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Protecting Public Lands from Logging—Not Privatizing Them—is Good Fire Policy

When President Trump and Secretary of Agriculture Rollins announced policies to increase logging on national forests and other federal public lands, they claimed that more logging was needed to address wildfire.¹ They are now taking steps to roll back long-standing environmental protections for our public lands and to shift more control of federal forests to state and private entities. There has even been concern that the Trump administration will attempt to privatize federal lands.²

These efforts are wrapped up in the claim that more logging will reduce the amount of high-severity wildfire in forests, and the associated push to reduce forest protections to enable this logging. However, in reality, this claim has turned out to be false. Instead, logging is associated with increased likelihood of high-severity fire. Multiple studies—by independent scientists and the Forest Service—have found that *private timberlands that have the fewest restrictions on logging burn more severely*. By comparison, *public lands with the most restrictions on logging burn less severely*. Here are the findings from several large-scale studies:

- One of the largest studies of fire behavior across the western US—covering 1500 wildfires over 30 years—found that private industrial timberlands with the fewest restrictions on logging had the highest percentage of high-severity fire, while parts of national forests that allowed some logging had a lower percentage of high-severity fire, and the *federal lands with the strongest restrictions on logging—such as wilderness areas and national parks—had the lowest percentage of high-severity fire of all*, within the same forest types.³
- Within national forests, a study of 472 Pacific Northwest wildfires over 30 years found that the *densest forests had the lowest fire severity*. In contrast, they reported that more open forests—which is an outcome of logging—have “hotter, drier, and windier microclimates.”⁴ And a related large study found that the more open conditions after thinning were associated with “increasing fire intensity.”⁵
- In a study of 154 fires on more than 2 million acres in California, *high-severity fire was 1.8 times more likely on private industrial forests than on public forests*.⁶

In summary, *the most protected public lands are a success story in terms of fire management*. In contrast, *efforts to privatize public lands would likely result in increased fire severity*.

In recent years, there has been particular attention on wildfires that occur in groves of giant sequoia trees on public lands, including in wilderness and national parks. Here, again, there is an underlying problem with misinformation about what is actually happening when these protected areas burn. It is too often assumed that many sequoia groves have not experienced any fire for so long that they will now mainly burn at high severity, unless they are thinned first. This erroneous claim is then used to try to weaken restrictions on logging of public lands within giant sequoia groves. However, the reality is that *more than 83% of the total sequoia grove area*

*has burned since 2013. Moreover, only 13% of that fire burned at high severity.*⁷ In short, most sequoia groves on protected public lands have recently experienced fire, and when they burn, they do so mainly at low-to-moderate severity.

Furthermore, the small fraction of sequoia groves that burn at high severity have an ecologically important role. Recent research has found that *patches of high-severity fire create the best conditions for sequoia reproduction. This is where, by far, the most abundant, and fastest-growing sequoia seedlings are found, compared to the lower-severity fire areas.*⁸ This is where the next generation of giant sequoias is thriving. In other words, having fire with a mixture of severities, including some high-severity effects, is beneficial to the long-term future of the giant sequoia ecosystem. However, in areas with fewer restrictions on logging, *83% of the young sequoias have been killed during post-fire logging.*⁹ Once again it is the protected areas, rather than the logged areas, that are the real success story. We should see protected public lands as a role model for good fire policy, rather than trying to privatize or otherwise weaken protections for those lands.

¹ See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/immediate-expansion-of-american-timber-production/>; <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sm-1078-006.pdf>

² See: <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2025/03/12/public-lands-advocates-worry-doge-cuts-are-precursor-to-privatization/82283768007/>

³ Bradley, C.M. C.T. Hanson, and D.A. DellaSala. 2016. Does increased forest protection correspond to higher fire severity in frequent-fire forests of the western USA? *Ecosphere* 7: article e01492.

⁴ Lesmeister, D.B., et al. 2021. Northern spotted owl nesting forests as fire refugia: a 30-year synthesis of large wildfires. *Fire Ecology* 17: Article 32.

⁵ Lesmeister, D.B., et al. 2019. Mixed-severity wildfire and habitat of an old-forest obligate. *Ecosphere* 10: Article e02696.

⁶ Levine, J.I., et al. 2022. Higher incidence of high-severity fire in and near industrially managed forests. *Frontiers in Ecology and Environment* 20: 397-404.

⁷ See: https://www.hillheat.com/files/315/2023_Save_Our_Sequoias_Act_HNRC_Testimony_Bryant_Baker_Final.pdf

⁸ Hanson, C.T., T.Y. Chi, M. Khosla, B.C. Baker, and C. Swolgaard. 2024. Reproduction of a serotinous conifer, the giant sequoia, in a large high-severity fire area. *Fire* 7: Article 44; Hanson, C.T., T.Y. Chi, B.C. Baker, M. Khosla, and M.K. Dorsey. 2024. Post-fire Reproduction of a Serotinous Conifer, the Giant Sequoia, in the Nelder Grove, California. *Ecology and Evolution* 14: e11213.

⁹ Hanson, C.T., T.Y. Chi, B.C. Baker, M. Khosla, and M.K. Dorsey. 2024. Post-fire Reproduction of a Serotinous Conifer, the Giant Sequoia, in the Nelder Grove, California. *Ecology and Evolution* 14: e11213.