

<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/climate-lab/proposed-changes-would-allow-more-logging-on-federal-land-in-northwest/#comments>

Logging would be allowed on millions of acres of NW national forest under proposal

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[Climate Lab](#) is a Seattle Times initiative that explores the effects of climate change in the Pacific Northwest and beyond. The project is funded in part by The Bullitt Foundation, Jim and Birte Falconer, Mike and Becky Hughes, Henry M. Jackson Foundation, University of Washington and Walker Family Foundation, and its fiscal sponsor is the Seattle Foundation.



1 of 3 | The largest trees often grow together, some even supporting other trees at Cedar Flats Research Natural Area near Cougar, Cowlitz County. The area is owned by the U.S. Forest Service. Logging would be allowed in millions of acres of national federal forest in Washington, Oregon and California, including older trees currently off limits to cutting, under proposed amendments to the Northwest Forest Plan. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times, 2021)



2 of 3 | A clear-cut of private land butts up against the Cedar Flats Research Natural Area with Mount St. Helens in the background. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times, 2021)



3 of 3 | Trees cut on private land next to the Cedar Flats Research Natural Area near Cougar, Cowlitz County. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

Logging would be allowed in millions of acres of national forest in Washington, Oregon and California, including older trees currently off-limits to cutting, under proposed amendments to the Northwest Forest Plan.

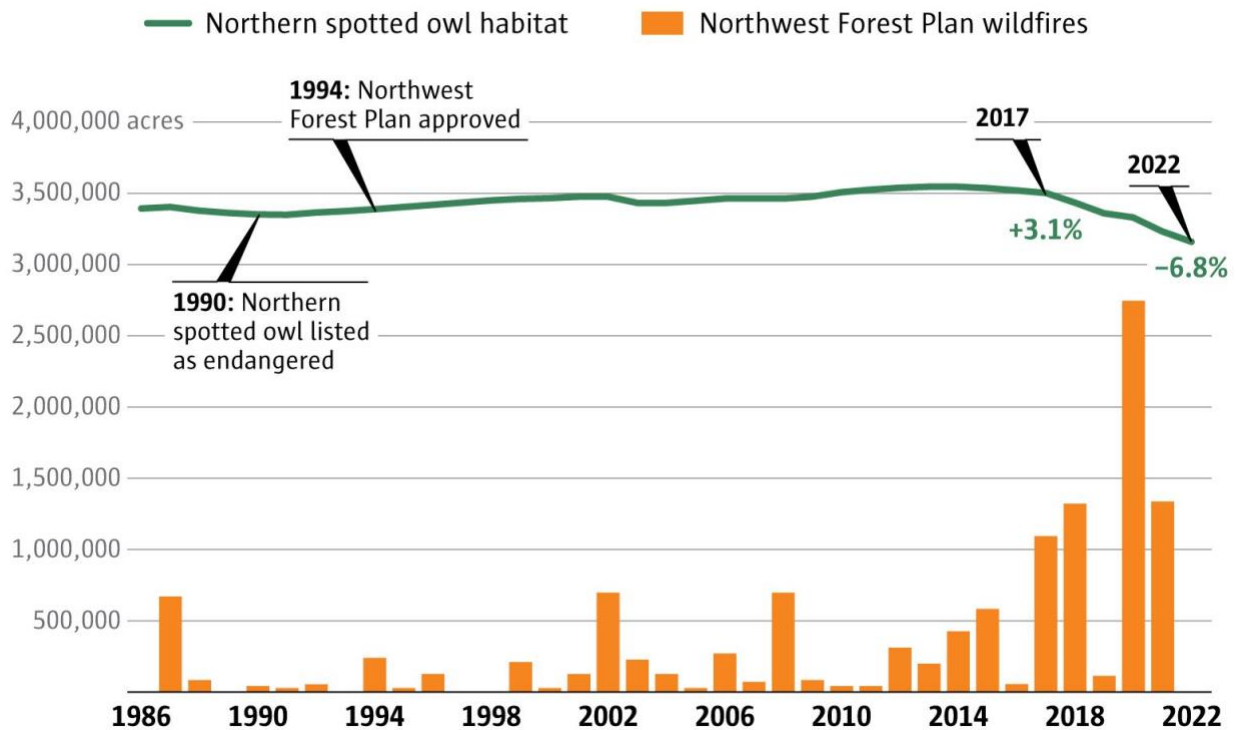
The conservation plan was enacted in 1994 and includes 24 million acres across federal land. It was intended to preserve mature and old-growth forests and protect species, including the marbled murrelet, threatened and endangered salmon and the northern spotted owl.

Now the Biden administration has embarked on an update of the plan to address changes, including a loss of nearly 7% of protected old-growth forest within the plan area because of wildfire. The loss has eliminated gains of old growth achieved during the first 25 years of the plan.

The Forest Service intends to issue a final environmental impact statement on the proposed amendments in 2025, under the incoming Trump administration. What that will mean for the outcome is unclear.

