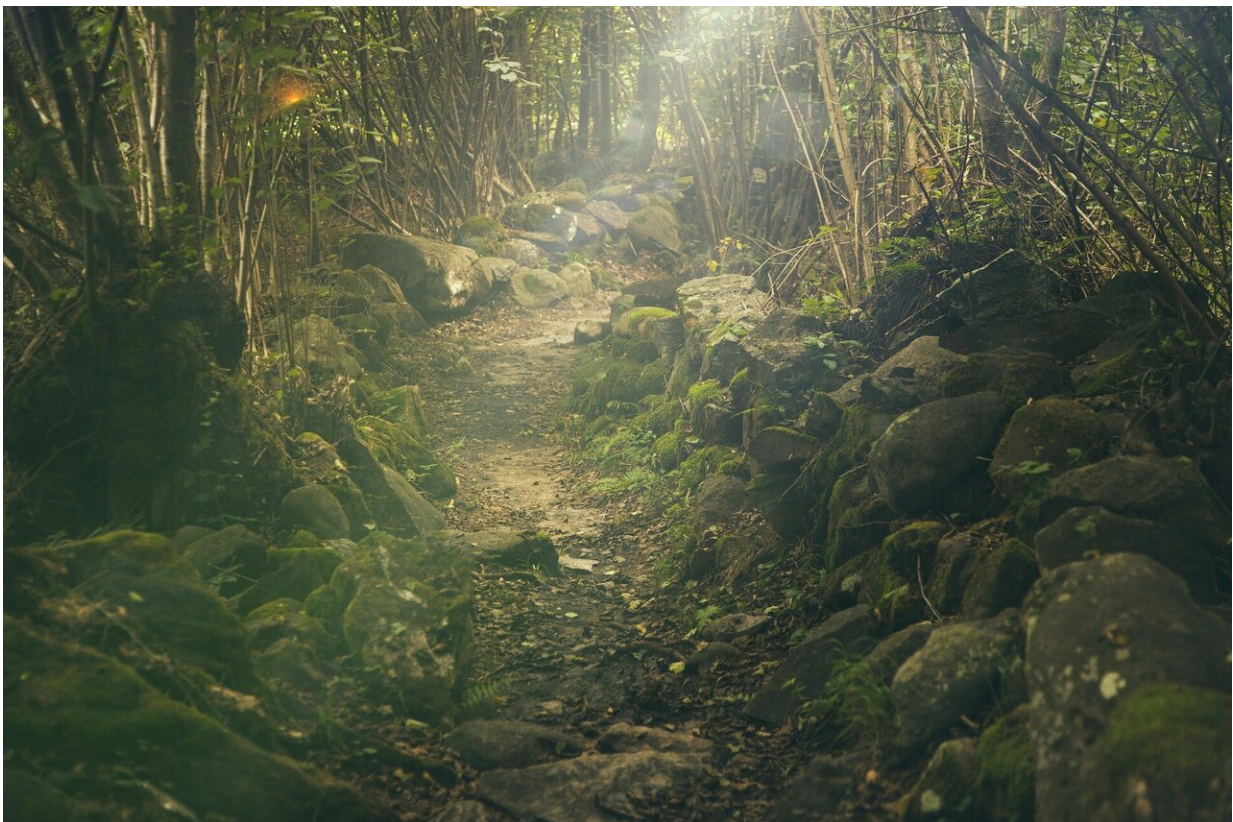


Amid climate crisis, a proposal to save Washington state forests for carbon storage, not logging

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Older than Washington state, the biggest Douglas firs on this patch of state forestland have stood through more than a century of logging.

Part of a 180-acre timber sale auctioned off for \$4.2 million last November by the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR), their next stop was a plywood mill. Then, something unusual happened.

Hilary Franz, state commissioner of public lands, pulled back nearly 40 acres with most of the biggest, [oldest trees](#) from the sale.

Now, this timber sale named Smuggler (sales are often whimsically named by state foresters) also is swinging open a door to a broader conversation in Washington, home to the second-largest lumber producer in the nation, to rethink the value of trees on state lands not as logs, but as trees to help address the twin crises of species extinction and climate warming.

Franz is kicking off an examination over the next three to four months of all older forests on DNR lands west of the Cascades not already in conservation status—about 10,000 acres.

But that is nothing compared to positions staked out by two of her predecessors: Jennifer Belcher, commissioner from 1993-2001, and Peter Goldmark, commissioner from 2009-2017. They have launched a proposal to gradually stop all commercial harvest of state forests west of the Cascades, for what they see as a higher purpose: combating the climate crisis.

Nothing we currently know of works better than allowing trees to suck carbon from the atmosphere when they are living, and store it in their branches, roots and the [forest](#) soil for centuries after their death. Trees—especially mature forests—are the cheapest, fastest, most reliable form of carbon storage.

So-called proforestation is the leading edge of new science that finds intentionally leaving forests to grow bigger helps blunt the worst effects

of the climate catastrophe. Of course, fossil fuel emissions must also be drastically reduced.

