

**Topic:** Open Forest communication plan for the 2019 Christmas tree permit season

## Introduction

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This communications plan provides key messages and information to Forest Service employees supporting the Open Forest Christmas tree pilot project. Specifically, it is targeted for use by Public Affairs Officers (PAOs) and frontline staff at the following National Forests piloting the Open Forest system ("pilot Forests") during calendar year 2019:

1. Arapaho and Roosevelt (2018 pilot participant),
2. Flathead (2018 pilot participant),
3. Shoshone (2018 pilot participant),
4. Mt. Hood (2018 pilot participant),
5. Deschutes,
6. Ochoco,
7. Gifford Pinchot,
8. Rogue River-Siskiyou,
9. Fremont-Winema,
10. Okanogan-Wenatchee,
11. Umatilla,
12. Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, and the
13. Willamette.

This plan will help guide these employees through the launch of the Open Forest system at their local units, and increase their understanding of Open Forest to better communicate with their stakeholders. In addition, interested Agency staff (e.g., Agency leadership) can read this communication plan to learn more about Open Forest for online Christmas tree permits.

## Background

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The purpose of Open Forest is to provide an opportunity for forest visitors to obtain permits in a timely and efficient manner using the internet and mobile technologies. The first phase of this effort included Christmas tree permits on the following four National Forests: Mt. Hood, Shoshone, Arapaho and Roosevelt, and the Flathead. The need for an online solution was identified through frequent recurring requests from National Forest visitors, as well as Forest Service employees.

The 2018 pilot was successful on all four participating forests. Nearly 5,000 permits were issued through Open Forest, which accounted for approximately 30% of Christmas tree sales for each participating forest. For 2019, Open Forest is being expanded to an additional nine National Forests in Region 6: Deschutes, Ochoco, Gifford Pinchot, Rogue River-Siskiyou, Fremont-Winema, Okanogan-Wenatchee, Umatilla, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, and the Willamette.

## Objectives

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- This communication plan should provide PAOs key messages to help facilitate information sharing with Forest staff and internal and external stakeholders.
- This communication plan should be a guide for pilot Forests when distributing press releases and social media updates regarding the Open Forest system for Christmas tree permits.



## Key Messages

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These messages and associated talking points are intended to increase awareness of the Open Forest system for Forest Service employees at participating pilot Forests. In addition, they should help Forest staff better communicate with their visitors about this effort. Information provided in this communication plan is intended to be a guide.

Please note, **key messages have been identified as “Internal and External Audiences” or “Internal Audiences Only” depending on the appropriate target audience.**

Please see the Questions and Answers section for additional background information on the Open Forest Christmas Tree Pilot Project, which have also been labeled “Internal and External Audiences” or “Internal Audiences Only”.



## For Internal and External Audiences

**Key Message #1: Open Forest will allow visitors to purchase Christmas tree permits online during the 2019 Christmas tree permit season. Open Forest includes the following National Forests: Arapaho and Roosevelt, Flathead, Mt. Hood, Shoshone, Deschutes, Ochoco, Willamette, Fremont-Winema, Gifford Pinchot, Rogue River-Siskiyou, Okanogan-Wenatchee, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, and the Umatilla.**

- The Open Forest pilot seeks to improve the Agency's customer service to the forest visitor by allowing Christmas tree permits to be purchased on a computer or mobile device, rather than requiring purchases to occur at a physical Forest Service unit or participating vendor.
- Open Forest offers the opportunity to learn about Christmas tree gathering, understand the rules and regulations of Christmas tree gathering, and to purchase and print a Christmas tree permit from the comfort of one's own home.
- Open Forest is planned to be available for public use in alignment with each participating forests Christmas tree season.
- Christmas tree permits will continue to be sold over-the-counter at each pilot Forest (i.e., at the front desk), and at that Forest's participating vendor locations.
- Personal and financial information entered into Open Forest is secure and protected through Pay.gov. For more information on Pay.gov you can visit their website <https://www.pay.gov/public/home/privacy>.
- For general questions about Christmas trees, or the local Forest's Christmas tree program, the forest visitor should call their local Forest Service office.
- Technical questions from the public related to the use and function of the Open Forest website can be sent to this Open Forest team email address: [SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov](mailto:SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov)

