

Forest

From A1

Pollock and others have repeatedly criticized the college's latest push to update the management plan for the 11,500-acre McDonald-Dunn Forest, which they claim is happening largely behind closed doors — claims DeLuca has previously called unfounded.

But that's not the only concern. Earlier this month, the college's computer modeling of the impacts of proposed forest management approaches drew a slew of skeptical comments at a public meeting hosted by the College of Forestry, including from an OSU faculty member.

According to Holly Ober, the school's Associate Dean for Science Outreach, officials are working to respond to questions raised at that session and will consider potential changes to their modeling as the planning process moves forward.

"We really take that feedback seriously," Ober said by phone.

Activists like Pollock, however, remain concerned for the future of McDonald-Dunn's old-growth trees.

The Woodpecker Harvest

Defining old-growth trees can be tricky, as the ages in which trees mature vary from species to species and depend on all sorts of factors, such as water and sunlight access.

In fact, work is underway at the federal level to arrive at a better definition, after the Biden administration moved to protect old-growth trees in national forests in 2022.

"If you were to ask five different people their definition of old-growth, you would probably hear five different answers," Ober said.

According to DeLuca, tree stands within the planned Woodpecker Harvest are not considered old-growth.

Based on the College of Forestry's over 20-year-old forest plan, trees are considered old-growth when they are 160 years or older. The average age of the trees in the planned Woodpecker Harvest is 108, according to Ober, but the definition goes beyond age classifications.

Timber harvests at McDonald-Dunn like Woodpecker are generally planned 1½ years in advance, according to Brent Klumph, associate director of operations for the college's research forests.

For context, OSU oversees



Trees marked for clearcutting in the McDonald-Dunn Forest.

PHOTO COURTESY DOUG POLLOCK

15,000 acres of research forests across the state where students can study and gain practical work experience. McDonald-Dunn, about a 20-minute drive north of OSU's main campus, is the university's largest.

The forest's current management plan, finalized in 2005, outlines management strategies for different areas within the forest.

Essentially these are different harvesting practices that can vary by the duration between harvests — or rotations, in timber industry lingo — and vary by the kinds of harvesting methods employed, like thinning or clearcuts, all of which aim to cultivate certain environments such as same aged or mixed-aged stands, according to Ober.

The Woodpecker site — the name was selected by students who assisted with the planning process — falls under the 2005 plan's "multi-aged, mixed species" category, Ober said, with thinning, restoration and patch cuts planned for the operation.

The harvest would help maintain overall health and vigor of the forest, she said, with thinning, for example, eliminating competition for larger dominant trees.

Harvest operations also generate revenue for the College of Forestry.

Woodpecker is one of 14 harvest operations scattered throughout McDonald-Dunn scheduled this year, Klumph said, and according to the College of Forestry's resource page, which provides updates and closure notices for when operations occur, it's also

one of the largest by acreage so far this year.

But, while the harvest was slated to begin this week, with a notice posted on College of Forestry's resource page on June 17, the operation hasn't yet to begin.

Ober said she is aware of the concerned emails sent to college officials about the harvest.

The emotions ran high. One email addressed to President Murthy on June 24 is from Matt Trappe, a 2008 College of Forestry graduate, who argues OSU was embracing a forestry management philosophy "straight out of the 1950s."

Another, from retired occupational therapist Charlotte Maloney sent the day before, said she was angry and saddened by the news of the operation.

Those emails join more than 20 others, according to Pollock, who posted about the planned harvest on Facebook last weekend, urging people to call Murthy's office and submit letters to Mid-Valley Media, to stop the cuts planned for June 24.

But by June 26, the operation had yet to gear up, though Ober said it's a pause, not a halt.

What's the plan?

Public concern around Woodpecker comes as the College of Forestry is also working on drafting a new management plan for McDonald-Dunn.

That process began two years ago, when DeLuca tapped two advisory committees to assist with the update: an external stakeholder advisory group consisting of different interests, including Tribes and

timber companies, and an internal faculty planning group, largely consisting of forestry faculty.

Those committees began hosting a series of meetings, starting in the summer of 2022, and have so far hosted two community listening sessions and two input sessions, the most recent on June 5.

DeLuca has maintained the process has been more open than previous efforts, pointing to a partnership with Oregon Consensus, a state program that navigates differences on contentious subjects to oversee public outreach.

In the meantime, the forest is operating under its 2005 plan. But that wasn't always the case.

That 2005 framework was suspended in 2009, leaving the forest without a formal plan for a decade. Then interim-dean Anthony Davis reinstated the 2005 plan in 2019 and issued a moratorium on cutting trees more than 160 years old. That move followed OSU's controversial clear-cutting of nearly 16 acres of old-growth Douglas firs, including one tree that was over 400 years old.

Pollock, a frequent recreator at McDonald-Dunn, was the first person to raise the alarm about that harvest, which has fueled a deep distrust of OSU's forest management. It also prompted him to form the local advocacy group Friends of OSU Old Growth.

He attended the June 5 public input to once again call out the planning process as biased toward timber interests. But he wasn't the only one. Around 30 people attended the meeting, hosted on

campus, in person, along with around 40 people who watched via Zoom.

Many voiced concerns about the first round of computer modeling done for the planning process. That modeling was conducted to evaluate the impacts of five proposed forest management strategies across a variety of measures at McDonald-Dunn: biodiversity, wildfire resistance, tree density and even revenue generated from harvests.

For many attendees, the modeling raised red flags, particularly when a scenario in which an increased percentage of the McDonald-Dunn Forest was held in protected reserves — increasing the habitat for certain species — led to a predicted decrease in biodiversity.

Additionally Beverly Law, an emeritus professor at the Department of Forest Ecosystems & Society who studies the impacts of climate change, fire and management on forests, also expressed concerns about the modeling.

"Your assumption on the carbon density metric appears to be, the more you cut out of these forests, the more resilient they will be. Where is the science that supports this assumption? Because increased thinning increases surface heat load, which would increase canopy heat load and make the remaining trees more vulnerable to heat stress," she said, adding forests like McDonald-Dunn are vital in mitigating climate change.

Next steps?

According to Ober, the college is working on drafting responses to Law's and others' questions raised at the June 5 meeting, which she said will be posted later on the resource page's website.

"And the second step is we're looking into ways to potentially make adjustments to the model, according to suggestions that were provided at the listening session," she said.

"And I'm glad to hear the concerns that were brought forward," Ober added.

After both advisory committees give their feedback on the proposed scenarios, they'll conduct a second round of modeling, with a yet-to-be scheduled additional public input session hosted afterward.

As for Pollock, any management scenario that means cutting century-old trees is a non-starter.

"They're worth more standing," he said.