

Experimental forest lets scientists gather info

The Associated Press

BLUE RIVER — Steve Sillett has spent most of this decade studying lichens and mosses while dangling from a rope in the treetops at H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest east of Blue River.

"This place has been a hub of research for a long, long time," Sillett said.

The forest, celebrating its 50th anniversary, drew apostles of old growth ecosystems along with about 250 others last Friday for a day of speeches, workshops and reminiscing.

Created in 1948, the 16,000-acre forest has served as the scientific ground zero in the long-running debate over the nation's remaining old-growth forests.

Scientists did their first-ever studies of old-growth ecosystems in the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest in the 1970s.

These same scientists were the first to study the northern spotted owl.

They pioneered research into the importance of wood that falls into streams.

They built the world's largest "debris flow" flume to study landslides.

They launched a 200-year study of how logs rot.

"We came along with a lot of knowledge about old-growth ecosystems at a very critical time," said Jerry Franklin, a University of Washington professor who is regarded as the "guru" of old-growth forestry.

Franklin, who was the U.S. Forest Service's senior ecologist at the time, was the author of numerous research papers, including one called PNW-447.

That publication defined an old growth forest and helped launch one of the biggest changes in federal forest management this century.

In 1994, President Clinton curtailed federal logging by 80 percent and put most of the remaining old growth off limits to further harvesting.

In the last 10 years alone, more than 700 articles and papers have been published based on research done at the experimental forest. It is one of the National Science Foundation's 22 long-term ecological research sites.

"It is one of the crown jewels," said Fred Stormer, deputy director of the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station in Corvallis.

The forest, originally called the Blue River Experimental Forest, was renamed in 1953 for Horace "Hoss" Andrews, a former Forest Service regional forester killed in a car wreck.

Franklin, who started working at the forest in 1957 as a student, said the forest was almost shut down in the 1960s because forest managers decided they "knew everything" about how to harvest trees.

But Franklin and other scientists won out in their effort to launch some studies of native forests.

"That was the turning point," Franklin said. Until then, "we knew nothing about old growth forests, except to cut them."

In the 1960s, major studies of watersheds looked at how logging affects water quality. A study that began after the 1964 floods provided important information for scientists who, 22 years later, studied the 1996 floods.

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Franklin said he had spent more than 20 years in forests before noticing one of their most significant components: the dead, dying logs scattered on the ground. “It never occurred to me that these big structures had important ecological value,” he said.

That makes Franklin wonder about the H.J. Andrews' next 50 years.

If the most renowned old-growth scientists couldn't see the logs for the trees, “what aren't we seeing today that will be important in the future?”