**Key Message #2: Lessons learned from Open Forest 2019 will be used to inform future development of the Open Forest system.**

- Through Open Forest the Forest Service hopes to learn about customer usage of the system, performance of the system, and the overall customer experience which includes the forest visitor and Forest Service staff.
- This input would inform improvements for the Open Forest system for potential future use and applicability.
- Feedback gathered in 2018 has resulted in improvements to the system that have either been completed, or are currently being developed.

## For Internal Audiences Only

**Key Message #3: The Open Forest team will provide training and support to key employees (PAOs, frontline staff, Christmas tree program staff, and Law Enforcement Officers) at the new pilot National Forests to ensure they are prepared for the launch and implementation of the Pilot Project.**

- Demonstrations of the website will be provided August through early November for key Forest Service staff that support the Christmas tree program at each participating pilot Forest.
- Technical questions related to the use and function of the Open Forest system can be sent to this Open Forest team email address: [SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov](mailto:SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov)

## Link to USDA Strategic Goals

The Open Forest pilot and the key messages provided above align with the following USDA Strategic Goals:

***STRATEGIC GOAL 1: Ensure USDA programs are Delivered Efficiently, Effectively, and with Integrity and a Focus on Customer Service.***

- Open Forest was built with a focus on functionality and efficiency for both the forest visitor and the Forest Service employee.
- The Open Forest Christmas tree program was built based on iterative customer and Forest Service employee feedback.
- The Open Forest Christmas tree program offers the opportunity for the forest visitor to learn about the Christmas tree program on their participating National Forest much like the visitor would if they were in a forest or district office.
- Open Forest Christmas tree program offers an opportunity for a forest visitor to easily acquire a Christmas tree permit at their convenience instead of relying on National Forest office hours.

***STRATEGIC GOAL 4: Facilitate rural prosperity and economic development.***

- The convenience of the Open Forest online permit system encourages responsible recreation and visitor use which supports the outdoor recreation industry and businesses that may be local to participating National Forests.

***STRATEGIC GOAL 6: Foster productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System lands.***

- Open Forest Christmas tree program offers a consistent approach for forest visitors to engage with and ultimately access their National Forest.
- The Open Forest program provides a learning opportunity for the forest visitor before they acquire permits without having to drive to an office.
- This option for the forest visitor eliminates their dependency of visiting a forest office during business hours.

## News Release Example

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### Christmas Tree Permits Available for Purchase Online

**[Insert Name of National Forest], [Insert State: OR, ID, WY, WA, or CO], November DD, 2019**—Christmas tree permits for the 2019 season are now available for purchase online. The **[Insert Name]** National Forest is one of thirteen National Forests participating in offering permits online through the [Open Forest system](#). Christmas tree permits purchased online will have to be printed to be valid. However, this program allows you to purchase your 2019 Christmas tree permit from the comfort of your own home, or by using your mobile device, instead of traveling to a Forest Service office.

You can learn about purchasing your permit and gathering your Christmas tree online at: **[Insert link to Forest's page where visitor can be directed to Open Forest page (or insert Open Forest link here <https://openforest.fs.usda.gov>]**. Traditional Christmas tree permits will still be available at local Forest Service offices, or participating vendors.

For more information about the Christmas tree program on the **[Insert Name]** National Forest, please **[Insert your Forest's preferred method of contact and contact information]**.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

## Social Media

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The below image and two examples of social media posts may be used by PAOs. Attach this image to social media blasts below



Open\_Forest\_Christmas\_Tree\_permits2.png



- Christmas tree permits are available online for the 2019 season! Learn about gathering Christmas trees on the **[INSERT NAME]** National Forest, and then purchase your permit here <https://openforest.fs.usda.gov>

- The Forest Service is offering online purchasing of Christmas tree permits on the **[INSERT NAME]** National Forest this holiday season. Check it out here: <https://openforest.fs.usda.gov>

## Forest Website

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The same image and link, should be posted directly to the websites of pilot Forests.

