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Organization: MN Forest Industries

Title:

Comments: See attached.

RE: MFI Comments on Fed. Reg. 42493-42494 Vol. 87, No. 135 July 15, 2022

Dear Mr. Barbour:

The following comments are from Minnesota Forest Industries regarding the above captioned Federal Register Notice. Minnesota Forest Industries, Inc. (MFI) is an association representing Minnesota's primary forest product companies. MFI and its member companies encourage conservation, proper forest management, and industry development that foster sound environmental stewardship, multiple use of timber lands, and sustainable, long-term timber supply.

MFI members are part of a forest products industry which contributes \$16.8 billion to Minnesota's economy and provides nearly 68,000 jobs. MFI members, and the forest products economy are reliant on continuous and year-round supply of timber harvested from the forests of the state, including fiber from National Forests.

General Comments:

MFI feels that the Executive Order, and all efforts to implement it are a thinly-veiled attempt by radical environmental organizations to use influence within the Biden Administration to reduce logging and remove federal lands from being suitable for timber production. This action appeases one forest stakeholder group, to the detriment of all others. It also ignores the science of forest management and all of the existing laws and regulatory frameworks governing management of federal forestlands. This action meets the very definition of "arbitrary and capricious".

Mature forests are generally considered those that have reached the point where their vigor, health, or growth are declining. The art and science of forestry is in scheduling and designing timber sales to maintain and increase those values, while managing for all of the ecosystem services that forests provide. It seems unconscionable for the federal government to focus so much effort on one aspect of forest management.

Active forest management is vital for sustainably achieving ecological, economic and social goals and outcomes for forest ecosystems. Placing arbitrary and binding regulations on forest management will prevent forest managers from mitigating the scale and intensity of forest wildfires; maximizing carbon uptake and storage while minimizing emissions from fire and decay; providing diverse forest types and age classes; creating and sustaining wildlife habitat for species that evolved with young forests; maintaining early seral stage forest types (e.g., aspen, jack pine, paper birch, red oak, etc.); and providing needed raw materials for industries that meet societal needs, and provide good-paying jobs in rural communities.

We are entering a time in history when humans need wood products more than ever before. Fears of climate change have resulted in carbon emission mandates that can only be met by reducing the use of fossil fuels. But the need for energy and other commodities is not going down. Many of these needs can be met with wood as a feedstock. Biomass and pellets can be burned to produce electricity as a low carbon alternative to coal and natural gas. Wood can be refined into renewable diesel, renewable jet fuel, and gasoline for transportation and heavy hauling. Components of wood can be processed into plastics, food additives, clothing, carbon fiber, biochar and plastic replacements. Now is not the time for the federal government to curtail raw material supply for these important innovations.

The Forest Service Organic Act of 1897, the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960, the Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974, and the National Forest Management Act of 1976 provide the legal basis for all management activities, including timber harvest, on the National Forest System. All of them hold that timber harvest, including the harvest of mature trees, is an objective on unreserved lands on the National Forests. None of them set objectives for the "conservation" of "old-growth and mature forests" as an objective on the National Forest System. This Executive Order circumvents the legislative process and hundreds of years of legislation that specifically dictates that our National Forests are meant to harvest timber to meet societal needs. Numerous studies have shown that management (including harvest) maximizes carbon sequestration and storage on forestlands.

This is all being done under the guise of managing carbon to alleviate climate change. It is true that forgoing final harvest of timber can store carbon on the stump, to a degree. But it is extremely short-sighted to focus entirely on one portion of the carbon cycle. Leaving old trees too long results in mortality and decaying trees releasing carbon into the atmosphere. Old trees don't absorb as much carbon as young trees. For example, young aspen absorbs atmospheric carbon at 4 times the rate of old aspen. When trees are cut and made into products their carbon is stored for varied lengths of time from years to centuries. Even paper has a 68% recycling rate and is recycled as much as 5 times before being landfilled (where decay is slow and gases are often captured). Lastly one must consider the substitution effect. Erecting a building made of wood stores the carbon in the wood, but it also prevents the release of fossil carbon from producing steel and concrete to make the building.

Climate change models project much wider swings in weather patterns than we have seen in recent history, including longer and more severe drought, more intense rain events, shorter winters, more wind events, etc. The same folks pushing for more old forests also are promoting increased forest resilience to climate change. These two concepts are not compatible. Old forests are more susceptible to wind events, insect infestations, and wildfire, and are less capable of surviving drought, floods and changes in freeze/thaw patterns. A resilient forest has a diversity of forest types and age classes across the landscape.