Franz said she opposes her predecessors' proposal. She is concerned about preserving local timber supplies, mills, jobs and payments made from timber revenue to state trust beneficiaries for school construction and local government needs. State trust lands contributed more than \$155 million in net revenue to those beneficiaries in 2018, most of it from timber harvests.

But she does want to take a new look at older trees. Not the old growth the state already protects, sprouted before 1850, among other characteristics. The older trees that are the giants of tomorrow.

Franz sees an opportunity to take a broader, more holistic view and create meaningful change that extends beyond the Capitol State Forest, she said in an interview.

Public comment will be heard at the regularly scheduled meetings of the state Board of Natural Resources, which meets the first Tuesday of every month. Meanwhile, DNR does not anticipate bringing forward any sales with older forests.

"This offers an opportunity for us to have that larger conversation, to balance two admirable objectives to protect working forest lands and ensuring older growth trees are conserved for their ecological values," Franz said.

Century-old trees

The 91,650 acre Capitol State Forest south and west of Olympia in Thurston and Grays Harbor counties is a place that's always worked hard for Washington. It is patched with clear cuts old and new.

So to walk Unit 1 of the Smuggler sale is to enter another world.

There is western hemlock and Douglas fir. Red cedar and alder. Sunlight streams through canopy gaps where giants fell. Old logs are easing back into the fragrant soil as brown as rich chocolate. Devil's club stands shoulder high, and the sword ferns are as wide and thick as a mattress.

Railroads were built through the forest to take out the timber in the 1900s. There are stumps here and there in some areas, hand-cut, with the scars still visible in the trunks where loggers stood on springboards to saw down giant firs by hand.

Yet this grove was left. Some of the stand regenerated naturally from a "sloppy" cut from the 1900s and there are patches never logged.

Stephen Kropp, director of the Center for Responsible Forestry, a small environmental organization, said he was amazed when he saw some of the trees at Smuggler especially in Unit 1. "It was the kind of thing I would expect to see in Mount Rainier National Park," Kropp said.

He contacted staff at DNR to tell them he thought he had found old growth in the sale.

After a lot of back and forth, DNR staff resurveyed the land and concluded Kropp was correct. The department pulled two acres of old growth out of the sale, and reached across the boundary of the sale to capture some 400-year old trees, to meet the state's minimum requirement of five acres to protect qualifying trees under the state's old growth policy.

That still left a lot of trees in Unit 1 that didn't quite fit the department's definition of old growth, but included older, naturally regenerated forest not typically seen in production stands.

"I've been thinking about this since day one," said Daniel Donato, who manages old growth for DNR. Many of the trees here were so big, Donato had to get new equipment to take test cores to double-check their ages.

Many he cored turned out to be more than a century old. It was a borderline situation. Not old enough to be protected as old growth. But clearly special.

The sale went forward.

Until it didn't. In this stand, in these times, Franz decided to pull nearly 40 acres out of the sale and push pause on similar stands in Western Washington for a rethink.

"You don't pick a specific age, you stand back and look at the ecological function of an older forest provides, and we especially need to be doing this in the context of climate change," Franz said. "So we will be taking a step back, and looking at this at the watershed level, at the functions these older forests have, and doing this not only at the Capitol Forest."

Kropp, who advocates for protecting older forest ecosystems in the Puget Sound region and Southwest Washington, was unimpressed. He would like the department to consider protecting diverse, natural stands 80 years and older, while focusing harvest on younger, plantation lands.

But Belcher and Goldmark out-greened them all.

'A higher purpose'

Jennifer Belcher launched some of the department's most important conservation practices, working with tribes and state lawmakers to create a habitat conservation plan that made Washington's harvest policies the

most restrictive in the Northwest. But today, she and Goldmark agree that's not good enough.

Goldmark and Belcher are calling for the creation of a new class of state forest trust lands: the Washington State Ecological Reserve, implemented by retiring 5% per year of westside forest lands from commercial harvest over 20 years.

They would keep whole the trusts that now depend on timber revenue, with payments from the purchase of carbon credits by businesses and others that want to invest in state forests as a defense in the fight against climate warming.

They acknowledge it's a big change—but say that is what is needed in a time of climate crisis. "Now is the opportunity time," Belcher said. Goldmark agreed.

"I just see everything differently, now in light of the greater crisis of climate change and the importance of doing something transformative," said Goldmark.

"This is something that needs to happen. We are calling out to have these forests used for a higher purpose."

The call for a new look at state forests is coming from other directions, too.

The state Supreme Court has agreed to review a case at the request of Conservation Northwest, and other environmental groups, to reconsider the interpretation of the state constitution as it relates to management by DNR of state trust lands.

DNR puts proceeds from state trust lands toward construction for K-12

schools and local government needs, including fire, hospital and library districts.

Local taxing districts, especially in rural timber communities, rely on DNR payments for everything from a new stadium in Clallam County to police cars in Mason County.

The suit argues DNR lands are to be managed to benefit all people, not just to maximize economic return for trust beneficiaries.

"We don't think these lands need to be managed so hard for extraction," said Paula Swedeen, policy director for Conservation Northwest.

Meanwhile the DNR has been sued by a timber industry trade group and local school districts for not cutting hard enough.

But sales especially of bigger older trees also are becoming more controversial.

