

Forest Service takes critical old-growth steps, kickstarts update to Northwest Forest Plan

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Last week, the U.S. Forest Service issued a Notice of Intent to amend the Northwest Forest Plan, which encompasses 19 million acres of federal forest lands in Washington, Oregon, and Northern California.

The news follows the creation of and months of planning and coordination by a Federal Advisory Committee that provides the Forest Service advice and recommendations for sustainable, climate-adapted, wildfire-resilient landscape management across the Northwest Forest Plan area.

Following is a statement from The Wilderness Society's Washington State Director Megan Birzell:

"The Northwest Forest Plan is a hugely important tool for the future of our national forests, and it needs to be updated based on the best available science to address increasing threats from wildfires, floods, loss of mature and old forests, and the increasing impacts of the climate crisis," said Megan Birzell, Washington State Director at The Wilderness Society. "The Pacific Northwest is facing different challenges from 30 years ago when the plan was created, so we're eager for the opportunity to modernize it in a way that makes the plan a win for everyone."

The Wilderness Society recommends that the Forest Service promptly amend the Northwest Forest Plan that aims to accomplish several important goals, including:

Protection of mature and old forests.

A focus on improving climate resilience in these forests.

Addressing and responding to the needs and priorities of tribes and rural communities.

The Notice of Intent signals one of the administration's biggest steps forward in old-growth protection efforts since President Biden's 2022 Earth Day Executive Order, the Forest Service's premiering of a historic inventory of mature and old growth forests across various forest types on public lands, and its April announcement of an Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to boost climate resilience across all national forest lands. The Northwest Forest Plan region has an outsized role to play in mitigating the worst impacts of climate change by storing immense amounts of carbon in mature and old forests.

Additional background on the Northwest Forest Plan:

The Northwest Forest Plan – adopted in 1994 – continues to be the largest, truly science-based forest and ecosystem management plan in the country. To date, the Northwest Forest Plan has improved the health of streams and salmon in the region and conserved old-growth forests, which are all critical tools in climate mitigation.

However, the Pacific Northwest and the entire country are facing different challenges from a quarter-century ago when the Northwest Forest Plan was created. Some of the biggest challenges national forests and the communities that depend on them face are the impacts of climate change, more frequent and severe wildfire, growing tourism and recreation, diversifying economies and the stability of water resources.

The Biden administration has an opportunity to build off the ecological successes of the 1994 plan by gathering insights and knowledge from all types of communities in the region – from tribes to rural towns and timber communities, to public health experts, to scientists, to agency representatives. The just-announced scoping period for an amendment to the Northwest Forest Plan is a critical opportunity for communities to help ensure that changes to the plan will protect old growth, restore fire and climate resilient forests, and reduce hazardous fuels while supporting restoration economies and tribal treaty rights and cultural practices.