

The ambitious Northwest Forest Plan tried to balance desires for timber and biodiversity, but preservation trumped logging—and research. Can the plan be made as adaptable and science-friendly as intended?

Learning to Adapt

For decades, a steady stream of logging trucks rolled out of forests in the Pacific Northwest, piled high with ancient Douglas firs, valued for their huge trunks. Old-growth forests on private lands were the first casualties, and as they disappeared, the loggers turned to national forests. Despite outcries from environmentalists, the pace of clear-cutting intensified in the 1980s—reaching a peak of more than 5 billion board feet a year, enough to build 350,000 three-bedroom houses, much of it from old growth. Then in the early 1990s, environmentalists finally found a weapon powerful enough to fight destruction of these venerable forests: the northern spotted owl, which needs large tracts of old trees to survive.

Not long after the owl was added to the endangered species list in 1990, environmental groups sued on its behalf, and a federal judge ordered a moratorium on logging in owl habitat. The rumble of trucks from the national forests silenced, but the volume of the debate only got louder. As it played on national media, the bitter battle pitted birds against jobs. Activists spiked trees to damage mills, while loggers held protests and cut down old-growth trees at night. The tension ratcheted up.

Out of this political crisis came the largest, most ambitious forest conservation plan ever. Called the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP), it covers 9.8 million hectares of federal land in California, Oregon, and Washington. Striving for compromise, the plan tried to balance the needs of loggers and endangered species. To meet that tall order, the architects set up special research areas to devise new ways of cutting timber that would be benign or even beneficial to wildlife. Economic and ecological progress would be monitored, and the plan would be altered decade by decade as needed—a process called adaptive management.

Now, more than 10 years and \$50 million in monitoring costs later, researchers and for-

est managers have taken the first major stab at assessing how well the plan is working. This fall, they will publish a series of extensive reports, with a synthesis slated for release this month. The bottom line, they say, is that the plan is basically on track: Old-growth forest has been preserved, and watersheds are



Flash point. Cutting of old-growth trees, like this Douglas fir, created bitter conflict and led to the Northwest Forest Plan.

improving. But several key goals have not been met. Some forests face the risk of catastrophic fires; the spotted owl population is still declining; and timber sales never came near projections, meaning lost jobs and dollars for both the timber industry and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS).

Another shortcoming is the relative dearth of new approaches for improving the plan. Despite good intentions, the goal of devising and studying alternative management strategies essentially fizzled. Officials say that fixing this is a top priority, as is reducing fire risk.

But keeping the plan on track—let alone boosting its activities—faces serious challenges, as funding for the USFS in the Pacific Northwest has fallen dramatically. Forest service officials say that changes in regulations governing the plan, implemented by the Bush Administration, will give them needed flexibility, but environmentalists

worry that the changes provide license for irresponsible logging that could threaten remaining old-growth forests.

Legal logjam

Several broad environmental laws passed in the 1970s made the conflict between logging and old-growth conservation all but inevitable. The Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 requires the conservation of habitat that listed species depend on, and sections of the National Forest Management Act mandate that populations of species be kept viable. Forest service officials knew in the 1980s that the spotted owl was likely to be listed but, under pressure from politicians in the northwest, continued to allow cutting of old-growth forests—until the Seattle Audubon Society and other groups sued.

In March 1989, a federal circuit judge blocked sales of timber within the range of the owl, an area encompassing the remaining old growth. Congress intervened, allowing a few timber sales to go through, enraging environmentalists. The issue rose to prominence in the 1992 presidential campaign.

A few months after the election, President Clinton asked a large group of scientists from USFS, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and universities to provide a range of options that could end the judicial moratorium. The Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team (FEMAT) was charged with finding ways to protect the long-term health of the forest across the range of the spotted owl while providing “a predictable and sustainable level of timber sales and non-timber resources that will not degrade the environment.”

A core team of several dozen researchers, led by wildlife biologist Jack Ward Thomas of USFS, holed up for 3 months in a Portland office building, working around the clock and calling on more than 100 outside scientists when needed. “The mood was one of great

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