



# FOREST NEWS

The Newsletter of Forest Service Employees For Environmental Ethics /

Winter 2024

## Protecting Old Growth

from the  
Forest Service

### Inside

**NORTHWEST FOREST PLAN / WILD OLYMPICS /  
GUEST COLUMN: ATVs / QUIETEST FIRE SEASON IN DECADES**



# Don't Offer Up Our National Forests for Industrial Carbon Waste Dumping

by Jim Furnish

In my 34-year career at the U.S. Forest Service, the agency worked to support American industry while also maintaining public lands and the renewable resources they foster. That's why I am shocked to learn that the agency plans to make a fundamental change to how it manages our public lands: allowing private parties to permanently dump industrial pollution in national forests.

While I was serving as Siuslaw National Forest Supervisor in Oregon, and deputy chief for all U.S. national forests, the agency updated its Special Use Permit rules in 1998. At that time, the agency was adamant that no industry — no matter how useful to society — had the right to permanently use or occupy national forest lands. In a special-use rule issued that year, the agency was clear that it opposed “an exclusive and perpetual use of Federal land.” To do otherwise would undermine longstanding policy meant to protect national forest ecosystems and recreational uses.

Now, in an alarming contradiction, the Forest Service has proposed a new rule that would blow a pipeline-sized hole in its regulations “to allow exclusive or perpetual right of use or occupancy ... of National Forest System (NFS) lands” for carbon waste injection and storage. This carbon waste, in addition to requiring pipelines and injection wells, can cause people and animals to suffocate or even die. This I know: once gases are piped underground, there are no do-overs. What's done is done. And I wouldn't want to be a Forest Service ranger working anywhere near these dangerous operations.

*The Forest Service now seems to think that it can throw away decades of policy preventing “forever” permits that privatize forests for corporate use.*

Why the abrupt change? Nothing in laws establishing our national forests has changed since the rule was updated in the 1990s, but the Forest Service now seems to think that it can throw away decades of policy preventing “forever” permits that privatize forests for corporate use.

Maybe the answer comes — as it often does — from following the money. The carbon would likely come from smokestacks of facilities like coal-fired power plants. Fossil fuel companies are eager to adopt carbon capture and storage to perpetuate business as usual in the face of our need to transition to renewable energy. After capturing their pollution, these industries have to put it somewhere. Sending the waste through pipelines to national forests is surely more appealing than dealing with landowner opposition to carbon pipeline companies' efforts to take private property by eminent domain. To add icing to the cake, the federal government is offering companies massive tax subsidies to dispose of their carbon waste, even though research has shown this program is fraught with fraud.

Some national forests will be targeted sooner based on their geology, but this rule change puts all of them at risk from future applicants' desires to make quick profits and spoil public lands permanently. Impacts of this rule change could spread across our landscape: national forests are widely

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**Cover: Old-growth cedar trees on the Kootenai National Forest, Montana.**

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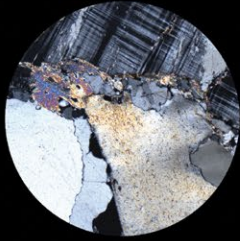
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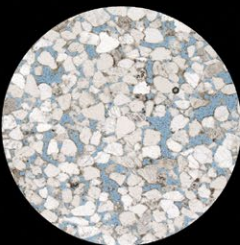
U.S. Geological Survey studies underground rock layers. Scientists identify those that are most suitable for trapping and those that are good for storage. One consideration is space.

#### Microscope Views of Rocks:

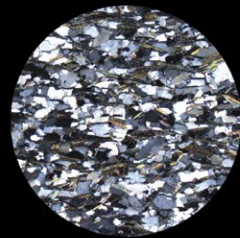
No empty space, good for trapping  $\text{CO}_2$  below



