## Trump rule change opens up logging on national forests

**By MONICA SAMAYOA** and DAVID STEVES

Oregon Public Broadcasting

The Trump administration has finalized a rule change that aims to open up vast stretches of national forests to increased logging in Oregon, Washington state and beyond.

The rule change took effect last week after it was finalized by the U.S. Forest Service. It eases the approval process for activities on public forest lands, including logging and road-building. The newly-revised rule authorizes the Forest Service to bypass requirements under a bedrock conservation law called the National Environmental Policy Act. It applies to areas of national forest land as large as 2,800 acres at a time, allowing the Forest Service to authorize logging and other activities without following the National Environmental Policy Act's public notification and environmental review requirements.

The change to the environmental policy act is just the latest in a wave of moves by the Trump administration to roll back environmental protections and remake the nation's policy regime to be friendlier to industry particularly in the extractive fields of mining, drilling and logging, which have chafed against laws that impede their access to raw, natural resources like coal, minerals, natural gas and timber.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue oversees the Forest Service. In a press statement he lauded the agency's newly-established authority to use "categorical exclusions" to bypass the environmental policy act provisions.

"The new categorical exclusions will ultimately improve our ability to maintain and repair the infrastructure people depend on to use and enjoy their national forests - such as roads, trails, campgrounds and other facilities," he said.

But conservation leaders said the rule change will bring unwelcome impacts on the environment stretching well beyond trail and campground improvements. They specifically took exception to the newly created categorical exclusions - called loopholes by critics forest restoration and resilience projects and for certain road-management projects.

"The Forest Service just granted itself a free pass to increase commercial logging and roadbuilding across our national forests under the guise of restoration," Randi Spivak, public lands director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement. "The Trump administration is streamlining destruction of our public lands when what we need to be doing is protecting them.'

Nick Smith, public affairs director of the American Forest Resource Council, said the Forest Service's changes to environmental policy act is a modest and important effort that will help streamline restoration efforts as well as increasing resilience from



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

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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