the Spotted Owl Wars by callously eliminating habitat essential to preventing the owl’s extinction will make that good work next to impossible.”



# Forest Service Partnerships and Volunteers

As funding for public lands agencies has dwindled, the Forest Service has turned to nonprofit partnerships and volunteers (P/Vs) to help keep boots on the ground. The Forest Service Wilderness Advisory Group (WAG) examined this trend in 2008, identifying the top 10 barriers to successful partnerships. The WAG then conducted a follow-up assessment in 2018.

The top-10 list from 2008 begins with “inadequate capacity ... due to low funding and limited staff time.” The themes of budget cuts and diminishing human resources are echoed throughout the list: “the substantial investment of time and energy needed” by agency staff, “smaller wilderness and recreation budgets,” “many vacant positions,” process barriers that “incur an additional cost in staff time,” “shortage of skills and abilities,” and so on.

To address these barriers, the WAG listed their top three solutions:

1. Fund positions that focus on partnership creation and consider “creative approaches such as positions shared among partners, jointly funded volunteer coordinators, or foundation-funded development positions.”
2. “Develop additional non-federal funding sources” that can contribute to stewardship projects through National Forest Foundation grants.
3. Support partnership development by investing in agency staff to address the theme of “inadequate capacity” common to all of the barriers identified.

The 2018 assessment states, “Progress has been made,” but finds, “Inadequate capacity is still a primary barrier,” and partnership and volunteer efforts are most successful when there are “dedicated Forest Service employees that can put time into the relationships.” The 2018 assessment notes that, even as Forest Service capacity continues to decrease, “requirements for agreements, training, and volunteer certification” have gotten more complicated.

The 2018 paper also hints at a possible disconnect between Forest Service leadership and field-level employees, who are concerned that partnerships and volunteers may be viewed as a replacement workforce. Additionally, “The field does not feel leadership recognizes the costs associated with volunteers ... versus the efficiency and versatility of Forest Service crews.”

After comparing the findings from 2008 and 2018, the WAG paper raises important questions: “Is paying partnership groups more efficient and cost effective than Forest Service crews? How will shared leadership work? What does this mean for Forest Service employees and the future workforce?”

Concluding that the underlying issue of underfunding and inadequate capacity is “intractable,” the 2018 assessment warns, “The continued push for increased P/V collaborations without support could worsen relationships between the field and Forest Service leadership, erode morale, and negatively impact employee recruitment and retention and credibility with our communities.”



Volunteers work with a Forest Service ranger to build a fence and horse step-over to discourage illegal motorized trespass in San Isabel National Forest in Colorado (Joe Stone).





**FSEEE**  
Forest Service Employees  
for Environmental Ethics

NONPROFIT ORG  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
EUGENE OR  
PERMIT NO. 679

**P.O. Box 11615**  
**Eugene, OR 97440**  
**541-484-2692**  
**fsee.org**

Forest News is a publication of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics. Our mission is to protect National Forests and to reform the U.S. Forest Service by advocating for environmental ethics, educating citizens, and defending whistleblowers. FSEEE is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

*Forest News is printed on post-consumer, recycled paper with vegetable-based ink.*

## Take Action

# Save Alaska's Rainforests. Restore the Tongass Roadless Rule!

Tongass National Forest is the crown jewel of our National Forest System. It harbors old-growth trees that lie at the heart of the largest temperate rainforest in the world. These roadless areas provide a priceless source of clean water, they sequester huge amounts of carbon, and they protect crucial

salmon runs. The former administration eliminated protections for 9.2 million acres of pristine Tongass forestland. Please contact the White House and ask President Biden to reverse this short-sighted rule change. Let the president know how important the Tongass is for the health of our nation and our planet.

**To contact the White House, call 202-456-1111, or send a fax to 202-456-2461.**