



Bring in the Loggers

President Biden signs the death warrant for old-growth forests.

By Jim Petersen

The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are responsible for the stewardship of 112 million acres of mature and old-growth forests—about 58 percent of the nation’s 193-million-acre federal forest estate. From coast to coast, that’s 175,000 square miles of trees that are more than 80 years old, some more than 800 years old. A land area larger than all but three states: Alaska, California and Texas. An area you could overlay on Delaware, West Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Hawaii, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Maine—with another Maine left over.

On Earth Day 2022, President Biden signed a death warrant for all 112 million acres of old and mature federal forestland owned by Americans. Why did he do this? To “save” them from *L-O-G-G-I-N-G*. The fact that the Forest Service and the BLM stopped

logging old-growth timber in the wake of the 1990 northern spotted owl listing is irrelevant. Biden signed his order in the run-up to his bid for a second term in the White House to

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SUN TZU, CHINESE WARRIOR & PHILOSOPHER,
FROM “THE ART OF WAR”

appease the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), all zero-cut advocates and leading litigators of all Forest Service and BLM efforts to pull national forests back from the brink of ecological disaster.

Thirty-three anti-forestry groups jointly

signed a letter endorsing Biden’s old-growth death warrant. Legitimate conservation groups did not. Among them: the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, National Wild Turkey Federation, the Mule Deer Society and The Nature Conservancy. Groups that understood the necessity of adaptive forest management: thinning and prescribed fire tailored to meet specific forest objectives, including protecting old-growth forests from insects, diseases and wildfire.

A timely quotation making the rounds on social media tells us, “An evil man will burn his nation to the ground to rule over the ashes.” To give it an air of credibility it is attributed to Sun Tzu, an ancient Chinese warrior and philosopher who wrote “The Art of War” in 521 B.C. But Sun Tzu never said it and we don’t know who did. What he did write in his lasting treatise is equally riveting, however: “In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity.”



PHOTO © CHRIS CONRAD

Retired forester Ron Cerruti inspects a huge giant sequoia in the Freeman Creek Grove of the Sequoia National Monument killed by the 175,000-acre 2020 Castle Fire in California. Over 19 feet in diameter, this tree was “old growth” at its finest. It had survived centuries of low intensity wildfires, but it could not survive the “environmental” groups’ lawsuits that had prevented the forest thinning that would have easily saved it from the hot crown fire that destroyed it. The vast majority of the flammable understory trees in this area had grown up in the last 60 years. Active forest management will save old growth, not destroy it. Thick regeneration of small giant sequoias seen in this photo gives hope in spite of the mindless destruction, but the small trees will grow into another catastrophic wildfire problem in the years ahead without proactive thinning and future fuels management.

national forests. What better way to slow this process to a standstill than to require the FS and BLM to complete an inventory and assessment of threats to these forests? Thus was born the “Climate Forests Campaign,” funded by the Sierra Club, NRDC and CBD. Cue the Biden for President 2024 campaign.

To its credit, the Biden administration ignored the Climate Forests campaign’s demand that no tree over 80 years of age be harvested. But history tells us it didn’t need to.

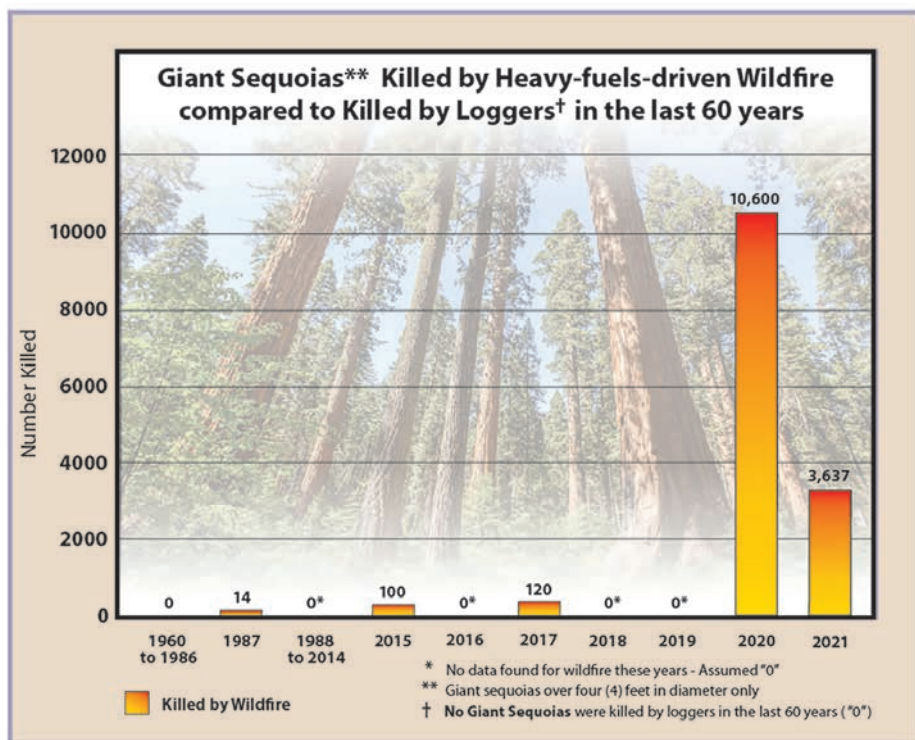
What to do?

