

Experimental forest in running as national research site

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The H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest near Blue River could become part of the biggest and most ambitious ecological research project ever, one that will draw scientists from all over the world in an attempt to answer some of the biggest questions in ecology.

The forest is one of several candidates to serve as a core research site for the National Ecological Observatory Network, which will establish 20 biological test sites in every major ecological zone in the country. Major investments are planned at each site to allow researchers to probe more deeply into questions about biodiversity and the effects of climate change, hydrology, plant disease, invasive species and many other topics.

NEON "is seen as the way to address some of what we call the grand challenge questions," said Oregon State University forestry professor Barbara Bond, co-director of the Andrews forest.

With primary funding from the National Science Foundation, the nationwide effort will accelerate research at the core sites by building new laboratories and support facilities and next-generation research and monitoring tools. If the Andrews forest is chosen, it would mean a new, 3,000-square-foot lab building staffed by six scientists.

Only one site will be selected to be the biological stand-in for a vast swath of the Pacific Northwest that runs from southeast Alaska to Northern California and from the Cascade crest to the ocean. Another site in Washington, the Wind River Experimental Forest in the south central part of the state, also is in the running.

Although scientists from both forests are working collaboratively on the nomination process, Bond said she believes the H.J. Andrews forest is an excellent candidate because of the variability of its terrain and ecology. NEON staffers spent three years dissecting the country to find candidate sites, and Bond said Andrews stood out.

"We happen to be the region with the most variability of any of the 20 regions," she said. "We have the highest variability, in terms of mountains and topography and everything that's going on. There's no place that's more representative than Andrews."

NEON is expected to draw some of the largest ecology research grants ever made, although organizers say it's too early to put a number on it. Funding in the millions of dollars already has been awarded to plan NEON, and millions more is in research budgets awaiting congressional action.

Bond said all of the sites will receive similar cutting-edge research tools and use coordinated methods so that results can be compared and combined. The high-tech tools will turn the Andrews into a kind of "cyber forest" that generates constant streams of data and make it one of the most intensively monitored forests in the world.

In addition to the core research site, each location also will include smaller satellite research sites. If the Andrews forest is chosen, one of those probably will be the West Eugene Wetlands along with others near Portland and on the coast.

A decision on some of the 20 research sites is expected as early as next month. In cases where the choice is more difficult, site visits will be conducted before a final decision is made.

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