Blue color represents empty space, good for storing  $\text{CO}_2$

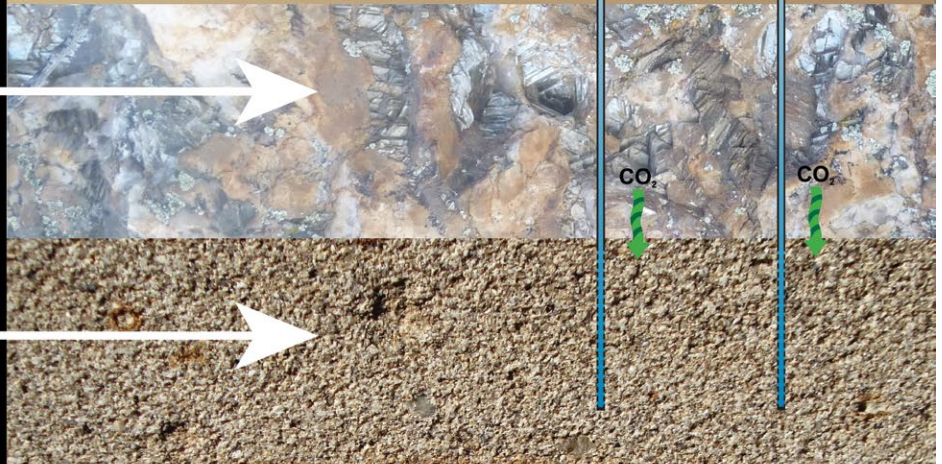
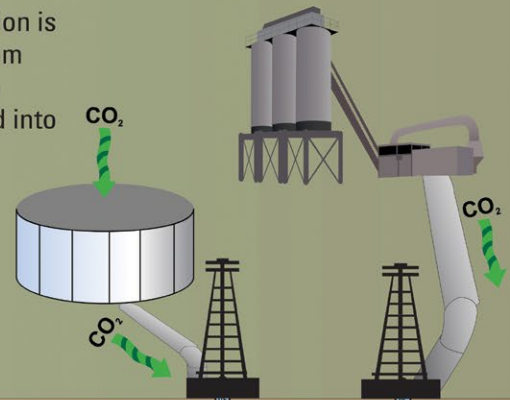


No empty space, good for sealing  $\text{CO}_2$  above



## Geologic Carbon Sequestration

Geologic carbon sequestration is capturing carbon dioxide from industrial processes and the atmosphere. It is then turned into a liquid and injected deep underground.



*Geological carbon sequestration requires industrial drilling rigs capable of boring thousands of feet into the Earth, followed by installation of industrial injection pumps, tanker truck terminals, and pipeline networks (U.S. Geological Survey graphic).*

distributed throughout the U.S. and highly valued for recreation, domestic water sources, crucial fish and wildlife habitat, and outstanding scenery.

Ultimately, policy questions turn on values. Forests store tremendous amounts of carbon — naturally! The agency has a golden opportunity to elevate the value of carbon sequestration by protecting mature and old-growth forests. Isn't this a better values choice than chasing tired, polluting industry practices that are squarely opposite to where our climate-change battle should be heading?

*The agency has a golden opportunity to elevate the value of carbon sequestration by protecting mature and old-growth forests.*

The Forest Service should abandon its proposal to permanently privatize the public's land and endanger our shared renewable resources and ecosystems, which only benefits a small group of rich

companies and investors. National forests have a huge role to play in protecting biodiversity and storing carbon in forested landscapes. Allowing polluters to permanently industrialize these lands will only rob the public of real climate solutions in order to chase after false ones fraught with unacceptable risks.

Jim Furnish retired from the U.S. Forest Service after serving for 34 years, including as deputy chief for national forests from 1999 to 2002. During the 1990s, Furnish was Siuslaw National Forest supervisor and a leader in protecting 60 million roadless acres.





*A snow-covered Mount Hood towers above the surrounding national forest.*

# Featured Forest

## Mount Hood National Forest

The Mount Hood National Forest encompasses 1.1 million acres, with about a third of those acres designated as wilderness within eight wilderness areas. The Forest has a rich history and offers year-round recreation opportunities. Its watersheds provide drinking water to more than a million people in the greater Portland area.

Mount Hood, an active stratovolcano that reaches 11,249 feet above sea level, was named after naval officer Alexander Arthur Hood by British Lieutenant William Broughton in 1792. Mount Hood National Forest includes land that was designated as the Bull Run Timberland Reserve by President

Benjamin Harrison in 1892. In 1893, additional land was added to the reserve, and the name was changed to the Cascade Range Forest Reserve. After creation of the Forest Service, the land was renamed the Oregon National Forest in 1908. The Forest received its current name in 1924.

The Forest has supported nearby communities with natural resources and job opportunities, especially during the Great Depression when the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration provided jobs for unemployed workers who constructed buildings and recreation sites. Timberline Lodge, now a National Historic Landmark,

was the largest of these Depression-era projects.

Skiing was first recorded on Mt. Hood in 1900, and the sport has been growing on the Forest ever since. The Magic Mile chairlift, built in 1938, was the second chairlift constructed in the U.S., and five ski areas now thrive on the Forest. During World War II, activities on the Forest shifted from recreation to raw material production, but recreation attracted even more visitors after the war ended. More than 2 million visitors per year currently recreate on the Forest. In addition to skiing, popular activities include camping, hiking, snowshoeing, sledding, hunting, boating, and fishing.



