



Oregon

Theodore R. Kulongoski, Governor

Department of Forestry

State Forester's Office

2600 State Street

Salem, OR 97310

(503) 945-7200

FAX (503) 945-7212

TTY (503) 945-7213 / (800) 437-4490

<http://www.odf.state.or.us>

**Testimony of
Marvin D. Brown
Oregon State Forester**

Before the

**Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on
Public Lands and Forests**

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"STEWARDSHIP IN FORESTRY"

Chairman Wyden and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the science, policy and management of old growth forests. My name is Marvin D. Brown. I am the Oregon State Forester, and also serve as forest policy advisor to Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski. I am here today speaking on behalf of Governor Kulongoski.

Slightly less than half of Oregon is forested, about 30 million acres in total. Approximately 60 percent of this land, 16 million acres, is managed by either the U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management. These federally-owned lands are the focal point for discussions about old growth in our state.

The federal lands are capable of producing a broad range of benefits, including the unique values associated with old growth forests. These values include types of biological diversity found only in old growth forests, the inspirational beauty of large trees, and a simple reassurance that some places in nature are being left generally undisturbed by people. Such values are important to the people of Oregon, and federal lands play the dominant role in providing them. These are values that Governor Kulongoski assigns to old growth forests. Shaped by those values, the Governor firmly believes that we must resolve to shift the debate about management of federal forest lands from whether or not harvest should occur in old growth forests to agreeing that such forests should be off limits to commercial harvest so we can turn our attention to properly managing the rest of national forest lands for multiple benefits.

As a practicing forester, however, I have yet to find a straightforward, easily agreed-upon definition of old growth, or a formula for determining how much old growth we need. Ultimately, questions about defining old growth – and about managing our federal forests in general – come down to policy decisions informed by science, but based on a shared vision about the purpose and range of benefits we seek from these lands.

It's important to acknowledge that disturbances, in addition to natural events such as fires or floods, also include removal of trees as part of a management strategy. Mechanical removal of some trees can be more practical, more economical than, and just as effective as, allowing natural disturbances that perpetuate a climax condition.



A management regime that leads to sustained re-entry for thinning, general improvement of forest health, and for creating an appropriate distribution of size classes can successfully achieve and maintain old growth benefits.

Assuming a workable definition for old growth can be developed, the next challenge is being able to implement policy. The Northwest Forest Plan, approved in 1994, represents current policy for federal lands in western Oregon. Developed in response to the listing of the northern spotted owl as a threatened species, it designates large areas as late successional reserves (LSR), where forests would grow to old growth conditions. Notably, the Forest Plan also committed to restoring a predictable, sustainable federal timber supply for rural communities, although at lower levels than those of previous years. While most of that supply was intended to be derived from lands classified as 'matrix' lands under the plan, the plan also recognized the management of lands classified as late successional reserves would also produce merchantable timber by thinning such stands to accelerate their progression to an old growth forest ecosystem.

Almost 15 years after the Plan's adoption, little of its vision has been realized for Oregon and its communities. Instead, controversy has stymied needed management – from thinning of LSRs to harvest in matrix lands, the plan is not being implemented as intended. This is of great economic and social consequence to Oregon. The loss of a predictable and sustainable supply of timber from federal lands has resulted in the loss of jobs, community vitality and forest industry infrastructure. Worse, it has severely reduced revenues to counties in Oregon which were promised a reasonable stream of funding from federal land harvests, creating uncertainty and hardship for local schools, law enforcement and other county services. In this light, resolving the issue of what constitutes old growth would be most welcome if it facilitates successful implementation of the Northwest Forest Plan.

In adopting a definition of old growth, it must be recognized that desired old growth conditions vary depending on several factors to include annual precipitation, elevation and tree species. For example, in eastern Oregon, old growth values on federal lands are presently addressed through what are called the "Eastside Screens." Among other things, this provision significantly inhibits the harvest of any tree over 21 inches in diameter at breast height. From a forest management perspective, this is a very coarse filter that does not meet the critical management need on these lands, which is to keep stand density low enough and size distribution varied enough to promote acceptable forest health.

As a consequence, eastside federal forest lands are overcrowded with diseased, insect-infested, dead or dying trees – the result of years of suppression of the fires that once were a natural part of the ecosystem, and of climate change. What we see now are unusually hot, large fires that damage the resource, threatening even those reserve areas intended to grow into older forests. About three-quarters of the federal forested acres in Oregon are now considered vulnerable to unusually severe fires, and fire is a genuine threat to older forests and the habitat they provide.

This is why a definition of old growth must not only consider the length of time trees have been growing, it must also consider the overall forest health and other conditions that provide the ecosystem benefits desired of old growth forests.

Improving the definition of old growth in these instances will help, but in order to implement policy, there are also improvements needed in application of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and in concepts for funding federal land management.

Costs, appeals, and litigation associated with NEPA analysis have severely limited the number of forest management projects that actually make it to implementation. If federal policy were to recognize that such projects enhance environmental benefits (as opposed to the current presumption that they threaten environmental values) then there would be justification for significantly less analytical cost. The key would be to identify the circumstances under which management projects are accepted as environmental enhancements. And taking controversial projects that target cutting of old growth off the table would also do a great deal in reducing controversy, litigation and the need for extensive NEPA analysis.

Regarding funding, investment in federal lands has clearly declined at the same time that timber harvests on federal lands have been reduced to a small fraction of historical highs. This disinvestment has resulted not only in a failure to manage designated forest lands towards an old growth condition, it has also resulted in a loss of recreation facilities as well as significant threats to water quality and fish habitat because of seriously back-logged road maintenance.

Rural counties in Oregon are in jeopardy of losing roughly \$280 million in safety net payments under the Secure Rural Schools Act. No one expects timber revenues to ever again approach their historic levels.

But achieving a harvest level that offers these counties some financial relief, and that provides economic sustenance for forest-dependent communities should also be part of creating the right balance. Harvest levels and revenue to counties could be largely achieved if we simply implemented the Northwest Forest Plan. However, the failure to

agree on a definition of old growth and how we will manage areas to an old growth condition curtails our ability to produce intended benefits on other federal forest lands. Just like the problem we face with fire severity, the loss of a predictable and sustainable supply of timber from federal lands for the benefit of communities speaks to the need to resolve the question of old growth.

Whether you focus on social, environmental or economic values, the federal forests clearly are not contributing benefits in proportion to the extent to which these lands dominate Oregon's landscape. Given that dominance, we cannot expect to have a sustainable forest resource in Oregon if federal lands are not well managed.

If we are successful at achieving some improvements, we think that a host of important forest related benefits, including those related to old growth forests, can be more fully realized. Those improvements should include the following: a commitment to eliminate harvest in old growth forests except when managing to accelerate or protect old growth conditions; the creation of a legally-recognized definition of old growth would benefit management of Northwest forests, a recognition that harvesting trees for management to a desired condition or to produce multiple benefits that include timber may both produce revenue, but that such harvests are for entirely different objectives and both should be allowed; and that funding federal land management in the future requires an analysis of return on investment to include the values of minimizing fire risk and associated losses as well as the role of forests in producing biofuels and sequestering carbon dioxide.

Mr. Chairman and Subcommittee members, this concludes my remarks. Please let me know if I can provide additional assistance.

Sincerely,


Marvin D. Brown
Oregon State Forester