

Forest Service to release Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Northwest Forest Plan Amendment

November 14, 2024



The USDA Forest Service is seeking public input on a proposed amendment to the land management plans guiding national forests within the Northwest Forest Plan area, which span Northern California, Oregon, and Washington.

The draft Environmental Impact Statement for this amendment will be published Friday, Nov. 15, in the Federal Register, initiating a 120-day comment period. This will provide an opportunity for the public to share input on how these forests will be managed for decades to come.

“Much has changed in society and science since the Northwest Forest Plan was created nearly 30 years ago,” the Forest Service’s Pacific Northwest Regional Forester Jacque Buchanan said. “We’re amending the plan to address today’s challenges in ways that honor the plan’s original goals, while adapting to changing conditions and enhancing wildfire resilience.”

KEY THEMES OF THE PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

The draft EIS focuses on balancing economic needs, ecological health, and community safety across the Northwest Forest Plan area, according to a release from the U.S. Forest Service. Themes addressed in the proposal include:

Fire Resilience

To address the increasing threat of severe wildfires, the proposed amendment provides guidance on managing forests to reflect the unique fire patterns, or fire regimes, across Northwest forests.

This includes the use of hazardous fuel treatments, like mechanical thinning and prescribed fire to reduce dense vegetation to lower wildfire risk and impacts on communities, critical infrastructure, and forests, while maintaining and improving overall forest health across the landscape.

Economic Opportunities

The proposed amendment seeks to support rural economies by promoting a predictable commercial timber supply through sustainable forest restoration and timber production activities.

This approach can create local jobs, provide training in forest management, and build economic resilience in communities that depend on forest resources.

Improved Forest Stewardship

The proposed amendment improves on the original Northwest Forest Plan by providing clearer, more specific guidance that distinguishes between moist and dry forest types and between young and old forests.

It also provides direction to use ecological forestry practices that promote landscapes to be more resilient to fire, retain old growth conditions to support at-risk species, and restore non-forest habitats such as meadows and huckleberry patches where they naturally belong.

These efforts would bolster the commercial timber supply in addition to fostering restoration to support species, natural resources, and community safety, the release states.

Adaptation to a Changing Climate

The proposed amendment draws on the latest science to help forests and communities adapt to the effects of a changing climate, such as the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, including droughts and wildfire.

The draft EIS recommends creating connected habitats to support species migration and refugia for vulnerable species, as well as promoting

species better adapted to dry conditions in post-fire landscapes. This would help support resilience across the landscape and protect both natural resources and infrastructure.

Tribal Responsibilities

The proposed amendment emphasizes the Forest Service's commitment to honoring its trust responsibilities to tribal governments and communities by involving them in land management planning and implementing forest management practices. This approach integrates tribal knowledge, values and perspectives into land stewardship.

The public is encouraged to submit comments on the draft plan during the 120-day comment period.

"We want to work together to steward our public lands for social, economic and ecological sustainability," U.S. Forest Service Pacific Southwest Regional Forester Jennifer Eberlien said. "Input from tribes, the public and the Federal Advisory Committee has been invaluable in reaching this stage, and now we need to hear from as many voices as possible during the comment period."

Comments can be submitted at <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public//CommentInput?Project=64745>.

The Forest Service will review and incorporate feedback to develop a final environmental impact statement, anticipated in 2025.

The USDA Forest Service is amending the Northwest Forest Plan to address changed conditions with a focus on five key areas: wildfire resilience, climate change adaptation, tribal inclusion, sustainable communities, and conservation of old growth ecosystems and related biodiversity.

The Forest Service is committed to preserving the elements of the plan that are working well while incorporating the latest science to help forests adapt to social, economic, cultural, and ecological changes, the release states.

The Northwest Forest Plan covers 24.5 million acres of federally managed lands in California, Oregon, and Washington. It was established in 1994 to address threats to threatened and endangered species while also contributing to social and economic sustainability in the region.

After nearly 30 years, the Northwest Forest Plan needs to be updated to accommodate changed ecological and social conditions, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

Additional information about the Northwest Forest Plan is available at www.fs.usda.gov/goto/r6/nwfp.