Owl habitat declining due to wildfires

The endangered northern spotted owl has benefitted from the Northwest Forest Plan since it was implemented in 1994. Increasing wildfires have led to an almost 7% decline in protected habitat.

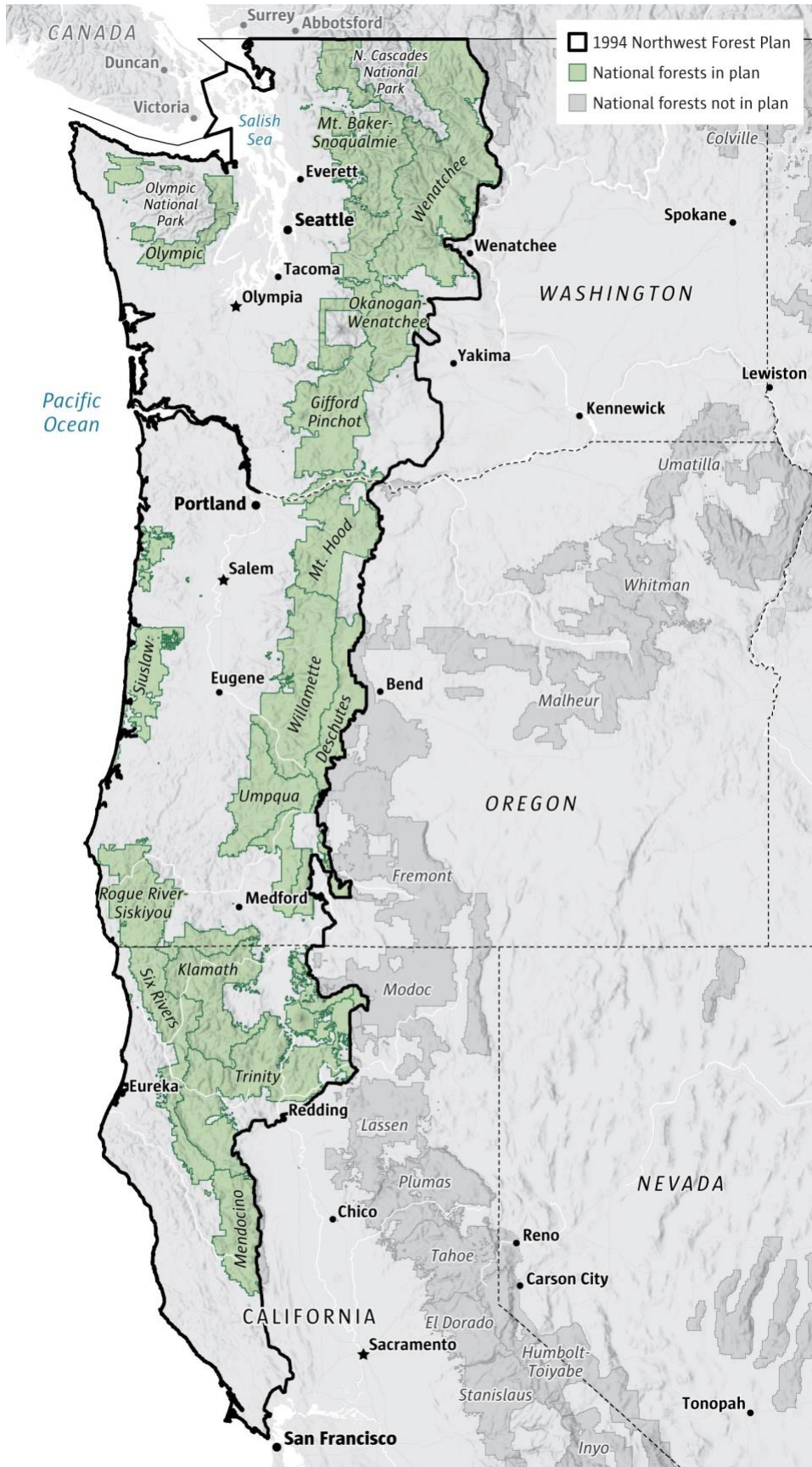


Large fires within older forests are expected to increase due to climate change and a 100-year history of fire suppression, which has built up forest density and fuels throughout the plan area.

The Forest Service has [proposed alternative amendments](#) covering only the national forest portions of the plan area, or 19.4 million acres. The public has [until March 17 to comment](#) on the Forest Service’s draft environmental impact statement on proposed amendments.

Northwest Forest Plan

The 1994 Northwest Forest Plan applies to 24 million acres of federal land in three states. Proposed amendments to the Northwest Forest Plan would open new areas for logging within — 17 national forests.



Among other changes, the amendment alternatives call for long overdue tribal co-stewardship in implementing management practices, along with other reforms sought in the relationship with tribes and the national forests on their ancestral lands. Tribes were not consulted during the formulation of the original Northwest Forest Plan.

