

Defending Fall Creek

Lawsuits and tree-sits surround the BLM's proposal to log

A bird calls high in a Douglas fir at the edge of an old clearcut. It's the whistle of an owl calling to its mate. The owl sits on a branch, staring curiously down at the invaders in its forest in Fall Creek.

Josh Laughlin of Cascadia Wildlands carefully imitates the call to learn it and determine if this owl is an endangered northern spotted owl, a creature that could be further threatened if this patch of ancient forest is clearcut under the Western Oregon Plan Revisions (WOPR). The trees are marked with paint and flags. Bits of string tangled in the underbrush show where measurements were taken.

Laughlin says, "They want to turn this place into stumps and clearcuts. People go here to recreate, not to see clearcuts and stump-fields." The 400-acre area is just a mile or so up the hill from swimming holes and fishing spots an hour from Eugene.

"This is the BLM's first whack at WOPR timber sale," Laughlin says, "and we believe it's never going to be logged."

He's got some basis for his belief. The Fall Creek area has a history with Eugene activists. It is a mix of heavily logged private timberland as well as BLM and Forest Service lands, and the Forest Service has planned three failed timber sales here.

"All the forest defense campaigns in Fall Creek over the last decade have been successful," Laughlin says. He mentions the Clark timber sale in the mid-1990s, and the North Winberry and Straw Devil timber sales. The Clark tree-sit (also known as Red Cloud Thunder) lasted for around five years and Jeff "Free" Luers, who is about to mark his ninth year in jail for the arson of SUVs at Romania Chevrolet, was one of its more well-known participants.

That the BLM proposes to log an area that has been so vehemently defended in the past shows "how out of touch the BLM is," Laughlin says.

"This is not a timber sale," says Wayne Elliot, a planner with the BLM. "It's a very, very, early proposal."

He says "the area has got potential," but "the [BLM's] interdisciplinary team has only met once."

The owls are not the only creatures in the trees these days; the idea of logging in Fall Creek has spawned a new tree-sit. On June 1, Cascadia Summer 2009, a direct action campaign, erected a tree-sit in the Douglas firs, not far from where the owl called, and yards away from a small waterfall.

Samantha Chirillo of Cascadia Ecosystem Advocates, one of the organizers of the sit, hikes up the hill towards the trees along with Joshua Featherview, once a member of the Northwest Ecosystem Survey Team that halted or reduced many timber sales by spotting tree vole nests high in the old growth. Tree voles are the food for spotted owls. Chirillo and Featherview imitate bird calls to alert the sitters of their presence, but long before coming into view, the laughter and joking of the tree-sitters gives notice of their position high in the trees.



CAMILLA MORTENSEN

A barred owl, one of the threats to spotted owls in Fall Creek

Ryder, Clark and Sara are the names the sitters give. They have platforms in two trees, strung together with a rope. This is Sara's fourth time climbing a tree, she says, calling down from her high perch. The goal of Cascadia Summer, according to Chirillo and Featherview, is not just defending the trees but training people in all aspects of activism, from interacting with the media to climbing the trees. And the group doesn't just want to stop at Fall Creek, "If we lose our forests, we lose our clean water and our soil," says Chirillo, and points to the link between logging and global warming.

"In protecting the forest and climbing trees, we're not just protecting the environment, we're addressing issues of social justice," Sara adds.

Back in town, Elliot of the BLM says plans to log under the WOPR are on hold until July 20. Proposed logging under the WOPR is complicated by lawsuits by groups like Cascadia Wildlands and others against the BLM and U.S. Fish and Wildlife for failure to consult on the Endangered Species Act, and also by the fact that one of the key positions the Obama administration has not yet filled is director of the BLM.

The Obama administration has until July 20 to decide if they will defend the Bush administration's controversial plan to consult over individual timber sales or decide whether the WOPR as a whole threatens endangered species like the spotted owl. "The government has agreed not to do any planning for any timber sales that would be under the WOPR," Elliot says.

Timber sales, however, can be planned under the Northwest Forest Plan, he says. Elliot says that logging under the NWFP means a larger buffer between the logging and waterways, and leaving six to eight trees standing per acre.

"Litigation takes a long time," he says, "Everybody knows that."

Until then, the folks of Cascadia Summer say they will occupy the trees until the Fall Creek forest is saved from clearcutting once again. Laughlin and Cascadia Wildlands will continue to litigate and agitate from the ground. **EW**

For more information on the work of Cascadia Wildlands go to www.cascwild.org and for information on Cascadia Summer 2009 and their upcoming meetings go to forestdefensenow.org

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