

We're deep in the west Cascade wilderness, standing among a few sparsely scattered trees in a clearing otherwise void of life. We climb over loosely packed piles of twigs and needles – the dried remains of Douglas and noble fir that once flourished in this recently logged patch of forest.

We're at ground zero, and depending on how you look at it, it's either a heartbreaking scene of destruction or a stage set for rejuvenation.

The height of the Northwest's timber wars may be a distant memory, but a fierce debate over how publicly owned forests should be managed rages on.

The U.S. Forest Service says active management of national forests, including some logging, is necessary for forest health, restoration and the benefit of the public and local economies.

Two significant changes to forest management rose out of the jobs-versus-environment debate of the early 1990s.

For one, President Bill Clinton unveiled the Northwest Forest Plan in 1994, creating rules for managing 24.6 million acres of federal land in northern spotted owl territory spanning Oregon, Washington and northern California. Since then, lawsuits have been fewer and logging in national forests has decreased drastically. Timber cut from Mount Hood National Forest in 2014 was 12 percent of what it was in 1990.

In forest management, the rules are dense, the terms many and the politics complicated. To follow along on our field trip, understanding a few basic principles is necessary.

When the Northwest Forest Plan was enacted, the 19 national forests in its jurisdiction amended their individual forest plans accordingly. Under the updated rules of Mount Hood National Forest's plan, timber harvest for producing wood products can occur only in areas designated for "timber emphasis." When logging does occur in those areas, the Forest Service must follow hundreds of standards and guidelines put in place to protect wildlife, water quality and scenery.

Logging can occur in areas designated as reserves, but the rules governing those areas are even stricter; timber can be removed only to specifically benefit the forest and dependent species. These reserves include "late successional reserves," which either contain old growth or have been selected to evolve into old-growth forest, and "riparian reserves," which are areas adjacent to waterways, including rivers, wetlands and seasonal streams.

Forest plan revisions now underway may put these protections at risk because the Forest Service has indicated it wants to do away with the regional plan.

Also stemming from the timber wars decades ago was the establishment of collaborative groups. Their purpose is to bring together timber interests, environmentalists, elected officials, citizens and the Forest Service to come to a consensus on whether a restoration project or timber sale should move forward.

Ultimately, however, it's the Forest Service that makes the final decision. There are 26

Forest watchdog groups say these restoration projects are nothing more than timber sales thinly veiled as restoration, and when logging operators move in, they often cause more harm than good.

Are these restoration projects helping or hindering America's beloved national forests? Both sides have studies, scientists and other experts backing up their claims.

To get an on-the-ground understanding of this debate, Street Roots invited the Forest Service and an environmental group with a history of suing it to join us on a field trip into Mount Hood National Forest to see how this modern-era timber war is playing out in Portland's backyard.

But before we venture any farther into the woods, it's important to understand how we got here in the first place.

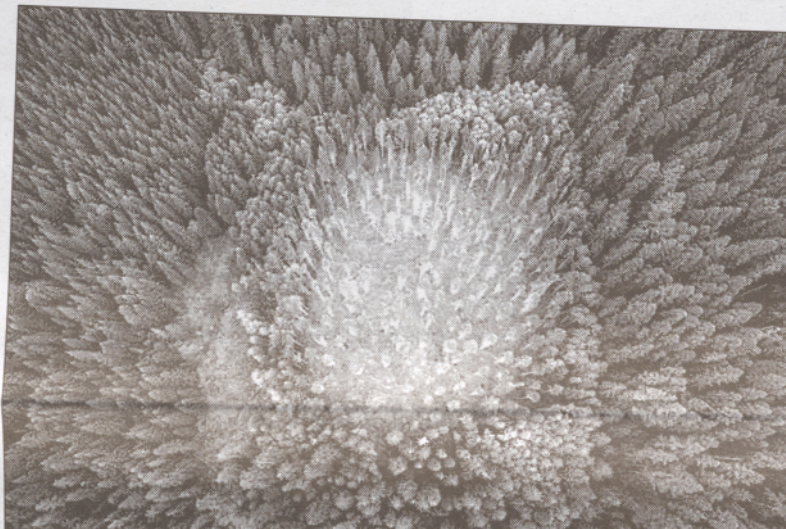


PHOTO BY TRIP JENNINGS/BALANCE MEDIA

This aerial photo of an isolated unit within the Jazz Thin project in Mount Hood National Forest was taken by drone. A moderately thinned area such as this is typically left with about 65 to 75 trees standing per acre. A heavily thinned unit is typically left with about 40 trees standing per acre. More photos from our field trip are online at news.streetroots.org.

collaborative groups in Oregon.

