

A New Dawn for Ancient Forests: Rewriting the Future of Old-Growth Forest Management with Stakeholder Input

Executive Summary

The National Old-Growth Forest Amendment seeks to reform land management plans (LMPs) around the country with modern science and traditional Indigenous knowledge to conserve forests as crucial carbon sinks. The amendment, proposed by the US Forest Service (USFS) and supervised by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), may not be directly voted on by the US Congress but can be significantly influenced by congresspeople. Specifically, Colorado congresspeople should support the Climate Forests Campaign (composed of 9 trusted environmental organizations) in their suggestions to revise the action plans published by the USFS for which public comments recently closed. These revisions focus on stricter protections from commercial logging (Center for Biological Diversity, 2024).

Old-growth forests are in the late stages of development, identified by large tree size and dead woody material, characteristics of canopy layers, types of species present, and other functions of the ecosystem. Colorado has numerous old-growth forests throughout the Western Slope and other parts of the state, and nationally the Bureau of Land Management and the USFS manage 32 million acres of old-growth forests, 18% of the total forested land managed by these two agencies (USDA, 2024). Representatives in Congress should be involved in revising the amendment to better protect forested lands in their state and then ensuring it passes by building bipartisan support and engaging the public.

Introduction

In April 2022, former President Biden issued Executive Order 14072 to ask the USDA to pass an amendment reforming their LMPs for old-growth forests to restore them and implement better conservation practices (Center for Biological Diversity, 2024). As shown in Figure 1 below, healthy old-growth forests create ecosystems that are key for carbon storage, biodiversity, wildfire risk mitigation, sustainable development, cultural practices, and recreational opportunities (USDA, 2023). Tree bark is thicker and canopies are higher among these forests, supporting normal global nutrient cycling and creating crucial habitats (Center for Biological Diversity, 2024).



Figure 1

Old-Growth Forest Value as stated by the USDA and USFS (US Forest Service, 2024b)

Traditional Indigenous knowledge developed around old-growth forests has been supplemented by modern science to reach conclusions about best management practices. Indigenous communities have historically been overlooked in political and academic spheres despite their numerous successes in subjects like forest management. Their consistent resistance to deforestation has and will continue to curb global greenhouse gas emissions; according to Project Drawdown, “if forestland under secure tenure grows by 995.46-1,126.84 million hectares by 2050, reduced deforestation could result in 8.69-12.51 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions avoided” (Rubinson, 2024). However, though tribes were present when drafting the initial LMP reform released by the USFS, one of the key complaints cited by the Climate Forests Campaign is the lack of protections from commercial logging (Center for Biological Diversity, 2024). This tracks, since the USFS has a history of skirting regulations to allow logging projects to begin or continue because of short-term economic benefits. The amendment at hand was slated to close the loopholes used for this purpose in the past, but LMP reforms preferred by the USFS don’t follow through (Forest History Society, 2017). Therefore, revising the suggested LMP reforms is necessary to reach the goals initially outlined in Executive Order 14072 before the amendment passes.

Research Overview

This amendment highlights the need to conserve old-growth forests given the reality of climate change to develop adaptive management strategies locally and nationally using modern science and Indigenous knowledge. LMP reforms attempt to set a baseline for “management direction” but do not constrict localities to a national plan that ignores area-specific considerations (US Forest Service, 2024a, p. 1). Tribal input was received through email and USDA agents speaking on behalf of tribes they communicate with. The USFS will remain open to changes to these reforms until the Final Environmental Impact Statement is published (US Forest Service, 2024a).

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) serves as an analysis of LMP reforms in order to highlight their effects (Wildlife Management Institute, 2024). Two key aspects of the DEIS include “specifications for place-based old-growth definitions/criteria to be used at the local level” and “added or changed standards/guidelines that encourage proactive management actions, especially for wildfire risk management …” (US Forest Service, 2024b, 3). Four action alternatives were defined:

1. *No Action*: LMPs would stay as they are
2. *Modified Proposed Action*: LMPs referring to units with forested land would be fully amended
3. *More Restrictive Standards for Old-Growth*: the same as Alternative 2, but commercial logging would be prohibited
4. *Less Restrictive Standards for Old-Growth*: based off of Alternative 2, but with multiple key protections cut

In the informational materials presented to the public, Alternative 2 is listed as preferred. This alternative highlights the need to make LMP changes based on differing characteristics of land plots (units) managed by the USFS. It includes six grassland units and one National Forest unit that will be exempted from LMP changes due to their limited forested area (US Forest Service, 2024a). It also promotes “proactive management,” which uses prescribed fire, timber harvest, and other methods to achieve wildfire mitigation and habitat improvement. Timber harvest focuses on the selective removal of material, including dead wood, to reduce fire risks, whereas commercial logging typically prioritizes large-scale timber extraction for economic gain. However, Alternative 2 doesn’t restrict commercial logging either; Alternative 3 does and is the same in every other way (US Forest Service, 2024b).

Examination of Findings

Since the current preferred alternative includes updates to the language used in LMPs but doesn’t make many specific calls for the protection of old-growth forests from deforestation, Alternative 3 should be chosen instead. The amendment is a key step in mitigating emissions through internal government planning and needs to include strong stipulations combating industrial impact to ensure forest

management continues in the right direction. Given the political sensitivity surrounding environmental regulations, building bipartisan coalitions will be crucial to ensure these reforms pass.

Conclusion

Colorado congresspeople should support the Climate Forests Campaign in pushing for revisions to the current amendment, chiefly by suggesting that Alternative 3 is chosen instead of Alternative 2 to include better deforestation protections. They should also foster public engagement by holding town halls and consulting with Indigenous groups to build community support. These reforms provide a unique opportunity to involve historically overlooked stakeholders like the Indigenous community and employ their expertise for the betterment of all land management; given the state of the climate, it is more important than ever that amendments like these are passed with sustainable stipulations.

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