Attach this image to your Forest's home page



Open\_Forest\_Christmas\_Tree\_permits2.png



Link Open Forest from your Forest's home page, and/or Christmas tree program page.

<https://openforest.fs.usda.gov>

Example website language:

The **[INSERT NAME]** National Forest is offering online Christmas tree permits through Open Forest this holiday season. Click here to purchase your Christmas tree permit online!

[attach image and link]

## Questions and Answers for **Internal Audience**

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### Open Forest Overview

What is the leader's intent for Open Forest?

- To provide a convenient customer experience and encourage people to use their National Forests.

Why is it necessary to offer Open Forest as a pilot?

- When developing new systems, pilot efforts are often used to ensure a system will work effectively and efficiently. The pilot approach reduces risks, costs, and helps ensure a timelier implementation with an initial investment.

Why is Open Forest starting with Christmas trees instead of some other non-timber forest product?

- They provide a simple type of transaction in comparison to some other Forest products.
- The Christmas trees were chosen to test back-end financial transactions with other Forest Service financial systems (i.e., POSS and FMFI).
- The system for tracking sales volume could not be integrated with the Timber Information Management (TIM) system; and Christmas trees have the flexibility to be classified as a timber product or a recreation product. Christmas trees purchased through Open Forest are considered a recreation product; funds are collected through FLREA.

How do Forest visitors access the Open Forest website?

- Forest visitors can access the Open Forest website one of two ways:
  1. Find a link to Open Forest from the participating Forest's Christmas tree webpage.
  2. Visit Open Forest directly at <https://openforest.fs.usda.gov>

What Forests are participating in the pilot?

- In 2019 the same forests from 2018 are participating in addition to the following Region 6 National Forests: Deschutes, Ochoco, Willamette, Fremont-Winema, Gifford Pinchot, Rogue River-Siskiyou, Okanogan-Wenatchee, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, and the Umatilla.

How were the pilot Forests selected and why?

- The Forests were selected by National Forest System executive leadership based on public interest, quantity of permits sold each year, and capabilities of each Forest to participate.

My forest offers more than one type of Christmas tree permit, why don't I see the other option(s) available through Open Forest?

- The Open Forest pilot does not offer the opportunity to purchase anything besides a traditional Christmas tree as defined by your Forest and/or Region.
- Offices that issue permits for other/oversized Christmas trees should follow their regular protocol for issuing those permits.

How long is the pilot expected to last?

- The pilot was launched in 2018 and is currently scheduled to continue for the 2019 Christmas tree season.

Will this online system be available on a mobile device?

- Yes. Open Forest has been developed for use (purchasing your permit online) by desktop computers and mobile devices. Even though a permit can be purchased on a mobile device, it will still need to be printed to be valid.



## Questions and Answers for Internal Audience (Continued)

Is the online pilot system secure? Will personal information be protected?

- Yes, the Forest Service has followed all agency, USDA, and federal cybersecurity protocols while building and implementing Open Forest. Identity and payment information will be protected through Pay.gov. <https://www.pay.gov/public/home/privacy>.

### Open Forest Outcomes and Next Steps

What information will be used from the pilot to determine its success?

- During the Pilot Project, the Agency hopes to learn about usage and usability of the system, performance of the system, and the overall customer experience of the public and Forest Service staff. A feedback tool is currently being designed and developed for use this year.

What happens after the pilot is over?

- Information related to the topics above will be utilized by executive decision makers as well system managers to improve the system for the future.

Will there be improvements made based on the pilot?

- Yes, based on information gathered during the pilot.

What is the cost to operate Open Forest?