The DNR saw its first known tree sit last fall, in a peaceful protest of the Chameleon timber sale, also in the Capitol State Forest.

The tree sitter eventually came down and the trees were cut. But DNR noticed. After the sale, the department put up "no trespassing" signs on the access to the Smuggler site, in part to prevent another Chameleon, said Angus Brodie, a DNR forest policy manager.

Logging's legacy

Net timber revenue from state forestlands totaled about \$124 million 2018, according to a DNR review underway of the performance of its trust lands. That review also found that timber revenue is in steep decline (down 45% since 1995) in part because of increasing restrictions that

reduce harvest.

The department already conserves a lot of forestland: About 40% of all DNR forestlands, and more than 50% of DNR forests west of the Cascades, are in conservation areas to protect everything from salmon streams to unstable slopes.

That doesn't mean they haven't been cut in the past, but over time these areas are intended to become older stands.

Jerry Franklin, 84, spent his career as a scientist at Oregon State University, the University of Washington and the U.S. Forest Service, becoming a national expert on forest ecosystems, and old trees in particular. He praised Franz's "responsible" decision to look at the state's older trees not now in conservation.

But he doesn't agree with her predecessors' pitch to stop westside commercial harvest on state lands. Those forests serve social needs, in addition to ecological purposes, Franklin said: State forests provide jobs, sustain a timber industry infrastructure and are managed more responsibly than other suppliers, including B.C., which is still cutting the last of its old growth.

Forests that have been transformed by repeated clear-cuts, pesticide treatments, and regrown as plantations also will need continued management, Franklin said. "These are grossly-changed forests, they are very unnatural ... We can't just walk away."

He would rather see a proposal to grow trees longer on private industrial forest lands, which are cut on much shorter rotations than DNR lands.

"They aren't being radical enough," he said of Belcher and Goldmark. "If you want to look at where the huge opportunities lie for carbon

sequestration, it is in the industrial forestlands.

"What we have (are) forestlands I would describe as socially underperforming land from every point of view, including wood production and carbon sequestration."

No matter what DNR does, there will still be plenty of logging in Washington. Private timber companies own about a third of the forests in Washington, and generate 70% of the timber harvested, according to the Washington Forest Protection Association, a trade group. Raw logs can't be exported from public lands, but logs from private land go anywhere there's a market, including overseas.

While not what it used to be, the timber industry in Washington still supports about 100,000 jobs. About 12% of all forestlands in Washington are owned by DNR, compared with 20% in industrial, privately owned forest lands—including much of the most productive low-elevation ground. More than 65% of the timber harvest in Washington in 2020 came from private lands.

Logging rotations on industrial lands are as short as 30 years. DNR cuts its trees more typically at 60 to 80 years.

Both harvests cut short a Douglas fir just beginning its mature stage at the end of its first century. "They are not just growing a little bit. They are growing immensely," Franklin said. "Douglas fir is so incredible. We don't even know how incredible it is."

'We've done our part'

Creation of a state forest ecological reserve would put Washington at the forefront of a national movement to use natural solutions to blunt climate threat.

Beverly Law, an expert in carbon sequestration dynamics and professor emeritus at Oregon State University, signed on to a letter to the Biden transition team from scientists around the country advising creation of a Strategic Carbon Reserve from the nation's forests. Modeled on the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, the carbon reserve would be paid for by directing public subsidies for oil and gas to buying up forests, to just let them grow.

But rural communities hungry for timber revenue from state lands don't want to see more state forest put into conservation.

Conserving all westside DNR forest lands—especially in areas already home to national parks, where logging is banned—was a non-starter for Rep. Mike Chapman, a Democrat who represents the sprawling 24th Legislative District, covering most of the western Olympic Peninsula.

"We've done our part," Chapman said. "You can't have it all. ... I am not a slash-and-burn politician but I can tell you, that would be a bridge too far."

But Rep. Steve Tharinger, another Democrat representing the 24th District, acknowledged that the role of forestry in a changing world is being reassessed, just as dams are.

"Thomas Aldwell was not wrong to build the Elwha Dam ... and we were not wrong to take it out," said Tharinger, referring to the century-old dam that was removed in 2012. But he also thinks the Belcher-Goldmark proposal is "on the extreme end."

However, even the chief of the state public school system agrees it's time for a new look at the state's forests. With growing school needs and flat or declining revenue, timber trust dollars have come to play a diminishing role in financing common school construction.

In the current biennium, DNR timber revenue funded 5% of the total cost of projects funded under the School Construction Assistance Program for K-12 schools, said Randy Newman, director of school facilities for the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

"It's an almost invisible share of the money we spend every year on school construction," said Chris Reykdal, superintendent of OSPI. "This is not the future of school construction. It just isn't."

Money going to the school trusts today from logging would be better spent to protect species and habitat, and to take care of industries and the counties in communities where logging is reduced, Reykdal said.

He does see a role for some logging on state lands.

"But as a citizen of the state and the planet it is the right question," Reykdal said of the Goldmark-Belcher proposal.

"We just have to think like we are in the 21st century in a climate crisis and not like we are in the 19th century funding schools."

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