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Forest guru sees a gentler way

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With color slides, simple words and undisguised affection for his subject, old-growth forest guru Jerry Franklin described his vision of "a kinder, gentler forestry" to a standing-room audience of more than 300 Tuesday night at Portland State University.

Franklin has studied the Northwest's old-growth Douglas fir forests for more than 20 years and is widely regarded as the nation's foremost expert on their complex ecology.

He is the chief plant ecologist for the U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station in Olympia and a professor of forestry at the University of Washington College of Forest Resources.

He has gained national prominence for his research in new forestry techniques that he believes could offer a way out of the impasse between environmentalists and the forest products industry over logging of old-growth timber.

His proposal for "minimum fragmentation" of old-growth forests is incorporated in the timber compromise bill backed by the Northwest

congressional delegation. That bill is headed for a House-Senate conference committee next week.

On Tuesday, though, Franklin took the podium as a college lecturer and described his vision of a forest landscape where ecologically sensitive logging coexists with biological diversity, where the largest tracts of old growth are left intact and where some of the oldest trees are left standing after logging to fall, decay and pass on their legacy to the land.

The present practice of clear-cutting forests in dispersed patches across the landscape carves up habitat, eliminates structural and age diversity and increases wind damage along the edges of remaining forested stands, Franklin said.

"As time goes on, if you follow this procedure, it fragments the forest and breaks it down into contrasting patches," he said. "It increases the potential for some kinds of catastrophes. It creates a lot of edge."

In his research on the Willamette National Forest's Blue River Ranger District, Franklin has experimented with designing timber sales that leave as many as 14 live trees per acre, as well as down logs and stand-

ing dead snags to provide wildlife habitat and return nutrients to the soil.

"We're leaving behind a greater legacy of organic material, structural diversity and organisms of all kinds. We're emulating what nature does after a natural catastrophe."

Franklin said some national forests and Washington state forests are experimenting with the "new forestry" concepts.

But he said that a major shift to sustainable, environmentally sensitive forestry is needed. He called on conservationists to make a long-term commitment to changing logging practices on the national forests as a whole.

"We really have an outstanding opportunity, and the old-growth issue and the spotted owl have given it to us, to see that stewardship is changed on millions of acres," Franklin said.

"It's harder than creating a few more wilderness areas. It's complex. In this case we're talking about being involved in an ongoing process. Stewardship is forever. We don't get to walk away from it."