

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 3/9/2023 11:01:54 PM

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Comments: "Caring for the Land and Serving People." The motto of the United States Forest Service suggests that the agency will exercise careful stewardship of our natural resources for the common good. The Telephone Gap Integrated Resource Project, however, runs exactly counter to this mission by proposing to destroy thousands of acres of "Mature" and "Old" forest: exactly what the planet, and the people, need.

Not only are old-growth forests distinctly absent from the New England landscape due to past clear-cutting and forest mismanagement, their importance to the ecology of the region also cannot be understated. Old-growth forests provide habitat for numerous sensitive species, including wildlife and plants, as well as myriad (and some as-yet-unknown) species of fungi. Studies have shown species such as Swainson's thrush, northern flying squirrels, northern long-eared bats, and black-throated green warblers, as well as insects of various orders, occur in greater abundance in old-growth forests. Lichens, mosses, herbaceous plants, and even trees exist in higher populations and comprise of greater diversity. Additionally, these forests provide an astounding number of microclimates, that serve as refuges for plant, animal, and fungal species as the climate warms. Mature and old-growth forests harbor the biodiversity of tomorrow during the sixth extinction, a worldwide, human-caused ecological collapse. Vermont is in a unique position to conserve these irreplaceable habitats for the good of the ecological integrity of our state, as well as the future landscape our children will inherit. For this reason alone, the Telephone Gap Project should immediately be shelved.

However, in addition to causing a massive biodiversity disaster, the Telephone Gap Project is a direct affront on our State, and our Nation's, directive to address climate change and a warming planet. Mature forests (greater than 50 years) sequester carbon at a higher rate than young and emergent forests. Forests from 70-125 years (thousands of the acres proposed to be destroyed by this project) are going to add the most carbon storage to our fight against climate change in the coming years. On public land, it is the responsibility of the Forest Service to manage the land for the common good. In this case, the necessary management is nil. The trees in the Green Mountain National Forest will best serve the American people by being left alone, continuing to sequester carbon, and aiding the populous in fighting the existential threat of climate change. While a short-term timber harvest will create short-term profit for a few, the action is anathema to the goal of sustaining life on this planet, both human and otherwise.

While there is certainly a place for timber harvest and forest management for wildlife and public benefit, the composition of management actions as proposed as part of the Telephone Gap Integrated Resource Project is heading in the absolute wrong direction. Despite overwhelming evidence that mature and old-growth forests need to be preserved for the planet's wellbeing (both by way of safeguarding biodiversity and storing carbon to mitigate climate change), the Forest Service seems to be directly targeting these forests for destruction. I hope that the Forest Service will live up to its motto and shelve this project entirely. Instead, put these resources toward the management of young forests, acquisition of additional acreage for preservation, and further study of forest biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and related topics.