

Trump rule change opens up logging on national forests

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Todd Sonflieth/Oregon Public Broadcasting

By the late 1980s, between 3% and 7% of old growth forest remained in the Pacific Northwest's 56.8 million acres of forest in a mosaic of clearcuts and second-growth timber.

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Nick Smith | public affairs director of the American Forest Resource Council

wildfires and drought.

"It's one tool that the Forest Service can do to chip away at the millions of acres of national forests lands that are at risk of catastrophic wildfires, insects, and disease," Smith said.

In Oregon, Smith said the primary focus will be national forests east of the Cascades that have been impacted by wildfires and could use treatments like thinning to help restore the forests.

But he said the agency could have gone further as millions of acres of national forests are at risk and only a small portion are treated and therefore prone to wildfires and insect infestation. Smith said the claim that the changes to the environmental policy act rule will increase commercial logging is simply not true.

"Something should be done to mitigate these risks and help these forests become resilient to a changing climate," Smith said. "This is a positive step forward. It's not a panacea nor is it a gateway to rampant commercial logging."

The role of logging to thin forests and make them more resilient in the face of wildfire threats has been controversial. It's a strategy pushed by the forest-products industry and their allies in elected office.

But many of the top experts in the scientific community have produced research debunking the idea that cutting trees by itself will solve the West's wildfire conundrum — which is only getting more severe as climate change lengthens the wildfire season and brings drought, insect infestations and disease to millions of acres of forest land.

Conservationists say they will challenge the revisions to the environmental policy act in court. It was not immediately clear how the next Congress or President-elect Joe Biden might respond once they are sworn in in January.

The Trump administration's changes to the landmark Nixon-era environmental law have been generating controversy well before they were finalized by a lame duck president who lost his reelection bid three weeks ago.

During the public comment period they generated more than 100,000 public comments, both "strongly for and strongly against" the rule changes, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



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