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Plan for all forests, UW ecologist urges

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ELKHORN — Conservationists must look beyond protecting the Northwest's virgin forests and plan for the future of all forests, the nation's leading old-growth forest ecologist told a conference Sunday.

"There's no way we can preserve enough old-growth forest land to protect all elements of biological diversity," said Jerry Franklin, principal ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service's Olympia research station and a professor of forest ecology at the University of Washington.

Fundamental changes are necessary in logging practices and in the management of younger forests, logged-over stands and second-growth tracts as well, Franklin said.

"We can't afford to write them off," he said. "Without the ecological contributions of these lands, we will lose the biological diversity we want to protect."

Franklin spoke at a national conference, sponsored by Eugene-based Cascade Holistic Economic Consultants, on reform of the Forest Service. About 150 economists, biologists and environmental activists from across the nation gathered at Camp Cascade east of Salem to discuss the next phase of the forest-preservation campaign that has blocked most timber sales in the Northwest's old-growth Douglas fir forests this year.

Many speakers agreed with Franklin that the campaign must broaden its horizons and look to a future where forestry — including logging — is practiced with greater environmental sensitivity.

Participants also discussed the agency's firefighting and fire salvage practices, reforestation, road construction and a controversial concept advanced by Randal O'Toole, the conference's organizer, to change the agency's behavior by changing the way it is funded.

O'Toole has proposed increasing fees for hunting, camping and other non-timber uses so that forest supervisors would be rewarded for improving recreation, wildlife habitat and water quality rather than for meeting their timber-sale quotas.

Franklin is a pioneer in the study of "new forestry" techniques that leave live trees, snags and woody debris on logged-over lands to provide shade and wildlife habitat and return nutrients to the soil — an alternative to the clear-cut logging that is standard on most Douglas fir forests. He also has warned that the Forest Service's policy of dispersing

clear-cuts over the landscape fragments the habitat of many old-growth species, including the northern spotted owl.

But he warned that altering the Forest Service's longstanding timber-management practices would be a far more complex task than simply setting aside forest tracts as wilderness.

"You can't just draw a line, pass an act and get it done," he said. "But it's probably more important than anything we've ever done."

Brock Evans, vice president of the National Audubon Society and a key player in congressional negotiations over the Northwest timber-supply crisis, agreed that conservationists should broaden their forest agenda.

"We all agree there's much more to Forest Service reform than saving the ancient forests," Evans said.

What's needed, he said, are new laws that require the Forest Service to practice "ecological forestry" by reducing the annual timber sale quotas, preserving old-growth structures in logged forests and ending fragmentation.

Without such laws, Evans said, "they're always going to say they considered it, but they're always going to go ahead and log."

Moreover, the time to push for such legislation, Evans said, is now — while a national audience is paying attention to the Northwest's old-growth forest controversy.

"The opposition won't be any greater if we try to do it all, if we dream of a national forest system that practices real ecological forestry," he said. "We've tried the old way too long. This is a better and surer vision."

Another indication of the new direction being discussed in some conservation circles came Saturday. James Monteith, executive director of the Oregon Natural Resources Council, said his group was working with others, including private-property owners, to draft a bill that would create a national conservation area in the Metolius River Basin of Central Oregon.

Such a designation would not ban all logging, Monteith said, but it would protect large blocks of old-growth and head off plans by the Deschutes National Forest for intensive logging and mountain-bike recreation in the popular Metolius corridor.

"It's a way in to talk about management and reducing the cut," Monteith said. "We don't want to have to file a lawsuit and lock up the timber."