

Forest plan must protect communities, too

The Northwest Forest Plan update needs better focus on affected communities and tribes.

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For The Herald

Since 1994, the Northwest Forest Plan has governed management of national forests across the Pacific Northwest. It was developed to strike a balance between conservation of old-growth wildlife habitat and the needs of human communities in a rapidly growing region.

Depending on who you ask, it's either been a resounding success or an abysmal failure. The truth, of course, lies somewhere in the middle. The U.S. Forest Service is taking public comment until Friday on how to update the plan, so we have a unique opportunity to improve the good parts and fix the bad ones. As the agency proceeds, they must ensure the updated plan conserves all remaining old-growth forests, improves resilience to climate change, and benefits rural and Indigenous communities.

Old-growth forests once stretched all the way to Puget Sound. But since the mid-1800s, between 77 percent to 83 percent of old-growth forests west of the Cascade Crest have been lost, mainly due to timber harvest, agriculture and urban development. These forests play an out-sized role in storing and absorbing carbon from the atmosphere, and in an era of climate change it is more important than ever that we keep what little we have left. The goal for managing our forests should be to create a mix of bigger and smaller trees and shrubs of varying species that attract different types of wildlife and improve overall forest health and resilience to climate change.

Climate change is bringing us hotter, drier summers — yes, even on the typically wet west slope of the Cascades — and with that comes increased wildfire risks to our forests and communities. The Suiattle River drainage near Darrington has experienced wildland fire the last four consecutive summers; this, in a rainforest. To help rural communities address this increasing threat, the updated plan should include increased

focus on fuels reduction near communities. Doing so will help Darrington and similar communities persist in a rapidly changing climate.

While the Northwest Forest Plan was mostly successful in conserving habitat and improving water quality, it left many human communities behind. Tribes were not consulted when the plan was developed. The promised economic support for timber-dependent rural communities was short-lived with little positive benefit. These communities also now face many social, economic, and ecological challenges not anticipated by the plan, including increased recreation use and rural stagflation and flight.

The complexities of these challenges will require creative solutions from many sectors. The Northwest Forest Plan update won't be a silver bullet. However, it can be part of the solution. Incorporating Indigenous co-stewardship principles and improving the predictability of timber and non-timber products from national forests would be a good start.

To ensure local communities benefit from forest management, the use of local

contractors and increased focus on fuels reduction and forest health should be prioritized. Finally, the plan should include support for local workforce training to create stewards, wildland firefighters, biologists, foresters and loggers who will foster our public lands for generations for the benefit of these ecosystems and communities.

The Northwest Forest Plan was ahead of its time 30 years ago, but we've caught up, and our understanding of our forests has advanced. Now is the time to build on the plan's successes and address its shortcomings as well as its unintended and unanticipated consequences. The task before the Forest Service now is to bring the plan into the 21st century so it meets the challenges our forests and communities face today and into the future. By following the science and working with all affected communities, the Forest Service can improve the plan and set us up for success over the next 30 years.

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