

Ancient Forest

H.R. 1969 WOULD PROTECT 48 FOREST CLASS SYSTEMS—Old Growth Bill Would Save 7

HR 1969, the Forest Biodiversity and Clearcutting Prohibition Act, would protect biodiversity by banning even-age logging in all federal forests. It has 51 cosponsors, from both parties, coast to coast.

The bill, by Congressman John Bryant, would stop federal agencies from conducting clearcuts, seed tree cuts, shelterwood cuts, group cuts wider than the height of the tallest adjoining tree, and would limit salvage logging drastically. It would require a shift to selection management, the growing of all-age, all-species stands. It provides for enforcement by citizen suits, including recovery of cash penalties.

The Native Forest Protection Act would do all these things and also ban all logging in federal forests that still retain significant native biodiversity, possibly 30 to 35% of federal commercial timberland, an estimated 26 million acres. Additional provisions include retraining and economic assistance for workers and affected communities. We have not yet been able to find a congressperson who will sponsor such a bill.

The Old Growth Forest Reserve bill that the House Interior subcommittee has drafted, HR 4899, would prohibit removal of merchantable timber, including salvage, from late successional forests of the Pacific Northwest. See also S 1536, by Brock Adams (D-WA).

The Money-Losing Timber Sale Bill, HR 2501 by Jim Jontz (D-IN) and S 1334 by Wyche Fowler (D-GA), would phase out Forest Service timber sales that recover less revenue than the costs. It would repeal the Knutson-Vandenberg Act which incites money-losing sales. It would provide retraining assistance for unemployed timber workers and their communities.

If we are able to stop even-age logging on 80 million acres of federal commercial timberland from coast to coast, we will substantially protect all 48 forest ecosystem classes mapped by A. W. Kuchler, 1978, in RARE II, Map B, Ecosystems of the United States. That compares with examples of seven classes we will save if we preserve 11 million acres of old growth in the Pacific Northwest. Kuchler designates the seven main forest ecosystems in the Pacific Northwest old

growth as spruce/cedar/hemlock, cedar/hemlock/Douglas-fir, silver fir/Douglas-fir, fir/hemlock, mixed conifer, western spruce/fir and Western ponderosa pine.

The obvious point is that if Congress passes a bill equivalent to both the Ancient Forest Protection Act, introduced last year as HR 902 by Jim Jontz, and the Biodiversity and Clearcutting Prohibition Act, it would save large examples of all the major forest ecosystems, rather than focusing entirely upon the Pacific Northwest. This same reasoning applies to the proposed Native Forest Protection Act. It would protect examples of virtually all forest classes. Most members of the Forest Reform Network support all three acts.

Most Kuchler classes contain multiple examples of plant associations or ecosystems. The ratio of forest plant associations protected by the bills would probably approximate the ratio of Kuchler classes protected, according to a Forest Service official who prefers to remain unidentified. His conclusion is: "While the ancient forest bill would protect certain important ecosystems by placing them off limits to cutting, HR 1969 goes beyond that to offer protection to those ecosystems in which we continue to harvest trees."

If the 7 million acres of spotted owl habitat recently designated by US Fish and Wildlife Service is preserved by Congress from any logging, HR 1969 may become essential to protect the four million or more acres of forest between the fragments of owl habitat so that the fragmented populations in between will have adequate forest cover to interbreed and thereby to retain genetic diversity essential to survival

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Legislation Dialogue

Science Editor's Response



Ned Fritz has long advocated the position that the real evil of federal timber programs is even-age management. If we were to replace even-age management (clearcutting and plantation silviculture) with uneven-age management (selection forestry), Fritz and his supporters claim, we could protect native biodiversity on federal forestlands. Surprisingly, Fritz thinks we could make the shift from even-age to uneven-age forestry on federal lands without any decline in timber production. As Fritz wrote recently in his newsletter, "selection would provide more jobs than even-age, would provide at least as much wood for the nation's demands, and would set an example for additional private timber interests to save native biodiversity in their logging."

I reject Fritz's optimistic appraisal of selection forestry, particularly if tied to a scenario of non-declining yield of federal timber. Although I agree that even-age forestry is *nowhere* an adequate emulation of a natural disturbance-recovery regime, and therefore can be expected to be harmful to native biodiversity, selection forestry is not necessarily any better. Indeed, if the Forest Service were to take the same amount of wood from National Forests using selection forestry as they do now with clearcutting, which Fritz thinks they could, possibly even more ecological damage would be done.

Intensive selection forestry would require an extensive road network for access and frequent entry into stands. Although Fritz (personal communication) claims that selection requires no greater road network than even-age management, neither he nor anyone else has verified this counter-intuitive claim. Even if he is right on this point, intensively managed forests require high road densities, for example, about 5 miles of road per square mile in the Pacific Northwest (E. A. Norse, 1990; *Ancient Forests of the Pacific Northwest*). Open road densities above 0.5 miles or so per square mile are known to be harmful to large carnivores and other sensitive wildlife, and have many other deleterious effects. We should be closing roads on federal lands, not leaving them open or building more for uneven-age management.

Also, intensive selection forestry, if based on "natural selection" principles that retain

only vigorously growing trees, would deplete a stand of the broken and diseased trees which are most valuable to wildlife. This would be just as destructive as the opposite process of "high-grading" (removing the best trees). Thus, a selectively harvested forest is a green illusion; it may look natural and healthy, but it is missing many critical components.

So, what is the solution to the even-age versus uneven-age quandary? It is simply to cut much less wood, which in turn means reducing drastically our use of wood products. Most National Forests and other federal forestlands are already severely overcut; cutting more timber on these lands *by any method* is insane, the only reasonable exceptions being thinning of dense and simplified plantations and fire-suppressed natural stands when necessary for restoration. Forest landscapes not yet overcut might possibly be managed sustainably with light selection forestry, using horses or other non-mechanical means to remove timber, building no new roads, and entering stands infrequently. However, even such gentle approaches to forestry are only experiments; we would need to watch them for several centuries before concluding that they are truly sustainable in the sense of maintaining all ecosystem components.

No forest bill before Congress comes close to an ecological approach to forest protection and restoration nationwide (Tim Hermach's Native Forest Protection Act, not yet introduced to Congress, comes closest). If HR 1969, the anti-clearcutting bill that Fritz endorses, was truly a step in the right direction, we should support it. But as written, HR 1969 is ecologically naive, allows continued non-sustainable timber production on federal lands, and fails to address the roads issue. Under such conditions, a substitution of uneven-age management for even-age management creates only an illusion that something positive is being done for federal forestlands.

—Reed Noss

ed. note: Tim Hermach plans soon to do what conservationists should have done decades ago: draft legislation that would ban commodity extraction on all public lands. See Native Forest Council's article in this issue, and write NFC for more information. —JD