

Guest Column: To save Oregon's big trees, we're suing the Forest Service

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On June 7, Central Oregon LandWatch and five other environmental organizations filed a lawsuit against the Forest Service over its decision to allow logging of large and old-growth trees across 7 million acres.

For over 25 years, forest rules known as the Eastside Screens have protected our national forests across Central and Eastern Oregon. One element of the Eastside Screens prohibited logging of any tree larger than 21 inches in diameter, providing bedrock protections for our biggest trees from timber sales.

When the Forest Service announced it was considering changes to the Eastside Screens in 2020, LandWatch, along with many conservation groups and dozens of top scientists, requested retention of the 21-inch rule.

Instead, in the last days of the Trump administration, a political appointee in Washington, D.C., signed a decision rolling back these large tree protections. With the stroke of a pen, the Forest Service ignored our requests and bypassed the public participation process.

Since then, we have been working with groups across Oregon to raise the alarm: mature forests are on the chopping block. This has included several requests to the Biden administration, and Oregon senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley calling for a review of the Trump administration's 21-inch rule rollback. Now, the Forest Service is authorizing several timber sales across our eastside national forests that will log trees larger than 21 inches in diameter.

For anyone who values our nation's public forests, it should be obvious why this rule change is alarming. Large trees are our most fire-resistant trees. They provide critical wildlife habitat to birds, bats, mammals and big game. They shade streams and maintain soil stability, protecting clean water and fish habitat. They store 42% of all carbon in the forest. And after a century of rampant timber harvest, large trees are incredibly scarce on the landscape, making up only 3% of trees left on Oregon's eastside forests. Why can't the Forest Service keep its hands off the largest 3% of trees?

Earlier this spring, we saw the tragic loss of large trees, many over 21 inches in diameter, along Phil's Trail west of Bend. This one example reveals just how imperiled our few remaining large trees are. Now the Forest Service has formalized its ability to log countless more across 11,000 square miles of public land.

On Earth Day, an Executive Order from President Biden recognized the important role mature trees play in sequestering carbon and fighting climate change. He called on federal agencies to protect mature and old-growth trees.

How can the Forest Service square its rollback of protections for large and old-growth trees with this new directive to also protect them? Our view is that nothing protects large trees better than a hard-and-fast prohibition on cutting them down.

There is room in the Forest Service's stewardship responsibilities to protect people from climate-driven wildfires. Fear of wildfire, which is a natural ecological process, should not be used as a scapegoat for cutting and selling our largest trees.

If we continue allowing the few remaining large trees to be logged, we lose their outsized benefits to the climate, wildlife, clean water and people who value public forests. With increased federal funding for fire risk reduction coming to Central Oregon, work should be focused near where people live with home hardening and defensible space in the Wildland Urban Interface.

The Forest Service overstepped its legal duties to responsibly manage our forests when it rolled back the 21-inch rule's protections for Central and Eastern Oregon's forests. This is why we're going to court to see those protections restored.

We again call on President Biden, Sen. Wyden and Sen. Merkley to work with the Forest Service to first reinstate the 21-inch rule, and second, convene a robust public process that establishes long-term, durable protections for the remaining large trees and mature and old-growth forest ecosystems east of the Cascades.