

The Register-Guard

COLUMNS | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Protect older natural forests in the western Cascades

Jerry Franklin and Norm Johnson

Published 5:00 a.m. PT April 27, 2021

Almost 20 years ago, the U.S. Forest Service essentially stopped logging older primeval forests on national forests in Western Oregon and Washington. Its harvests were halted by protests, legal challenges, species impacts and broadening social realizations of the ecological and wildlife benefits of such forests. The agency then switched to thinning plantations it had created after earlier clear-cutting of mature and old-growth forests.

Once again, however, the Forest Service plans extensive logging of older natural forests. This is illustrated by the Forest Service' proposed Flat Country Project on the Willamette National Forest in the upper reaches of the McKenzie River where almost 2,000 acres of mature (100- to 150-year-old) forests would be logged.

These forests were designated as potentially available for harvest under the Northwest Forest Plan developed in 1994 in response to the northern spotted owl crisis. However, primeval older forests are now grossly underrepresented in Oregon's forested landscapes, and they provide important ecological services and have high social value. They should be permanently protected.

Previous news coverage: [Conservationists sue to save spotted owl logging protections](#)

Since adoption of the NWFP, we have learned much about the ecological role of these mature natural forests. Westside Douglas fir forests undergo significant structural and functional changes during their second century of life. Much of their evolution into fully developed old growth involves natural thinning processes, including death

of some larger trees. Production foresters abhor the mortality of such trees as wasted harvestable timber. Viewed ecologically, however, their death creates gaps in the forest canopy that allow development of multiple canopy layers and enriched understories, which foster significant biological diversity.

Need a break? [Play the USA TODAY Daily Crossword Puzzle.](#)

Among tree species, Douglas fir is a long-distance runner rather than a sprinter, and at 100 years its growth has just begun to hit its stride. High rates of growth continue throughout the second century of these forests resulting in massive additional accumulations of wood and captured atmospheric carbon. Stocks of dead wood (snags and logs) are rebuilt and add significantly to carbon storage because of their slow rate of decay, helping to combat climate change and providing critical wildlife habitat.

Mature natural forests fulfill many of the same ecological roles as fully developed old-growth forests, such as providing habitat for endangered species like the spotted owl. They help reduce impacts of rain-on-snow storms that can lead to extensive floods in Western Oregon drainages. Ultimately, of course, mature forests become the replacements for old-growth forests that are inevitably lost to wildfire and wind, as occurred last September in wildfires in Western Oregon and Washington.

There are no ecological justifications for harvesting more than 2,000 acres of mature forest in the Flat Country Project. Such activities terminate the natural developmental processes that are at work in these stands, forcing the forest to “start over” on its way to becoming old growth.

News: [Eugene moves to slow decline of citywide tree canopy cover](#)

One Forest Service justification for the proposed harvest is that the mature forests are “too dense” and “overstocked.” However, these judgments are based on measures of desirable tree density developed for managing wood production plantations! Such measures have no relevance to the natural developmental processes underway in primeval mature forests.

The Forest Service also argues that harvesting mature forests is necessary to provide early successional habitat — the rich community of shrubs, forbs and grasses that naturally develop along with tree seedlings after wildfire or other disturbances. As longtime advocates for such habitat, we know that the wildfires of 2020 will provide significant areas of early successional habitat if the Forest Service does not salvage logs and aggressively replant them.

Is there other wood that the Willamette National Forest could harvest? The Forest Service could initiate regeneration harvests using ecological forestry in thousands of acres of plantations, which are highly artificial ecosystems established over the past 80 years. Doing so would provide economic and ecological benefits. In addition, portions of recent burns undoubtedly will be salvaged over the next few years and provide additional harvest volume.

It is time to stop logging magnificent mature forests like those in the Flat Country Project once and for all. These forests simply contribute too much ecologically, socially and spiritually in their current state. [Please visit the website for photos of the Flat Country Project](#) and more discussion on why these older natural stands should be permanently protected.

Jerry Franklin and Norm Johnson are retired forestry professors from the University of Washington and Oregon State University, respectively. They were part of the team that developed the Northwest Forest Plan.