Earlier this year, members of 19 environmental groups spanning the U.S., including two in Oregon, issued a statement claiming their voices are ignored at these collaborative-group meetings, and the "over-riding goal has become economic return to local communities and/or the timber industry."

Most stated they were withdrawing from the collaborative process altogether, a move that will likely lead to an increase in the lawsuits these groups were created to avoid.

Mount Hood National Forest watchdog group Bark signed the statement, but it hasn't given up entirely on the collaborative process.

Bark frequently files objections to proposed Forest Service projects when it finds the Forest Service strays from governing forest plans.

In cases where Bark believes the Forest Service is outright breaking the law or that logging activities will significantly harm protected areas, it takes the Forest Service to court.

Since Bark's formation in 1998, it has sued to stop projects 10 times, winning half of those lawsuits.

Accompanying Street Roots on the Sept. 25 field trip were two Bark staffers, attorney Brenna Bell and Forest Watch Coordinator Michael Krochta, and two Forest Service employees who work in the Mount Hood National Forest, District Ranger Jackie Groce and Silviculturist Glenda Goodwyne.

Goodwyne prescribed the restoration projects on our field trip agenda. As a silviculturist, it's her job to evaluate each stand, or grouping, of trees in a proposed project and decide how it should or shouldn't be managed.

At 9 a.m., we met at the Clackamas River Ranger District in Estacada, about 40 minutes southeast of Portland, where Goodwyne worked for 26 years after earning a degree in forest management from Oregon State University in 1985.

She said when she went to work at the Estacada station in 1989, it had 175 employees, and another station 26 miles away had 200 employees, plus seasonal help. But that station closed, and when she took a position at the Forest Service Region 6 office about 18 months ago, she left just 34 permanent employees behind her.

"Before the major cuts came in 2002,

Regulation rewind

Protections are at risk as Forest Service revises regional plans

Before the Northwest Forest Plan was unveiled in 1994, ending the timber wars, the 19 national forests within its jurisdiction already had forest plans, and some were more environmentally friendly than others.

Wildlife protections among forests varied depending on the nature of the relationship between each U.S. Forest Service district and the timber industry.

The Northwest Forest Plan brought consistency to those plans, forcing forest managers within northern spotted owl territory in Oregon, Washington and northern California to comply with the same rules and guidelines, which were aimed at repairing badly clear-cut forests and at protecting at-risk species by improving ecosystems over the next 100 years.

Since the Northwest Forest Plan's implementation, logging in national forests has decreased, and according to a 20-year monitoring report on the plan's progress released in June, it's achieving many of its ecological goals.

But since the Northwest Forest Plan was written, there have been a few developments.

Changes in climate are affecting forests, the Northwest is coming off another record-breaking wildfire season, and science behind forest management has evolved.

In 2014, the U.S. Forest Service announced it was time for a plan revision, but rather than have one overarching set of rules, it wants to go back to having an individual plan for each forest.

That approach didn't go so well for the environment in the past, so with this announcement, conservationists grew concerned.

On Oct. 1, a letter signed by 37 environmental groups, including Bark, Audubon Society of Portland and Oregon Wild, urged the Forest Service to maintain the framework of the Northwest Forest Plan, incorporate the best relevant science and "engage in further dialogue with us before making final decisions."

Brenna Bell, attorney for Bark, said conservationists would like the Forest Service to revise the Northwest Forest Plan rather than do away with it, and then update individual forest plans to comply with the new version.

On Sept. 20, Seattle Times published an editorial stating that returning to the old model of forest planning "would be a mistake" and a reversal of the 1994 plan's forward thinking.