That said, there is a need to conserve older forests on the landscape in order to provide biodiversity, habitat for old forest obligate species, and for the other ecological and social values they provide. But these are provided at the landscape scale on the tens of millions of acres of forestland in America that are under designations that do not allow timber harvesting. The USDA Forest Service has millions of acres of designated Wilderness, Wild & Scenic River corridors, Roadless Areas and other Management Areas where logging is off limits or severely limited. National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges and Department of Defense lands rarely if ever see active forest management. State and county parks, natural areas and private lands under conservation easements are typically all off limits to management as well. There is no compelling argument for more mature and old growth forest in the United States.

MFI and its member companies do not feel that there is a demonstrated need to develop a single, nation-wide definition of old-growth or mature forests in order to meet the nation's ecological, economic or social needs. Furthermore, we feel that doing so will inhibit active forest management to the degree that it will degrade our ability to meet the needs of the public and our natural resources.

Below are the answers to the questions posed in the Request for Information.

What criteria are needed for a universal definition framework that motivates mature and old-growth forest conservation and can be used for planning and adaptive management?

A universal definition that fits the vast array of ecosystems and forest types across this country would have to be so broad and general in nature that it would be essentially useless, and yet there are those who would force interpretations into the courts in a misguided effort to halt all forest management. You cannot classify by age, as

some forest types grow fast and die young, while others grow slowly and live for hundreds of years. And later successional forests can regenerate in their own shade, while early seral types (e.g., aspen, oak and birch) need full sunlight provided by even-aged management to thrive. Diameter is also not a good metric, as slow growing species in cold environments and poor soils grow exceedingly slow (e.g., stagnant black spruce). They can be hundreds of years old yet only a few inches in diameter. Conversely, open grown trees on rich soils can gain well over an inch in diameter per year (e.g., cottonwood).

Given the myriad of forest types, ecosystems, disturbance patterns and land use histories in America, there cannot be one universal definition of old growth found across this nation. These determinations and decisions are best made at a smaller scale where all considerations can be evaluated and debated locally. That has been the case to date, where most Forest Plans contain descriptions of older forests and acreage/ age class goals are set in the planning process.

What are the overarching old-growth and mature forest characteristics that belong in a definition framework?

There are no "overarching old-growth and mature forest characteristics" that are applicable.

How can a definition reflect changes based on disturbance and variation in forest type/composition, climate, site productivity and geographic region?

Again, this is not tenable at the scope and scale set by the EO. Variations in soils, elevations, and forest types can result in dozens of ecosystems on a single National Forest! A universal definition would be so broad it would be essentially worthless, but certainly a tool for anti-harvesting factions of society to tie up active management in the courts.

How can a definition be durable but also accommodate and reflect changes in climate and forest composition?

See above.

What, if any, forest characteristics should a definition exclude?

Any federal lands designated "suitable for timber production" should be excluded, as there are millions of acres of federal lands where logging is not allowed that can sustain "old growth" (however it is defined). Also, any forest type incapable of regenerating in its own shade should be excluded. Aspen, paper birch, oak, many pine species and others require partial or full sun to regenerate. An assessment of all timber types across the nation should be conducted and all of these eliminated from consideration.

Conclusion

MFI feels that this entire exercise detracts the Forest Service from its primary mission and from the urgent need to address the wildfire crisis in our National Forests. The legislation governing management of federal lands do not require management for maintaining mature or old growth forests. While you must perform actions required by an Executive Order, we hope that you will demonstrate to the Administration that there are more than sufficient lands set aside from active forest management to provide old growth characteristics across this country. Furthermore, there should be some recognition that there lands set aside from management are often the source for catastrophic wildfires, so active management around them is necessary to prevent those fires from destroying private timberlands, homes and other infrastructure.

A nationwide definition of old growth is not possible or desirable. It is better to recognize that individual National Forests should include definitions and goals in their Forest Plans. The real risks to our National Forests are inaction, mismanagement, and litigation that lead directly to unhealthy forests prone to destruction by wildfire,

insects, diseases and climatic changes. These losses have no ecological, economic or social benefits for the American people.

Sincerely,  
Rick Horton Executive Vice President Minnesota Forest Industries