



The Oregonian

Logging study sets off own firestorm

Biscuit fire - Objections at OSU to a graduate student's research on forest recovery ignite a scholarly dustup

Friday, January 20, 2006

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A contingent of professors at Oregon State University's College of Forestry want the nation's top scientific journal to withhold a study by an OSU graduate student who found that forests best recover from wildfires when they are not logged and left alone.

The issue of the journal *Science* including the study is due out today, and Donald Kennedy, its top editor, said there is no chance the research will be suppressed.

"They're trying to rewind history," said Kennedy, former president of Stanford University who now is a professor emeritus of environmental science and policy there.

The OSU graduate student, Daniel Donato, 29, led researchers in examining lands burned by the 2002 Biscuit wildfire in Southwest Oregon, where the Bush administration and others at OSU had promoted logging as a means of restoring forests quickly. Donato's team concluded logging slows forest recovery.

OSU's College of Forestry, which has close ties to the timber industry and receives about 10 percent of its funding from a tax on logging, was immediately and sharply divided.

As they do with all studies, *Science* editors had independent scientists review Donato's research before deciding to publish it. Kennedy on Thursday said the OSU professors, who contend the research is misleading, can respond to the study once it's published.

"That's the way scientists handle disputes, not by censorship," Kennedy said.

The step is the latest in an extraordinary dispute, entwined in the heated politics of Northwest logging and spilling out from a normally quiet academia. Many professors aspire all their lives to publish research in *Science*, and for an OSU graduate student to do so is a rare achievement.

Other scientists inside and outside OSU said they have rarely if ever heard of an attempt by professors to hold back such research, especially when it comes from their college. They said the attempt raises questions about academic freedom and conflicts of interest within the College of Forestry.

"One has to notice and acknowledge the courage of a graduate student to do research and publish findings that run against the norm," said Kathleen Dean Moore, a distinguished professor of philosophy at OSU who teaches environmental ethics. "The university isn't about secrecy, it's about discussion. It's about hearing all the voices so we can learn from them."

James Karr, a professor of fisheries and biology at the University of Washington who has criticized logging after fires, said he is "appalled at the way this is playing out." He said the turmoil is having a chilling effect on other OSU researchers.

Neither OSU President Ed Ray nor Provost Sabah Randhawa would discuss the situation.

The furor has engulfed the prominent dean of the College of Forestry, Hal Salwasser, who has testified in favor of a congressional bill that would accelerate logging after fires. The bill is co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, a Republican representing Eastern Oregon who leads a congressional subcommittee on forests.

A memo to faculty

Salwasser sent a memo to faculty questioning conclusions of the research paper, first released Jan. 5 in Science's online edition.

Donato's team, including five other scientists from OSU and the U.S. Forest Service, found that logging after the Biscuit fire destroyed seedlings growing on their own and had littered the ground with highly flammable tinder.

They said such cutting "can be counterproductive to goals of forest regeneration and fuel reduction."

The finding called into question the traditional approach of salvaging burned trees and planting seedlings. While provoking timber industry outrage, it deepened a rift within the College of Forestry, where John Sessions, a distinguished professor of forest engineering, and Professor Emeritus Michael Newton had authored a report suggesting aggressive logging to restore forests after the Biscuit blaze.

Their report caused the U.S. Forest Service, backed by the Bush administration, to expand its logging plans.

Asking for a delay

Sessions and Newton were immediately critical of Donato's research. They and seven other professors and scientists from OSU, along with the Forest Service, took the unusual step of asking the Science editors to delay publication of the study until it addresses their criticisms. Alternatively, they asked that their concerns be included in a letter accompanying the study.

They said the study, occupying one page of the journal, draws sweeping conclusions about salvage logging not backed up by the few years of research since the blaze. The true test of efforts to restore forests will be how well seedlings survive into future decades.

The limited research described so far "contributes no new science," they said in a letter to the journal.

They maintained the journal's process of peer review failed to detect the flaws.

"We believe that this article damages the institution of peer-reviewed science, and is inconsistent with the quality of articles we expect from Science," they wrote. "We believe that the peer review process failed as a quality control measure in this case."

Stem cell research

Their assertions emerge just a few weeks after Science faced criticism for failing to catch fraudulent South Korea-based stem cell research. But the journal's review process is among the most rigorous nationwide.

"There was no failure of peer review in this case," said Kennedy, the editor-in-chief of the Donato study. "I'm sorry they don't like the outcome, but I think they have a misplaced case here."

Salwasser said he had reviewed a draft of the letter to Science and asked the authors to make changes, which they did. He said he agreed that Donato's paper went too far in its conclusions but disagreed with the attempt to hold it out of Science.

"I never thought that was a good idea, but I didn't think I could step in and tell my faculty to do something or not do something without infringing on their academic freedom," Salwasser said.

"I sure as heck don't feel good about how this has all unfolded," he said.

Filling the vacuum

James Agee, a professor of forest ecology at the University of Washington, said the Science study helps fill the vacuum of research on logging after fires, but he noted weaknesses. It should more clearly state that the conditions in Southwest Oregon may not apply everywhere else, he said.

"We have such little information about salvage logging that it's an important piece," he said. "But it has to be put in the appropriate place, and the authors didn't do that."

At the same time, he said, the OSU critics "have lost a little perspective on this." Donato works under Beverly Law, an associate professor in the College of Forestry and the senior author of the research paper. Law declined to comment.

Donato said the authors stand behind their study and believe any response to their work should undergo the same scrutiny and review that their research did.

The paper's final version deletes one controversial sentence that appeared in the online version: "The results presented here suggest that postfire logging may conflict with ecosystem recovery goals."

On Thursday, Donato would not explain why it was taken out.

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