The proposed changes also would greatly increase logging, burning and thinning within national forests in the plan areas. For 30 years, stands of trees 80 to 120 years old in national forests west of the Cascades within parts of the plan area, including in the Olympic, Mount Baker-Snoqualmie and Gifford Pinchot national forests, have been off-limits to logging. That would change under proposed amendments, which would open those forests to logging, primarily for restoration. The motivation is to improve plantation forests and dense naturally-regenerated forests that might not otherwise grow to old growth conditions, said Priya Shahani, lead in the planning service center for the Forest Service on the Northwest Forest Plan Amendment.

Stands older than two centuries in moist west side forests would be off-limits to logging in most circumstances.

Forests east of the Cascades in parts of the the plan area also would also be opened for more burning, mechanical thinning and cutting than is presently allowed, both for restoration and to provide jobs for mills and timber workers. In dry east side forests, trees 150 years and older would be retained under most circumstances.

The specifics of what logging would look like on the ground — specifically which stands where, and how the cutting and other treatments would be done — are not spelled out in the alternatives, which instead provide only broad guidance and targets for cutting, burning and thinning.

The alternatives in the draft plan were informed by more than a year of work from a volunteer [federal advisory committee](#), including scientists, academics and representatives from tribes and local governments.

The goal of the amendments include creating more economic opportunity for rural communities and, according to the Forest Service, make forests more resilient to increased frequency and severity of fire.

“We have ... seen dramatic changes in the frequency of wildfire. The intensity of wildfire we’re seeing in many of our forests that were dramatically departed from what these forests would historically have seen,” said Shasta Ferranto, special assistant to the Forest Service’s regional forester, in a phone interview.

The plan distinguishes between logging primarily for restoration, Ferranto said, and logging to support rural economies by promoting a predictable commercial timber supply to create and sustain local jobs, though sometimes harvest could accomplish both objectives.

Fire is natural in forests. The goal of the amendment is to bring fire back where it has been suppressed and to tame risk by removing fuel where forests have become too dense. Guidance in

the proposals differs between moist and dry forest types and young and old forests, with more logging recommended in younger and drier forests.

Mike Anderson, of The Wilderness Society, is a member of the advisory committee that helped shape the draft impact statement. He said the logging it calls for isn't the same rampant clear-cut logging of 30 years ago that led to the plan's adoption.

“Logging has in my mind fundamentally changed its role in forest management and forest conservation; it is no longer the primary threat,” Anderson said. “It has become the indispensable tool for conservation in this era of climate change and increased wildfire.” The plan also calls for maintaining biologically diverse forests and growing more old trees, he noted, balancing the picture.

Jerry Franklin, the eminent forest ecologist at the University of Washington, helped draft the original Northwest Forest Plan and is a member of the advisory committee. He wasn't happy about opening old and mature forests for increased cutting, Franklin said, but added the amendments could help fix some things that didn't go right the first time around.

He likes the protection for trees 200 years old and up and agrees some cutting is needed to restore forest health. “I think what it does is it enables and encourages active restoration” on the east and west sides of the mountains, Franklin said.

Critics were alarmed. They see a departure from the fundamental conservation purpose of the original Northwest Forest Plan.

“It has stood the test of time as a global model for biodiversity conservation,” said Dominick DellaSala, chief scientist at [Wild Heritage](#), an old-growth forest protection initiative of the Earth Island Institute. The plan is a threat, not a help, to old growth, DellaSala said. “This is a 100-year plan they just needed to tweak a little ... but this is a major step back.”

Home to endangered species, critical for climate protection and clean air and water, the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest are some of the most carbon-dense on Earth, with tree species capable of storing carbon for 800 years and longer.

Reforestation, leaving forests to grow, lengthening harvest rotations on private forestlands and restricting harvest on public lands is the best, fastest and cheapest way to increase carbon storage, scientists [found in a recent paper](#).

Steve Pederey, conservation director of [Oregon Wild](#), noted the Northwest Forest Plan was originally imposed on the Forest Service because the agency would not follow changes in both law and society that demanded old-growth protection.

“The Forest Service now is shifting the frame of the plan fundamentally from restore and protect to [logging as much as possible](#),” Pederey said.

Ryan Talbott, Pacific Northwest conservation advocate for [Wild Earth Guardians](#), noted that fire is being used to justify more cutting at the same time that the secretary of agriculture — the head of the Forest Service — has called for upping the cut nationally, including in the Pacific Northwest.

“Fire is kind of being used as a means to do more logging with a lot of code words like restoration and resiliency,” Talbott said, “those are buzz words that the Forest Service is increasingly using.”

Attorneys at the Earthjustice law firm in Seattle urged caution. “If the agency’s proposed amendment falls short — if it does not keep current protections, include robust tribal involvement and protect climate-buffering forests in the face of climate change — then it should not go forward,” Earthjustice senior attorney Aurora Janke said.

Public meetings on the plan amendments outlined in the DEIS begin in January. The Forest Service has published a calendar of meeting times and locations, links to webinars, tips on how to comment and a DEIS document library in [its most recent newsletter](#) about the plan amendment.

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