

Flattening a Forest

RETIRED FORESTRY PROFESSORS, AN ENVIRONMENTAL GROUP AND A LAWMAKER SPEAK OUT ON A PROPOSED LOGGING OF MATURE FORESTLAND

By Henry Houston

During a recent trip to the McKenzie River area, Congressman Peter DeFazio tells *Eugene Weekly* that he's seen more logging trucks in that one day than he'd normally see in a year.

But logging trucks could soon haul away more than the controversial Holiday Farm Fire-related salvage timber. The U.S. Forest Service is proposing forest management actions scattered across a project area of 74,091 acres near McKenzie Bridge, according to sale documents. Called the Flat Country Project, the project in the Willamette National Forest concerns opponents who say the agency would be logging mature forests, affecting diverse ecosystems and affecting a space that could be a part of capturing carbon emissions.

"Going into a 100-, 120-year-old forest at this point in time is nuts," DeFazio says of the sale. "I don't know what they're going to do with all this timber."

According to USFS documents, within the boundaries of the 74,091-acre project, the agency is proposing forest management actions on 5,001 acres. This includes 4,039 acres of forest thinning, 767 of which are on riparian reserves, and 962 acres of regeneration harvests. The project will harvest trees that range in age from 27 to 150 years old.

The proposed logging sale dates back to 2018, and on Jan. 21, 2021, the agency moved forward with the process when it signed its Record of Decision. The sale has four purposes, the USFS says. One is to provide a sustainable supply of timber — about 100 million board feet over five years. The second is to increase the space between trees, which the USFS says are too densely spaced. The third would increase habitat complexity. The fourth is to manage the road system.

Jerry Franklin and Norm Johnson, professors emeritus at University of Washington and Oregon State University, respectively, don't agree with USFS's justifications for the logging. Both were involved in developing the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan, which was designed to balance logging while protecting the spotted owl and other species, Johnson tells *EW*.

In regard to the USFS's claim on tree density, Franklin says this forest isn't dense at all but is doing what trees do at a mature stage. The federal agency is applying principles used in managing plantations in declaring that it's too dense, and that isn't relevant to a natural forest, he says.

Both Johnson and Franklin say if the sale goes through, it would set a dangerous precedent for future logging projects in mature forests. "These old-growth forests are relatively rare in western Oregon," Johnson says. "They're important for a variety of species and for people, too."

Forests like those found in the Willamette National Forest are optimal for snow capture and retention in the spring, Franklin says. They help produce high quality water and they are effective at regulating water to minimize floods. The USFS is proposing to replace some mature trees with a plantation, he says, which doesn't provide any of those benefits and actually consumes a lot of water.

DeFazio tells *EW* that he's a disciple of Franklin and Johnson. "I agree with what they said. I've proposed to the Forest Service and the BLM different ways of doing forestry, following their prescriptions," he adds.

In a May 7 letter to USFS Chief Vicki Christiansen obtained by *EW*, DeFazio writes that in a recent trip up the McKenzie Highway, he passed nearly 40 logging trucks. "There is so much salvage harvest and roadside hazard tree removal occurring that some local mills have

stopped taking logs," he says. "In this context, I find it incomprehensible that the United States Forest Service would proceed with the Flat Country Timber Sale to harvest 2,000 acres of mature trees upwards of 100 to 150 years in age."

He adds in the letter that he sees no reason why the agency should proceed with "clearcutting 200 acres of rare mature forest."

DeFazio tells *EW* that he doesn't know if the USFS chief will change her mind, but since she is from the Pacific Northwest, maybe she'll understand how important the mature forests are.

The Eugene-based nonprofit Cascadia Wildlands agrees that the logging is unnecessary. Conservation Director Bethany Cotton says the group commends DeFazio for speaking out against the Flat Country sale.

"We call on elected leaders at every level to review the science on forest carbon, step forward to protect our forests, and in so doing safeguard our drinking water sources, iconic rivers and watersheds, wildlife habitat and climate," she says. "Pacific Northwest forests are an essential bulwark of climate resilience — but only if they remain standing."

Johnson says the Flat Country sale is the largest project the USFS has put together in 20 years, adding "all we can do is ring the fire bell in the night and say, 'Hey, what a minute here, what is going on?'"

The Willamette National Forest near McKenzie River is one of the last reservoirs of trees, he says, adding that they can't be replaced. "This is the motherlode of carbon storage," Johnson says. "It just stands out on a global map. If we're serious about combating climate change, you'd start with these forests and keeping them." ■

For the link to research by Franklin and Johnson on Flat Country, visit this story online at [EugeneWeekly.com](https://eugeneweekly.com).

slant

• The **University of Oregon** announced on **May 10** that all students, faculty and staff will be

required to take the COVID-19 vaccination — with the usual medical and non-medical exceptions — in order to attend and/or work on campus. The UO's decision came days after other Oregon institutions and weeks after the nation's largest higher education system (the California State University and University of California) made COVID-19 vaccines mandatory for the upcoming school year. But, hey, the UO's announcement is better late than absent.

• On Sunday night, **several Eugene City Councilors' homes, including Emily Semple, Claire Syrett and Alan Zelekna, were vandalized with spray-painted anti-police slogans.** Semple told *Eugene Weekly* that "defund EPD" and "fund CAHOOTS" were written on the side of her house with a banner that said "Your community is watching you." Her stairs and mailbox were also spray-painted. She says the tactic was not effective. "If you want me to vote one way come and talk to me," Semple says. "I don't feel particularly intimidated."

• Last week's Slant column annoyed a reader who left a **profanity filled voicemail with misinformation**

about COVID vaccines (or as he called them, "Nazi-vaccines") and threatening to come "put a foot up your ass." Thank you, sir, but we will continue to endorse science over conspiracies and threats.

• *Eugene Weekly* took 2020 off from our **annual Summer Guide issue** due to COVID. We're bringing it back, COVID-safe, for 2021, so if you have a summer event that's fun or informative and is not going to be a super-spreader, submit it ASAP to our online calendar at Calendar.EugeneWeekly.com/Cal or Cal@EugeneWeekly.com.

• **"The Butterfly and the Blaze," which ran in Eugene Weekly Dec. 10, 2020, took first place for science writing for 2020 from the American Society of Journalists and Authors,** the largest professional organization of independent nonfiction writers in the U.S. The story by Matthew LaPlante and Jacob Stuienvolt Allen detailed butterfly effect connections between typhoons in the western Pacific and last summer's devastating fires in Oregon. "This story is so skillfully put together, with a compelling narrative that conveys a complicated scientific topic that has significant implications as we move deeper into the climate crisis," the judges wrote. We happily agree.