## Old-Growth Forests

### Can the Forest Service Kick its 100-year Addiction to Logging?

President Biden was widely praised for Executive Order 14072, which ordered the first-ever national inventory of old-growth and mature forests on federal lands. Issued April 22, 2022 (Earth Day), the order emphasizes “Restoring and Conserving the Nation’s Forests, Including Mature and Old-Growth Forests” and states, “My Administration will manage forests on Federal lands, which include many mature and old-growth forests, to promote their continued health and resilience....”

The inventory was completed in the spring of 2023, and in December ’23, the administration’s Department of Agriculture announced a proposal “to amend all 128 forest land management plans to conserve and steward old-growth forest conditions on national forests and grasslands nationwide.”

The Ag Department press release asserts, “Healthy, climate-resilient old-growth forests store large amounts of carbon, increase biodiversity, reduce wildfire risks, enable subsistence and cultural uses, provide outdoor recreational opportunities and promote sustainable local economic development.”

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said, “Old-growth forests are a vital part of our ecosystems and a special cultural resource. This proposed nationwide forest plan amendment — the first in the agency’s history — is an important step in conserving these national

treasures.... Climate change is presenting new threats like historic droughts and catastrophic wildfire. This clear direction will help our

old-growth forests thrive across our shared landscape.”

Recent Forest Service actions have not kept pace with



*Old-growth ponderosa pine forests, like this one in Idaho's Deschutes National Forest, are fire-resilient, yet the new GMUG Forest Plan is targeting old-growth ponderosa for logging in western Colorado (Forest Service photo).*





**Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, Wisconsin (Forest Service photo).**

administration policy. For example, the agency is poised to approve a long-term plan for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison (GMUG) national forests in Colorado. As currently written, that plan allows commercial logging on more than 772,000 acres of public lands, including mature and old-growth trees — a 66% increase from the current forest plan.

The GMUG plan has been all but finalized, with the deadline for objections having recently passed. Objection resolution meetings are being facilitated by the National Forest Foundation. In this arid, high-elevation ecosystem, these fire-resilient forests will require centuries to regain their old-growth qualities once they are logged.

As previously reported, the Custer-Gallatin National Forest recently approved the South Plateau Landscape Area Treatment Project, a 16,462-acre logging project

along the western boundary of Yellowstone National Park:

- 5,531 acres of clear-cutting.
- 6,593 acres of commercial tree-cutting.
- 56 miles of road construction.

Predictably, the decision swiftly met with a lawsuit. Several environmental groups are challenging the proposal for its impact on protected wildlife while pointing out how the project conflicts with President Biden's pledge to protect old-growth and mature forests.

Initiated by the Trump administration, the Fourmile Vegetation Project on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest in northern Wisconsin is actively logging old-growth trees, mainly to supply pulp mills. Andy Olsen, senior policy advocate with the Environmental Law and Policy Center has stated, "While the Forest Service also speaks of the need to

'recruit' more old-growth trees and forests, it is proceeding to log just such trees and stands in the Fourmile project area."

Timber industry trade groups like the Great Lakes Timber Association support the logging, even though, as Olsen points out, "There's a glut right now of timber on the market. The Forest Service says that over 85% of these timber sales are to be used for pulp for paper products. And that market ... is saturated, so there's no market emergency, but we do have a climate emergency." Like the South Plateau Project, the Fourmile Project threatens sensitive wildlife.

"It's also the last habitat for the American marten and a host of other things that need those old, intact, moist moss- and fungus-filled forests," Olsen said. "That's not what remains after these logging practices, even the so-called selective logging."



The marten holds a special significance as a Clan animal to Ojibwe tribes, and Biden's executive order includes honoring Tribal cultural and subsistence practices. "The Ojibwe tribes are concerned about protection of the Clan animal and only mammal protected under Wisconsin's endangered species laws, and that's the American marten. ... Their logging is actually, they admit, it's going to reduce habitat for the marten, which has struggled to persist," Olsen said.

While the Biden Administration can be applauded for promoting the preservation of mature and old-growth forests, these logging projects in Colorado, Montana and Wisconsin reveal significant cognitive dissonance between science demonstrating the importance of preserving old-growth forests (much of it done by Forest Service researchers) and ongoing approval of old-growth logging projects by Forest Service bureaucrats.

Just one month before the Biden administration announced the proposed nationwide forest plan amendments, a Forest Service briefing dismissed the threat from logging. "Wildfire, insect infestations and disease — not logging — are the greatest threats to the nation's oldest forests," [officials said](#). They called for "a new policy" to embrace cutting of trees to help mature and old-growth forests better withstand wildfire, an approach that has been largely debunked by recent research, including the work of Dr. Tonia Schoennagel, an ecologist with the University of Colorado. As she has [documented](#), less than 1% of forest health treatments even encounter a wildfire during their effective lifespan.

