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Flattening a Forest

RETIRED FORESTRY PROFESSORS, AN ENVIRONMENTAL GROUP AND A LAWMAKER SPEAK OUT ON A PROPOSED LOGGING OF MATURE FORESTLAND

NEWS / BY HENRY HOUSTON / POSTED ON 05/13/2021

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During a recent trip to the McKenzie River area, Congressman Peter DeFazio tells *Eugene Weekly* that he's seen more logging trucks in that one day than he'd normally see in a year.

But logging trucks could soon haul away more than the controversial Holiday Farm Fire-related salvage timber. The U.S. Forest Service is proposing forest management actions scattered across a project area of 74,091 acres near McKenzie Bridge, according to sale documents. Called the Flat Country Project, the project in the Willamette National Forest concerns opponents who say the agency would be logging mature forests, affecting diverse ecosystems and affecting a space that could be a part of capturing carbon emissions.

“Going into a 100-, 120-year-old forest at this point in time is nuts,” DeFazio says of the sale. “I don’t know what they’re going to do with all this timber.”

According to USFS documents, within the boundaries of the 74,091-acre project, the agency is proposing forest management actions on 5,001 acres. This includes 4,039 acres of forest thinning, 767 of which are on riparian reserves, and 962 acres of regeneration harvests. The project will harvest trees that range in age from 27 to 150 years old.

The proposed logging sale dates back to 2018, and on Jan. 21, 2021, the agency moved forward with the process when it signed its Record of Decision. The sale has four purposes, the USFS says. One is to provide a sustainable supply of timber — about 100 million board feet over five years. The second is to increase the space between trees, which the USFS says are too densely spaced. The third would increase habitat complexity. The fourth is to manage the road system.

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1994 Northwest Forest Plan, which was designed to balance logging while protecting the spotted owl and other species, Johnson tells *EW*.

In regard to the USFS's claim on tree density, Franklin says this forest isn't dense at all but is doing what trees do at a mature stage. The federal agency is applying principles used in managing plantations in declaring that it's too dense, and that isn't relevant to a natural forest, he says.

Both Johnson and Franklin say if the sale goes through, it would set a dangerous precedent for future logging projects in mature forests. "These old-growth forests are relatively rare in western Oregon," Johnson says. "They're important for a variety of species and for people, too."

Forests like those found in the Willamette National Forest are optimal for snow capture and retention in the spring, Franklin says. They help produce high quality water and they are effective at regulating water to minimize floods. The USFS is proposing to replace some mature trees with a plantation, he says, which doesn't provide any of those benefits and actually consumes a lot of water.

DeFazio tells *EW* that he's a disciple of Franklin and Johnson. "I agree with what they said. I've proposed to the Forest Service and the BLM different ways of doing forestry, following their prescriptions," he adds.

In a May 7 letter to USFS Chief Vicki Christiansen obtained by *EW*, DeFazio writes that in a recent trip up the McKenzie Highway, he passed nearly 40 logging trucks. "There is so much salvage harvest and roadside hazard tree removal occurring that some local mills have stopped taking logs," he says. "In this context, I find it incomprehensible that the United States Forest Service would proceed with the Flat Country Timber Sale to harvest 2,000

----- forest trees to be removed - 800 to 150 ----- in ----"

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He adds in the letter that he sees no reason why the agency should proceed with “clearcutting 2,000 acres of rare mature forest.”

DeFazio tells *EW* that he doesn’t know if the USFS chief will change her mind, but since she is from the Pacific Northwest, maybe she’ll understand how important the mature forests are.

The Eugene-based nonprofit Cascadia Wildlands agrees that the logging is unnecessary. Conservation Director Bethany Cotton says the group commends DeFazio for speaking out against the Flat Country sale.

“We call on elected leaders at every level to review the science on forest carbon, step forward to protect our forests, and in so doing safeguard our drinking water sources, iconic rivers and watersheds, wildlife habitat and climate,” she says. “Pacific Northwest forests are an essential bulwark of climate resilience — but only if they remain standing.”

Johnson says the Flat Country sale is the largest project the USFS has put together in 20 years, adding “all we can do is ring the fire bell in the night and say, ‘Hey, what a minute here, what is going on?’”

The Willamette National Forest near McKenzie River is one of the last reservoirs of trees, he says, adding that they can’t be replaced. “This is the motherlode of carbon storage,” Johnson says. “It just stands out on a global map. If we’re serious about combating climate change, you’d start with these forests and keeping them.”

To read research by Franklin and Johnson on Flat Country, [visit here](#).

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