- There is no “upcharge” or “convenience fee” for forest visitors to use Open Forest to purchase a Christmas tree permit.
- Christmas tree permit pricing is determined by the Forest.
- Future costs associated with Open Forest and how they will be managed are still under consideration by executive leadership.

### Training, Expectations, and Other Logistics for the Pilot Forests

Why are we communicating about this now?

- The timing of communication is directly correlated to the availability of the system. The system launch is dependent on cyber security reviews that were recently completed and the system is now in final testing. Earlier communication may have resulted in setting a false expectation in relation to system availability.

Will there be a training for pilot forests on how to use this program?

- Yes, plans/communications are in progress to offer demonstrations of the website. Forest staff are encouraged to reach out to Amber Sprinkle [amber.sprinkle@usda.gov](mailto:amber.sprinkle@usda.gov) to schedule a demonstration of the Open Forest site if they have not received one yet.

How are frontline staff expected to assist the public when they call or come to the office with questions?

- Questions about cutting a tree and/or the Forest’s Christmas tree program should be addressed by the pilot Forest as they normally would.
- For technical support related to Open Forest email: [SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov](mailto:SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov).

Can a forest visitor still buy a Christmas tree permit in a Forest Service office? If so, does it have to be the same as an online printed permit?

- Christmas tree permits can still be purchased in the traditional manner; in-person at a Forest Service office or through local participating vendors.
- If the permit is issued from a Forest Service office or vendor, it will be the traditional Christmas tree permit/tag the forest typically issues. Offices should not print online permits.



Does this mean that we are going strictly to online permits as an agency?

- Not necessarily. Open Forest provides more flexibility for forest visitors to engage in business with their local forests. It provides an additional way for customers to acquire a permit. Open Forest launched a pilot specifically for Christmas tree permits during the 2018 season, and is piloting the system again during this upcoming 2019 season.

How do we know that Christmas tree permits that were purchased online are valid?

- The permits are required to be printed to be valid. Each permit has a unique number associated with it, just like our traditional Christmas tree permits do. As with any transaction there is risk of fraud. This risk is known by executive leadership.

How do we know if people are purchasing Christmas tree permits through Open Forest?

- Forest Service administrators assigned for each pilot Forest will be able to generate a report that provides information such as number of permits issued, number of trees that have been sold, and total value of sold permits.

How does this Open Forest system for Christmas tree permits impact local small businesses (i.e., local Christmas tree permit vendors)

- While Open Forest was in operation during the 2018 Christmas tree season, local vendors could still sell permits the way they have done in the past. Open Forest provides yet another avenue for a Forest visitor to obtain a Christmas tree permit. The same is true for 2019.

Where do the funds from sales go?

- The funds from Christmas tree permits purchased through the Open Forest system will go back to the participating Forest through Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) funding requirements.

How does the Every Kid Outdoors program fit in?

- There is a link to the program website on the Open Forest Christmas tree permits home page. Every Kid Outdoors is not associated with this pilot, and those passes cannot be issued through the Open Forest system. All Every Kid Outdoors transactions and information are provided on the Every Kid Outdoors website.

## Help Is Available

How do Forest Service employees get help if the Open Forest site is not working?

- For help, email [SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov](mailto:SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov).
- A list of your Forest's Open Forest administrators will be sent out in a separate document prior to the start of Christmas tree season sales on your forest.

Can Forest Service staff at the participating pilot Forests make any changes directly to the Open Forest website?

- Yes. Certain Forest Service staff (Open Forest Administrator) at each participating pilot forest will be granted administrator access in Open Forest for their National Forest.
- Open Forest Administrators at pilot Forests will be able to update season dates, cutting area dates (if applicable), generate reports of permits issued, and provide feedback.

## Questions and Answers for External Audience

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### Open Forest Overview

Why is the pilot necessary?

- When developing new systems, pilot efforts are often used to ensure a system will work effectively and efficiently. The pilot approach reduces long-term risks, associated costs, and helps to ensure a successful implementation with an initial investment in a pilot.