Timothey Ingalsbee, Ph.D., is a fire ecologist and former wildland fire fighter. [As he has pointed out](#), the Forest Service began promoting logging for forest health only after the agency was forced to drastically reduce old-growth logging 30 years ago. "The big shift in forest management and fire management came right at the early 1990s," Ingalsbee said. "At that time ... they were clear-cutting old growth to the point of driving species extinct. So there were court-ordered legal restrictions of clear-cut logging, and just like that, the focus of the agencies kind of morphed. They charted out [forest-treatment] prescriptions that basically any tree made of wood was subject to being salvage logged or thinned as hazardous fuel."

Dominick DellaSala, chief scientist with the Earth Island Institute's Wild Heritage Project, [responded to the Forest Service briefing](#) by noting that less old growth has been lost in recent years because past logging "nearly liquidated the entire ecosystem."

In spite of history, in spite of valid scientific research, and in spite of Biden's executive order, the Forest Service continues to promote, approve, and carry out old-growth logging. Is this an example of arduous bureaucratic inertia preventing agency reform? Is it an agency so compromised by special interests that it will never willingly reform itself? Or perhaps it's just politics as usual designed to deflect reform and obfuscate the truth?



**A damaging road and stumps of old-growth trees are the "selective logging" legacy in Lassen National Forest, California.**





The Gemini Bridges Trail in southeastern Utah provides legal motorized access to spectacular public lands.

## Guest Column

### The Arrogance of the Off-road Vehicle Lobby

*by Jonathan P. Thompson*

In a rather predictable — but still maddening — move, the off-road-vehicle lobby is suing the Bureau of Land Management over the agency's Labyrinth Canyon and Gemini Bridges travel plan for off-highway vehicle (OHV) use in southeastern Utah.

The BlueRibbon Coalition, Colorado Off-Road Trail Defenders, and Patrick McKay are challenging what they call the “illegal and arbitrary” closure of 317 miles of motorized routes on about 468 square miles of public land north and west of Moab between the Green River and Highway 191. The off-road coalition was already shot down once by the

Interior Board of Land Appeals; now they're taking their gripes to federal court, using the same spurious arguments.

Of course, these groups have every right to challenge federal agencies' decisions — environmentalists do it all the time. But what's maddening about these motorized-access groups is their intransigence — even arrogance — and stubborn unwillingness to compromise. They promise to “Fight for Every Inch” of motorized access to public lands, not for any real reason but as an end in itself, damn the consequences to the environment, the public, and wildlife.

The kerfuffle over the Labyrinth/Gemini plan is a perfect example. Over the last couple of decades, vehicle traffic — and its impacts — have burgeoned on some 1,100 miles of motorized routes in the management plan's area. The type of traffic has changed, too, shifting from the relatively slow-going and quiet jeeps and SUVs to the dune-buggy-esque side-by-sides that have become increasingly popular in recent years. They go faster, are noisier, and kick up more dust than other vehicles. They also carry more people into the backcountry than a motorcycle or old-school ATV, thus multiplying the adverse effects.



For years, river runners, public lands advocates, residents, and local elected officials have been pushing the agency to get a handle on the traffic on the 300,000-acre slickrock expanse.

Last year, the BLM came up with four alternatives, ranging from keeping the status quo to closing up to 437 miles of trails. Yes, the strictest alternative would have closed less than half of the routes to vehicles, leaving almost 700 miles open to some form of motorized travel. In other words it was a compromise that favored the motorized crowd.

But even that went too far for the BLM, which ultimately shut down just 317 miles of motorized routes while limiting motorized travel (to motorcycles or smaller ATVs, for example) on 98 miles. In other words, you can still burn gasoline and spew

exhaust on more than 800 miles of routes on this one relatively small swath of public land. Meanwhile, motorized travel remains mostly unrestricted on more than 10,000 miles of roads, two-tracks, and old trails in southeastern Utah as a whole, including on the nearby Manti-La Sal National Forest.

That's not enough for the BlueRibbon Coalition and friends, however. It's never enough for them. They are ideologically opposed to decommissioning even the most insignificant road spur, and they and their allies in local and state government will squander millions of taxpayer dollars to fight the closures. Their reasoning? Because OHV recreation is, in the words of the lawsuit, "a way of life in the American West."

It's the same trope rolled out whenever someone tries to get a coal plant to stop belching pollution all

over folks or a mine to stop defiling the streams. In those instances, it may have some validity: the move could affect the miners' or the coal plant workers' livelihoods and therefore their way of life. But these OHV folks will still be able to ride their noisy machines around on hundreds of miles of roads. Believe me, nothing about this plan will affect their way of life.