It’s clear that the members of the House Natural Resources Committee and the Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee need a great deal of public help to overcome the political power of the anti-forestry mob. A wide-ranging public information campaign is needed. It’s not what we do at Evergreen Foundation, but we’ve been up to our eyeballs in the forestry/wildfire/forest health debate since 1986. Everything we’ve ever

Biden’s Earth Day order definitely presents opportunity amid chaos. It requires the Forest Service and the BLM to complete an old and mature forest threat assessment. The administration released its findings in November 2023 and to the surprise of no one, wildfire, insects and diseases are the leading causes of mortality in federally owned forests. The report estimates that 5.5 million acres of old and mature forest have been “lost” since 2000—about 97 percent to insects and/or wildfire.

About 9,000 acres of old-growth have been logged since 2000. We assume these acres were within legally designated matrix lands where experimental silviculture prescriptions were possible. That’s 9,000 matrix acres out of 24 million included in the Clinton administration’s Northwest Forest Plan. Bear in mind that none of these acreage numbers include designated wilderness areas or national parks where no harvesting is allowed. Nor does it include inventoried roadless areas or national monuments.

If you’re wondering what all the hullabaloo is about in the zero-cut crowd, look no further than the fact that Biden signed the death warrant only weeks after Congress handed the Forest Service \$5.5 billion and told it to get to work on an aggressive thinning program aimed at reducing the wildfire, insect and disease threat that is sweeping



GRAPH BY E.T. GRAPHICS BASED ON U.S. FOREST SERVICE AND CALIFORNIA DATA SETS

The agencies have been so demoralized by years of litigation that there isn’t a need to drive more nails in federal forestry’s coffin. Now the Forest Service and BLM are obliged to amend all 128 national forest management plans—a mind-bending regulatory process that will take years and hundreds of millions of dollars to complete. Short of an administrative about face and the removal of layers and layers of regulatory bureaucracy, western national forests will continue to die and burn to the ground and those who enjoy camping, hiking, hunting, fishing and scenic beauty will continue to be victimized by serial litigators.

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Our best arguments favoring forestry begin with what I call The Big Four, a summary of public wants that come from polling we conducted during the run-up to 2003’s congressional ratification of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. The Big Four came from participants in focus groups that pollster Frank Luntz hosted in several metropolitan/urban population centers across the nation. Reduced to the fewest possible words, they are clean air, clean water, abundant fish and wildlife habitat and a wealth of year-round outdoor recreation

activities.

These are not natural amenities found amid the wreckage left behind by catastrophic wildfires, but they do reside in abundance in well-managed forests where hands-on management approximates natural disturbance patterns: fire, wind, floods, landslides, ice, earthquakes and insect and disease patterns. What these disturbance patterns tell us—or should tell us—is that forests cannot be saved in the way the Biden administration hopes to save mature and old forests. But we

Biological diversity cannot be “saved” by presidential fiat but can be created and protected in perpetuity. Thinning and prescribed fire—the techniques used annually by states, Native American tribes and private landowners—are key.

nouncements from the president and no cookie-cutter regulations from Congress. To do anything else is to minimize ecosystem diversity.

