

More protections coming for old-growth forests under federal plans

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America's oldest trees, most of which are in the West, will get added protection from wildfire and climate change under updated forest plans from the U.S. Forest Service.

In announcements in mid-December, officials from the Forest Service said they would begin the process of amending forest management plans affecting all 128 of the agency's forest and grasslands, including the Northwest Forest Plan governing federal forests in northern California, Oregon and Washington.

The amendments, both nationally and in the Northwest, are meant to bolster forest health to combat climate change and to further protect the last of the nation's old-growth trees, many of which have been threatened by growing wildfires, drought and diseases.

While updates would limit timber harvests in old-growth areas, logging would likely be allowed to continue in some mature stands in the Northwest.

Susan Jane Brown, founder and attorney at the Oregon legal nonprofit Silvix Resources, said the idea of leaving mature forests on the table for logging makes conservationists a bit "queasy," but she said it is

inevitable on federal forestlands managed for multiple uses.

“Given that, I want to see that harvests occur in the most ecologically sensitive way, that also honors cultural traditions, and I think we can do that,” she said. “I think that we can have timber harvests that focus on cutting the right trees in the right places for the right reasons.”

Updating these federal forest plans are part of the Biden administration’s strategy to “ecologically manage” the nation’s forests to be more resilient to wildfires and to better sequester climate-warming carbon dioxide. Living trees suck up and store climate-warming carbon dioxide. When cut or burned, they release it into the atmosphere. Older trees also contribute to the health of the water, soil and ecosystems, allowing better carbon and water storage for other trees and plants.

The decision to “amend” rather than “revise” the plans will allow changes to be adopted more quickly. The Forest Service has set a deadline of 2025 to finalize plans. Environmentalists hope this deadline is met to avoid derailment by any new presidential administration.

Difference between old and mature

The plans will focus on protections for old growth. The more than 20 million acres of federal forestlands protected in the Northwest Forest Plan contain 25% of the remaining old growth in all federal forests and grasslands in the lower 48 states, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. About one-quarter of Oregon’s forests are owned and managed by the U.S. Forest Service. This includes 10 national forests spanning 16 million acres.

The term “old growth” encompasses different ages for different tree species, but in general denotes tree stands and surrounding habitat that has not undergone any major human-caused changes for 100 years. The trees remain part of healthy, diverse ecosystems that are largely unmanipulated. Mature stands are typically close to a century old and characterized by their large size relative to younger trees, multi-layered canopies and the health of the soil around them.

The U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management oversee 72 million hectares, or about 278,000 square miles, of forests – an area about the size of Texas and Vermont combined. A recent inventory from the two agencies found that about 45% of those forests are considered “mature” and about 18% are considered “old growth.”

Most old growth and mature forests are in Western states such as Idaho, California, Montana and Oregon. Few stands still exist east of the Mississippi River. There are some left in New England, around the Great Lakes and in Arkansas, Kentucky and West Virginia, according to the Forest Service.

Northwest Forest Plan

The announced changes focus on five key updates to the Northwest Forest Plan, which covers 17 national forests across 20 million acres in Washington, Oregon and Northern California. It was approved in 1994 following lawsuits under the Endangered Species Act, alleging unsustainable logging was leading to the

decline and loss of critical species, including the Northern spotted owl. These owls rely on old growth and mature forests for nesting. In many ways, the plan succeeded in conserving old growth and improving habitat for land and aquatic species.

But over the last 30 years, growing threats from wildfire as well as drought and invasive pests and disease from climate change warrant an update to the management plan, according to Alexi Lovechio, climate program manager with Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center, a nonprofit conservation group based in Ashland:

“Since 1994, our environment has changed and new scientific data has emerged, Lovechio said. “We didn’t know nearly as much about climate change and the impacts it would have on wildfire severity or water quality and wildlife habitat as we do today. So that’s why this amendment is so important.”

The updates include managing and preserving mature and old growth forests, protecting them from climate change, including tribes in forest management, preventing and suppressing wildfires and supporting rural economies.

Brown of Silvix Resources,said when the plan was written it was missing some critical input.

“The 1994 plan was written without the government-to-government consultation with tribes, and as a result, there is no language at all in the plan about indigenous stewardship and uses of these lands,” she said. “I think we will, I hope that we will, make that change in our amendment.”

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Changes to the U.S. Forest Service’s national and Northwest forest plans should protect more old-growth trees from wildfire and climate change.