A couple of decades ago, I encountered a winter-time version of this same phenomenon on U.S. Forest Service and BLM land in southwestern Colorado's high country. The federal agencies were trying to tackle the impacts of a growing number of snowmobilers riding increasingly more powerful machines deeper into the backcountry. Not only was it affecting the wildlife and the landscape, it also led to conflicts with



**Side-by-side recreationists enjoy a wilderness view after illegally crossing sensitive alpine habitat.**



the burgeoning number of non-motorized backcountry users.

The agencies offered compromises: one side of the highway would be open to all use, for example, with the other only to non-motorized use, a user-friendly model that is also easy to enforce. Yet the snowmobilers pushed back, claiming they were being discriminated against and denied access to public lands, sending the agencies back to the drawing board. The proposals were gradually whittled down until, in the end, the agencies banned snowmobiles on just 200 acres of the 7,100-acre planning area. Were the snowmobilers satisfied? Nope. They could not accept losing access to a mere 3% of the rolling, snow-covered terrain. They sued the feds over the decision (and lost).

I suspect the off-roaders will also lose in the Labyrinth Canyon case; even the most conservative judges are unlikely to fall for their faulty legal reasoning. And so, the plan likely will remain in place, as it should. It's a compromise, and an admittedly crappy one for those of us who would like to see a lot fewer vehicles — and people — trampling the landscape. After all, it still leaves the sprawling road network mostly intact. But maybe it's the best we can expect in a world where every

time a land management agency tries to enact a few common-sense protections, it is met with reactionaries and obstructionists who seem to have no other goal than keeping the government from doing its job.

And even this compromise will make it a little easier for the hikers, the horseback riders, the bighorn sheep, the coyotes, and the natural silence to find a bit of refuge from the incessant squawk of combustible engines and the humans driving them.

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Jonathan P. Thompson has been writing about the lands, cultures, and communities of the Western U.S. and the Four Corners Country — his homeland — since the 1980s when he was the editor of the Durango High School newspaper. He went on to work at and own the *Silverton Standard and the Miner*, a weekly newspaper in a Colorado mining-turned-tourist town. In 2006, he began working for *High Country News*, first as an associate editor, then editor-in-chief, senior editor, and finally, contributing editor, a role in which he continues today. He is also the editor and founder of the *Land Desk*, a twice-weekly e-newsletter covering public lands, climate, economies, and cultures of the West. He has authored three books: *River of Lost Souls: The Science, Politics, and Greed Behind the Gold King Mine Spill*, *Behind the Slickrock Curtain*, and *Sagebrush Empire: How a Remote Utah County Became the Battlefield of American Public Lands*.

Public lands managers, forest rangers, and even other motorized recreationists have observed a sharp uptick in resource damage that coincides with the growing popularity of powerful side-by-side ATVs.







The Linville Gorge Wilderness Area in Pisgah National Forest protects 10,000 acres of old-growth forest in western North Carolina — a rare example of the magnificent forests that once dominated the eastern U.S.

# Forests in the American East

## Part 3: A Vision of the Return of Old-Growth Forests

by *Andy Kerr*

*Suggesting ways to partially — but significantly — bring back the magnificent old-growth forests that have long been lost.*

Enough of the early successional habitat already. It's a matter of balance. The forests of the American East have early successional habitat (ESH) far in excess of what was natural and is desirable. Between logging on private lands and permanent energy corridors, we have plenty of ESH. Public forests should be mostly old-growth forest. Only 19 percent of all forestlands in the American East are public, with 9 percent in federal ownership (mostly national forests, national wildlife refuges, and military facilities). It's going to take centuries for these forests to reach old-growth status, so we haven't a moment to waste.

### STATE AND FEDERAL FOREST AGENCIES OUT OF CONTROL

Since the end of World War II, the Forest Service has (along with most foresters) asserted (and practiced) that the solution to any problem is the chainsaw.

Timber supply for returning WWII veterans? *Log it.*

Jobs? *Log it.*

Some dying trees (also known as old-growth forests)? *Log it.*

Forest fires? *Log it* (before, after, and also during).