Why are Christmas trees my only option?

- They are a simpler type of transaction for the Forest Service to test in a pilot program compared to some other forest products.

When will I be able to purchase my Christmas tree permit online?

- In November depending on each forest's Christmas tree sales season start dates.

Where can I use the Christmas tree permit that I purchased through Open Forest?

- Christmas tree permits purchased through Open Forest can only be used on the Forest that is named on the printed permit, they are not transferrable between individuals. They are not transferrable between forests unless noted on the permit, and in the permit rules for that forest.
- Christmas tree permits purchased through Open Forest have an expiration date, and that date is indicated on the printed permit, and matches the end of the "season" listed on the information page for a forest.

Where can I go to purchase a Christmas tree permit?

- You can access the Open Forest website at least one of two ways:
  1. Find a link to Open Forest from the participating Forest's Christmas tree webpage.
  2. Visit Open Forest directly at <https://openforest.fs.usda.gov>.
- During the pilot, you can still purchase a Christmas tree permit from your local Forest Service office or vendor location.

How do I know the forest near me offers online Christmas tree permits?

- On the Open Forest website you will only be able to choose from a list of the participating forests. Each participating forest has its associated State indicated next to it. If you are still unsure whether or not your local forest offers online Christmas tree permits, please call your local Forest Service office.

How long is the pilot expected to last?

- The Open Forest Christmas tree pilot is currently scheduled for the 2019 Christmas tree season.

Can I purchase a Christmas tree permit from my mobile phone?

- Yes. Open Forest has been developed for use (purchasing your permit online) by desktop computers and mobile devices. Even though a permit can be purchased on a mobile device, it will still need to be printed to be valid.

Is Open Forest secure? Will my personal information be protected?

- Yes, the Forest Service has followed all USDA and Federal cybersecurity protocols while building and implementing Open Forest. Identity and payment information will be protected through Pay.gov. <https://www.pay.gov/public/home/privacy>.

## Questions and Answers for External Audience (Continued)

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### Open Forest Outcomes and Next Steps

What information will be used from the pilot to determine its success?

- During the pilot project, the agency hopes to learn about usage and usability of the system, performance of the system, what's important to forest programs and visiting public, and the overall customer experience of the public and Forest Service staff.

### Help Is Available

Who do I contact if I have a question about Christmas trees?

- For questions related to the Forest Service's Christmas tree program, please contact your local National Forest office.

Who do I contact if I have a question about the function of the Open Forest website?

- Contact your local National Forest office. The Forest Service Administrator will pass your question about the Open Forest website to the Open Forest team to be addressed in a timely manner. For technical support, an email can be sent to the team using [SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov](mailto:SM.FS.OpnFrstCsSup@usda.gov).

## Action Plan Timeline for Internal Audiences

Target Date	Action	Audience	Lead
10/7/2019	Open Forest Briefing	Offices of Communications and Regional Offices for Pilot Forests	Aaron Burk or Amber Sprinkle
10/14/2019	Distribute Final Communication Plan	PAOs at Pilot Forests	Amber Sprinkle
10/21-11/1/2019	Open Forest Briefing	Local Forest Leadership Team	Forest PAO/POC (Amber Sprinkle, Product Owner, can provide support if needed)
8/7 - 11/1/2019	Demonstration of Open Forest Site	Staff supporting the Open Forest pilot	Amber Sprinkle, Product Owner
10/15-11/1/2019	Local Distribution of Key Messages	Frontline Staff	Forest PAO
11/1-11/15/2019	Press Release, Web Update, Social Media,	Public at Large	Forest PAO
11/1/2019	USDA Blog	Public at Large	Aaron Burk, Project Manager
11/1/2019	Open Forest is live	Public at Large	Aaron Burk, Project Manager
01/15/2019	After Action Review	Staff supporting the Open Forest pilot	Amber Sprinkle, Product Owner

Table 1. Open Forest action plan for 2019 pilot launch.