Data Submitted (UTC 11): 9/8/2024 4:00:00 AM
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Comments: Dear Friends:

I grew up in Eastern Oregon in the 1970s. Back then my county was home to multiple lumber mills that provide great jobs that paid enough for parents to own homes, pickups, cars, and help their children pay for college. Our schools were well funded by PILT payments and our community had enough wealth to support two car dealerships, a Caterpillar dealer, several grocery stores, doctors and dentists offices. We had a thriving community as the Forest Service maintained thriving multiple-use forests.

In the 1980s advocates for the spotted owl shut repeatedly appealed timber sales and largely shut down logging in western Oregon. Those mills in western Oregon then began to outbid the mills where I grew up. The eastern Oregon mills then started buying logs from timber sales in Idaho and even as far away as Colorado. Those economics didn't work, so a few years later the mills where I grew up were shut down. Unemployment in my home county hit 25% -- it would have been higher but many people fled.

The car dealerships all went out of business, several grocery stores closed, school budgets were slashed, and many families had to file for bankruptcy.

At the time of the concerns being raised about the spotted owl, a friend of mine was working for the World Center for Birds of Prey in Idaho. He travelled to Oregon to meet with other environmentalists and told them he could help them breed more spotted owls. In turn, my friend was told to shut up -- he learned then that his fellow environmentalists didn't care about the owls -- they simply wanted a tool to shut down logging. They were successful.

Over the decades, a lack of thinning and logging led to dense forest growth. In 2015, the Canyon Creek fire burned over 110,000 acres, destroying 43 homes (barely missing the two homes I'd grown up in) and burning down nearly 100 barns, workshops and other structures. In some places the fire reached 2,000 degrees -- melting the sap in the trees which in turn created hydrophobic soils that in turn created flooding conditions as water raced off the mountains.

Today, the biggest threat to old growth forests today aren't chainsaws or commercial logging. Instead, the major threats are severe wildfires, insect infestations, and disease. Under the current process, it already takes years for the Forest Service to implement forest health treatments, which are critical to reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires. These delays are often made worse when projects are halted by litigation.

Unfortunately, the new proposed rules will only make managing forests even more difficult. I encourage the Forest Service to go back to the drawing board and ensure that future rules enable local silviculture experts to manage the forests with a focus on forest health, multiple use, and economic sustainability for local communities.

All my best,

Jeff Schrade

The Forest Service's threat assessment highlighted that over 70% of mature and old growth forests are at high risk of wildfire-caused mortality. This is compounded by the fact that forests in areas reserved from active management, such as wilderness areas, have seen greater losses of old growth than forests where limited timber harvest is allowed. In contrast, old growth forests have actually increased on managed forests.

Your comments can make a difference. We encourage you to visit the Forest Service's website to make sure your voice heard. Here are some key points:

Severe wildfires are the greatest threat to our forests, wildlife and communities. We need policies to accelerate forest thinning and other management activities.

Extra bureaucracy won't save our forests-proactive stewardship will. Empower our public lands managers to do their jobs and take care of the forests.

Rather than adding more red tape and litigation to the management of our federal forests, individual national forests should focus on implementing the Wildfire Crisis Strategy through their existing forest plans to achieve desired conditions on these landscapes.