Natural episodes of insects and diseases? *Log it.*

Fallen logs in streams as a barrier to fish passage (not!)? *Log it.* Stand-replacing fires, hurricanes, or volcanoes (that create ecologically complex preforests)? *Log it* (ideally before, but certainly after). Need for an increased water supply? *Log it.* Forests stressed by climate change? *Log it.* Forests stressed by fire suppression (caused by the Forest [dis]Service)? *Log it.* Increasing the rate of carbon sequestration in forests (through accounting legerdemain)? *Log it!* A decline in certain species of wildlife due to cut-over forests growing back? *Log it.* A decline in certain species of wildlife due to a lack of old forests? *Log the existing forest and dedicate what grows back to be old growth ... someday.*

### TOMORROW'S EASTERN FORESTS

We inherited the forests we have and had no choice in the matter. However, we have a choice as to the forest legacy we leave. I have a few ideas.



## Proforestation

Forests should be allowed to age naturally. Like a good single-malt scotch, the older the better. Fundamentally, it's all about letting the forests we have today grow older. Far older. To old growth. In a 2019 journal article, Tufts University Professor Bill Moomaw, Trinity College Professor Susan Masino, and Highstead Foundation Senior Ecologist Ed Faison coined the term “proforestation”:

*The recent 1.5 Degree Warming Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identifies reforestation and afforestation as important strategies to increase negative emissions, but they face significant challenges: afforestation requires an enormous amount of additional land, and neither strategy can remove sufficient carbon by growing young trees during the critical next decade(s). In contrast, growing existing forests intact to their ecological potential — termed proforestation — is a more effective, immediate, and low-cost approach that could be mobilized across suitable forests of all types. Proforestation serves the greatest public good by maximizing co-benefits such as nature-based biological carbon sequestration and unparalleled ecosystem services such as biodiversity enhancement, water and air quality, flood and erosion control, public health benefits, low impact recreation, and scenic beauty [emphasis added].*

## Real Preforests, Not Simplistic Early Successional Habitats

While rare, complex early successional habitat (aka preforest), was a real stage in the life cycle of forests in the American East. The occasional fire or hurricane did take out a whole stand, but mostly, complex ESH came from a massive number of microdisturbances in a stand. One tree or several fell and created a little opening that

lasted a while and was favored by certain wildlife species. Almost all the current (and planned) ESH is simplistic in that almost all of the commercially valuable trees are removed from the site. In a natural preforest, a legacy of live and dead standing and fallen trees is fundamental to the structural, compositional, and functional complexity of the site.

## Very Large Nature Preserves

The taming of the wild East in the United States came early, well before the idea of very large nature preserves such as Yellowstone National Park, established in 1872. Few very large nature preserves exist in the American East. This needs to change, starting — but certainly not ending — with a Maine Woods National Park and a White Mountain National Park in New Hampshire.

## Tonnes of National Wildlife Refuges

To achieve the scientifically essential goal of conserving 30 percent of the nation's lands and waters by 2030 (aka 30 x 30) — on the way to 50 x 50 — a large amount of natural, somewhat natural, and naturally recoverable private lands needs to become public lands within the National Wildlife Refuge System. The forests in these refuges for wildlife should be allowed to grow old — not burned or brushed back as they often are now.

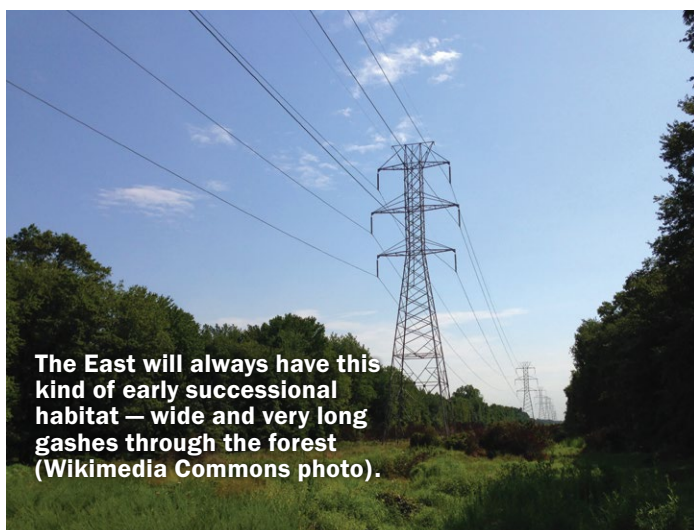
See my three *Public Lands Blog* posts on the National Wildlife Refuge System — “[Part 1: An Overview](#),” “[Part 2: Historical Evolution and Current Challenges](#),” and “[Part 3: Time to Double Down](#).”

