

Key plan for future of Northwest forests, adapting to climate change

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A panel of regional experts will spend the next two years updating a nearly 30-year-old plan for how to manage and protect millions of acres of federal forestland in the Northwest.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack on Friday appointed 21 people, more than half of whom are based in Oregon, to the Northwest Forest Plan Advisory Committee. Committee members will recommend policies to federal agencies updating the Northwest Forest Plan, focusing specifically on the impacts of climate change.

The original plan was created in 1994 as a legal framework for managing federal forests in the region for timber harvests while also protecting water quality, old-growth forests and threatened and endangered species, including the northern spotted owl and Chinook and coho salmon.

The plan was supposed to have been updated 15 years ago, but it didn't become a priority again until April 2022, when President Joe Biden issued an executive order on strengthening the nation's forests. The order

directs federal agencies to revisit and create plans to preserve the nation's forests, especially old-growth forests, and ensure they contribute to climate change solutions.

What the plan covers

The Northwest Forest Plan applies to 17 national forests and federal lands encompassing more than 20 million acres in Washington, Oregon and northern California. These lands contain 25% of all the remaining old-growth trees across all national forests and grasslands in the lower 48 states, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The newly created committee will focus on recommendations that ensure national forests are managed to be resilient to wildfire and invasive insects and diseases and for effective carbon storage. Old-growth trees play a large role in sucking climate-warming carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. The federal agencies will also need to ensure the forests are managed for economic and cultural value to tribes and local communities that depend on them.

The committee includes university professors, tribal government leaders, scientists at environmental nonprofits, state and local officials and the CEO of a timber industry trade group.

Revision reaction

James Johnston is an assistant professor at Oregon State University's College of Forestry who will serve on the committee. He's been involved with the Northwest Forest Plan since its inception nearly 30 years ago.

"The revision is legally overdue, in addition to the broad recognition that times have changed since 1994, and that communities have changed, forests have changed and climates have changed," he said.

Johnston and his peers will spend the next two years advising federal agencies on updates to the plan.

"We depend on these forests for water, wildlife, recreation, timber, and more," he said. "I think this is an incredible opportunity to learn from other experts around the table."

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