Imagine a community in which the only residents are “mature” or “old.” Not much age diversity here, and a gene pool that grows

ural diversity in old-growth forests. “I will argue that there is as much or more natural diversity in an early succession forest as there is in an old-growth forest,” he replied.

Early succession forests—seedlings and saplings—are like babies and youngsters in a community. If you don’t have them, your community is going to die a slow death. This isn’t something you want to leave to chance. Seedlings come from two sources: nature or planting crews, sometimes a combination of both. Either way, they grow in sun-



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ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT: Timber has been harvested from the Lake Creek and the Kootenai River drainages in northwest Montana for more than 100 years. Both are marvelous fisheries, thanks to designated riparian areas and best management practices observed by Montana loggers for decades. BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: A recent thinning on Lake Creek and an earlier thinning in old-growth ponderosa in New Mexico. The Lake Creek thinning is part of a larger project designed to increase plant diversity and food sources for grizzly bears, deer, elk and several bird species. The New Mexico thinning is protecting old growth.



can extend the lives of trees by replicating disturbance patterns in ways that minimize the chances that natural disturbance patterns will jump beyond what scientists call “the range of natural variability.”

Chad Oliver, a now retired Ph.D. forest ecologist described this in a paper he wrote more than 30 years ago for the late Booth Gardner when Gardner was Washington governor and Oliver was teaching at the University of Washington. He called the process “adaptive management,” which requires that forest practices be adjusted to fit prevailing natural disturbance patterns. No grand pro-

more shallow with each death. Minus babies, this community is doomed. There is no one to keep it alive and thriving. It’s the same with forests and all creatures that live in them.

The late Robert Buckman was a world-class forester and former deputy chief of research for the Forest Service, former director of the Pacific Northwest Forest Experiment Station in Portland and vice president of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations. The last time I interviewed him in a conference room at Oregon State University I asked what he thought of what was being said about the importance of nat-

filled openings created by harvesting or natural disturbance. It is the free, non-polluting energy of the sun that brings new forests to life.

This biological process is called photosynthesis. Plants use sunlight, water and atmospheric and terrestrial carbon dioxide to create oxygen and energy in the form of sugar that forms the molecular structure found in trees and wood products. Yup, the same carbon found in fossil fuels and Biden’s Public Enemy No. 1 and the same carbon wildfire smoke belches into the air we breathe: a carcinogenic graveyard the Biden administration likes to

whistle past.

Trees sequester carbon at different rates. As trees age, the speed at which they store new carbon eventually slows to a standstill. But they continue to hold sequestered carbon indefinitely. By contrast, seedlings, saplings and younger trees sequester carbon at much faster annual rates that slow as the trees age. Again, a community composed of young and old. We need both, but minus the young, we're dead. This is why maintaining what foresters call "age class diversity" is so important. Likewise, structural and genetic diversity.

Diversity cannot be "saved" by presidential fiat or congressional regulation, but we can adapt our forest practices to fit the pieces we have in different forests. This is what adaptive forest management is all about and this is what we aren't doing in federally owned forests. Until we reverse course, human life, economic certainty and community health and safety are at increasing risk. Likewise, the forests we all love. Start by ending the risk and hypocrisy associated with "managed fire."

Blessedly, conservation groups, including the Society of American Foresters (SAF), Trout Unlimited and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation weighed in with solid criticisms during the Forest Service's public comment period.

"There is no scientific grounding for a universal framework definition of mature or old-growth forests, as is reflected in the Forest Service's more than 200 definitions of the latter," SAF wrote in its comments. "The Forest Service should, pursuant to its multiple-use mandate, consider how the proposed amendment will impact the following factors: biodiversity and wildlife needs; recreation; watershed health; harvested wood products and local economies; fostering resilience to threats identified in the initial threats analysis...and strategies to adapt to anticipated and future impacts of climate change."

Sun Tzu got it right in "The Art of War" more than 2,500 years ago. "In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity." Lots of it. Thinning and prescribed burning provide many opportunities as precursors to adaptive forest management. States, tribes and private landowners use both tools annually. But the Forest Service and BLM rely increasingly on their ability to herd big fires across vast landscapes. It is a fool's game and an economic, environmental and cultural disaster. ■

Jim Petersen is the founder and president of the nonprofit Evergreen Foundation. You can learn more at evergreenmagazine.com.