## Conserving Mature Forests to Allow Them to Be Old-Growth Forests Again

Due to the history of national forests in the American East, there are public lands that contain large amounts of mature forests that — if left alone — could again become old-growth forests. Conservationists are urging the Biden administration to promulgate an administrative rule that would protect all mature and old-growth forests and trees on federal forest lands. See *Public Lands Blog* posts: “[Biden's Executive Order on Forests](#)” — “[Part 1: A Great Opportunity](#)” and “[Part 2: Seize the Day!](#)”

## Filling in the National Forests of the East: Reinvigorating the Weeks Act

The fact that we have any national forests in the American East is thanks to Massachusetts Republican U.S. Representative John Wingate Weeks (1860-1926). The Weeks Act of 1911 allowed the Forest Service to establish national forests that were not first carved from the public domain as in the American West. Where there is a national forest in the East, one can thank a visionary state legislature that had to approve such before the Forest Service could buy the land. It's not too late for



The East will always have this kind of early successional habitat — wide and very long gashes through the forest (Wikimedia Commons photo).





In western North Carolina's Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, an old-growth yellow poplar tree provides irreplaceable ecosystem benefits.

the legislatures of Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maryland, and Delaware to be visionary. The law is still on the books. If they are politically afraid to be that visionary, legislators could vote to establish more state forests, but that might entail spending state rather than federal money.

The exterior boundaries of the national forests in the Forest Service's Northeast and Southeast regions enclose 48.6 million acres. Yet, only 25.6 million acres is publicly owned national forest land. Some 23 million acres (47 percent) of the land within the boundaries of national forests is not the nation's forests. This land includes developments and settlements, but much of it is forested (from very fine to very clear-cut) or open fields that were once forested and could be again. No further action of state legislatures is necessary. See the *Public Lands Blog* post "[National Forests in the Eastern United States: An Incomplete Legacy](#)."

### Bringing Back Beavers and Bats

Many of the natural openings in what were once vast and heavily forested landscapes were engineered by beavers. A keystone species ("a species which has a disproportionately large effect on its natural environment relative to its abundance"), the beaver is the only dam builder I like. An old-growth forest without beavers is like whiskey without alcohol or bread without salt. See the *Public Lands Blog* posts "[Leave It to Beavers](#)" — "[Part 1: Good for the Climate, Ecosystems, Watersheds, Ratepayers, and Taxpayers](#)" and "[Part 2: Good for the Climate, Ecosystems, Watersheds, Ratepayers, and Taxpayers](#)."

Bottom Line: "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them" (Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854)

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

The following local organizations are among those in the vanguard of conserving and restoring mature and old-growth forests and wilderness in the American East:

- Friends of Blackwater.
- Northeast Wilderness Trust, see *Forever Wild* video.
- Old-Growth Forest Network.
- RESTORE: The North Woods.
- Save Public Forests Coalition.
- Southern Environmental Law Center.
- Standing Trees.

### TO TAKE ACTION

The Climate Forests Campaign ([Let Trees Grow: Protect the Climate](#)) is a broad coalition of conservation organizations leading the effort to achieve permanent administrative protection for the nation's remaining mature and old-growth forests on Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management holdings.

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Andy Kerr is the czar of The Larch Company and consults on environmental and conservation issues. The Larch Company is a for-profit non-membership conservation organization that represents the interests of humans yet born and species that cannot talk. Referenced articles are at [AndyKerr.net](http://AndyKerr.net).



## *Wild Olympics Bill, S. 1254, Clears Committee*

The Wild Olympics Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (Senate Bill 1254) achieved an important milestone when it cleared the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources Committee Dec. 14. Sen. Patty Murray (D, Wash.) first introduced the bill in 2012 and reintroduced it yet again in April along with House co-sponsor Rep. Derek Kilmer (D, Wash.).

Now, over a decade since the legislation was first proposed, the bill could finally become law, permanently protecting more than 126,500 acres of Olympic National Forest as wilderness.

Extensive community input has informed the legislation. More than 12,000 local residents have signed petitions in support of the bill, which would protect old-growth forests, drinking-water sources, and pristine salmon runs.

As Sen. Murray noted, “Passing Wild Olympics through Committee is a big win, and our job now is to keep up the momentum and get this bill to President Biden’s desk.”

## *Researchers Sequence Whitebark Pine Genome*

Among efforts to stave off the rapid decline of whitebark pine trees, **researchers have recently sequenced the genome** of this keystone species and **are publishing their findings**.

Conifer genomes can be challenging to sequence as they are 3-10 times larger than the human genome. Project lead David Neale, professor emeritus, Plant Sciences Dept., University of California, Davis, said the information will enable researchers to “expedite the supply of resistant seedlings.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed whitebark pine as threatened under the Endangered Species Act after more than 325 million of the trees died due to a variety of factors, including white pine blister rust, an invasive fungus.

The tree is a keystone species across 80.6 million acres in the western U.S. and Canada, where it grows up to treeline.

## *2023 Brings Quietest U.S. Fire Season in Decades*

The most current data show 2023 was a relatively quiet fire year. The **National Interagency Fire Center** reports 54,273 wildfires burned 2,627,112 acres through Dec. 18.

While the number of fires was in line with the 10-year average, the number of acres burned was the **smallest in more than two decades**, dating back to 1998 when 1.3 million acres burned. Fires in 2023 simply weren’t as destructive as in previous years.

As reported in *U.S. News and World Report*, Brad Rippey, a meteorologist with the Department of Agriculture, said high levels of precipitation kept the western U.S. mostly out of trouble, which kept the national numbers low.

Cal Fire San Diego Captain Thomas Shoots said California “caught a lot of breaks” this fire season. Even though the state still had quite a few wildfires, favorable weather conditions enabled firefighters to keep them relatively small.

Canada’s 2023 wildfire season offers a stark contrast. Weather and climate conditions in the country contributed to catastrophic wildfires that burned 45 million acres.



**Old-growth trees in the proposed South Quinalt Ridge Wilderness Area, Olympic National Forest (photo courtesy of Wild Olympics Campaign).**




**Whitebark pine snags in Washington’s Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest (photo by Richard Droker).**



**Precipitation from 2023 weather patterns produced flooding in the Nevada desert during Burning Man and limited the number of acres burned across the West (photo by Cory Doctorow).**





*Old-growth Douglas-fir trees remain in Oregon's Willamette National Forest due in large part to protections implemented as part of the Northwest Forest Plan.*

## The Northwest Forest Plan Amendment

The Northwest Forest Plan — the world's largest ecosystem management plan — was adopted in 1994 after President Bill Clinton essentially imposed the Plan on the Forest Service and other reluctant federal agencies. Of the Washington, Oregon, and California lands affected by the Plan, 19.4 million acres (79%) are on national forests.

Operating within the Agriculture Department, the Forest Service bureaucracy has, in Andy Kerr's estimation, "chafed under a plan that it never wanted and would never have created on its own." Now, the USDA has assembled an advisory committee to guide the process of amending the landmark plan with the goal of "modernizing landscape management."

The Northwest Forest Plan was developed after court rulings found the Forest Service bureaucracy guilty of flaunting federal law. Various federal courts found the agency's clear-cut logging of old-growth trees to be in violation of the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and National Forest Management Act. With these rulings, national forest logging dropped 80%, to a level at which it remains.

Clinton convened a forest summit in 1993 soon after taking office. The ensuing scientific review and planning process (in which FSEEE Executive Director Andy Stahl played a role) produced the Northwest Forest Plan. In the end, the Plan provided for:

- 6.5 million acres of late-successional (old-growth) reserves (LSRs).
- 0.1 million acres of "managed" LSRs.
- 2.1 million acres of "riparian reserves."

- 1.5 million acres of "adaptive management areas."
- 3.28 million acres for logging.

7.25 million acres were already protected as wilderness areas or wild and scenic river corridors. Other key requirements of the Plan are:

- The designation of "key watersheds."
- A requirement for "watershed analysis."
- A requirement to "survey and manage" for threatened and endangered species prior to logging.

In August 2023, a team of scientists with the U.S. Geological Survey, the Forest Service, and Oregon State University published a report based on a quarter century of data collection at more than 1,000 sites in 219 watersheds protected under the Northwest Forest Plan. The report documents "steady improvements in watershed condition" resulting from "broad-scale forest recovery combined with targeted forest, road, and stream management under the Northwest Forest Plan."

The landmark plan has proven successful in large part because it includes measurable standards that must be met. But the 2012 Forest Service Planning Rule redefined standards and guidelines in ways that give agency bureaucrats latitude to operate within standards as long as their decisions can be defended as "help[ing] achieve or maintain the desired condition." Guidelines are no longer enforceable, and the 2012 Rule was developed under Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who currently serves in the same position.

Updating the Plan will require an environmental impact statement and opportunities for public comment. Reports, comments and timelines will continue to be posted on the Forest Service website at [shorturl.at/noBIL](https://shorturl.at/noBIL).





# FSEEE

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## Action Alert!

*Call your senators now!*

**The Wild Olympics Bill  
— S. 1254 — has made  
it out of committee!  
PLEASE CALL and urge  
your senators to ensure  
that the bipartisan  
bill gets a vote on the  
Senate floor.**

Old-growth forest protected by Colonel Bob Wilderness Area, Olympic National Forest. The Wild Olympics Bill will protect additional old growth on Olympic National Forest, ensuring the preservation of this invaluable landscape.

**The Congressional switchboard phone number is 202-224-3121. It can connect you to your senators' offices. Thank you for helping to preserve our national forests!**