OSU Feels the Heat of Forest Planning Ire
by Doug Pollock

Our nation's leading forestry school came under heavy fire on June 5th, as dozens of upset citizens and even their own experts harshly criticized their forest planning process. Oregon State University is roughly two years into their update of the 2005 management plan for the (~11,250-acre) McDonald-Dunn Research Forests, located near Corvallis.

OSU's "community input session" was intended to be an opportunity for citizens to vote on the "5 new forest management strategies" that OSU's College of Forestry intends to implement across the forests. However, things did not go according to plan. Angry citizens criticized a wide range of problems, from flaws in OSU's modeling, to its non-collaborative approach to forest planning, and its failure to steward these public forests. Approximately 30 people attended the meeting in-person and 40 via Zoom. Despite a 2-minute limit on public comments, College leaders got an earful.

I criticized the planning process while a friend held up one large photo after another showing OSU's clearcuts, giant stumps and slash fires:

> *"This entire process has been baked from the start. The so-called "Stakeholder Advisory Committee" was chosen by the dean without even allowing the public to apply. Most of the members have pre-existing relationships with the College of Forestry. Nine of eleven people serving on the faculty committee come from the College Forestry. OSU has eleven colleges, yet only two are represented on this biased committee.*
>
> *We were promised a collaborative process back in 2019. You can argue about what collaboration means, but it certainly does NOT mean one side gets to decide everything, from the committee members to the information that is shared and the questions we are told to answer. That's not collaboration, that's a dictatorship!"*

One of the world's leading forest scientists, OSU's Professor Emeritus Dr. Beverly E. Law questioned the underlying modeling and assumptions of OSU's forest plan:

> *"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.*
>
> *These are the most important forests in the US for protecting carbon density for climate mitigation. So who made this decision? The carbon density is what is important. And what you're using for that kind of assumption...leads to really erroneous ideas that don't account for the biophysical impacts...on the micro-climate, on the soil surface, on the canopy, like the heat loads...so I don't get where reducing the density is the best thing to do and will make them more resilient.*
>
> *I think your ranking and your assumption is the problem...your assumptions of what is good and what is bad, and that's the same problem with many of these other metrics, the biodiversity one. Why are you using the forest vegetation survey model? It's a crappy model. It's*

inappropriate. It has a fire model in it that burns up forest...it's just not a good model to be using. What you really need to have is an ecosystem model...for what you're proposing to do."

Others pointed to the failure to use OSU's own experts in the planning process. Lisa Pierson, a forest neighbor from OSU's Fisheries and Wildlife Department, expressed years of frustrations with OSU:

"I have asked multiple professors, "Have you ever been asked by the Forestry Department to do a species survey in the McDonald or Dunn Forest?" The answer is always no and I think it is no because you don't want to know what lives there. Because if you know what lives there, you're obligated to protect it, especially threatened species and species of concern which are in those forests...but you refuse to use your own experts.

This is a very opaque model. You keep telling us you don't know how it was developed by experts that you don't want to give us their names by a public process that excluded the public…I hear the same thing I've heard for a decade from you guys about how you've gotten some experts, but we don't know how the model was made, but obviously, it's not from your own people.

Having watched this process over years and years and years...this community over and over and over has been ignored. You have a society of people here who are very polite and well educated, and willing to come and have a reasonable conversation with you guys.

We are up against extinction. And there comes a point where this is not going to be polite and that's not a threat, but people are going to get desperate if you guys don't start listening to us. We come and we say things to you and we write to you and nothing changes.

We as humanity and the forests are in the fight of our lives. And it's going to get really rough. And you guys need to step up. You're the leading forestry institution in this country, and probably the world."

Howard Bruner, a retired senior research assistant in the College, told a story that brought many to tears:

"I was up in the McDonald Forest last week, in a beautiful, 100 year-old contiguous stand that was just full of birds, absolutely loud...and I got about mid-way up … and in comes a semi with a low-boy that has a feller buncher on it. This is the device that is on tracks and runs up into the forest, and grabs trees, hugs them hard, cuts them off, carries them back and piles them.

I asked the boys that were unloading the feller bunch,"Where are you going to use that?" He waves his hand up on that beautiful ridge that is full of birdsong and he says, "Right here". Man, I thought, "Who's managing this forest?"

This is a valuable asset, this is a functioning system that is at the height of its value and if they come in here and start fragmenting things like that, the entire process has got something very wrong with it. 'Cause what they are sitting on there is hope for the future, that this can continue to evolve into an old system and the people that will live here 50 years, 100 years from now, will inherit that right next to Corvallis. To go in and fragment that is sacrilege in my opinion."

Ellie Cates, a local mental health counselor, spoke of the impacts she is seeing on community wellness:

"I can tell you that I'm actively seeing this impacting my clients to a very significant degree and my colleagues in this community are observing these same trends...We have to strongly consider the debilitating effects that environmental destruction, such as the 2019 old growth cutting has on human health and wellness.

Deforestation is detrimental to our health and well-being. That you are actively engaging in this destructive forest management plan when you could so easily be a part of a mindful solution is shameful! You are choosing greed over community wellness. And the worst part is you have all the education, information, and resources to make a better choice.

If you move forward with this plan and ignore the advocates who seek to protect these spaces, your legacy will be remembered as one of pride and community destruction, rather than humility, innovation and hope. I urge you to pause logging operations and to incorporate a less problematic task force to focus on ecological sustainability and preservation within the McDonald Dunn. Stop and consider that you have a choice, one that can shift from causing harm and destruction to one which fosters hope and community wellness for current and future generations."

Kevin Riley spoke about the sorrow his family experienced in the wake of the 2019 old growth cut, when his nine year-old son read a poem at a "forest memorial service" held in Corvallis. *"He knew more intuitively from his heart, as we've learned tonight, he knew there was something wrong, something broken with the way these forests are being managed. When you stand at a clear cut, you just feel it."*

Another participant echoed these sentiments, *"I am not speaking as a scientist, but I do have a science degree. What I want to speak to is the devastation that all of us feel when we walk into a clearcut. It's devastating, it's death. And anyone who tends a garden understands that soil is alive. It's an organism, just like a human body with lots of different organisms that keep it alive. When we walk into a clearcut, so much has destroyed the soil. Why are we still doing this? We should be doing better than this! Sustainable forestry is not about clearcutting. But also, the old trees really do matter and they support life for the whole forest. They seed the forest with lots of organisms that wouldn't be there if the forest was all the same age."*

The McDonald-Dunn planning process has captured the attention of groups far beyond Corvallis, as OSU's role in the Elliott State Research Forest has diminished. Conservation leaders increasingly view OSU's management of these forests with skepticism and concern.

By law, the State of Oregon holds the titles to these forests, so they are "public forests"."That means they belong to ALL Oregonians. But it's really much bigger than that. OSU uses them to demonstrate, teach, and promote their forestry practices which have a ripple effect around the world. Why is our nation's leading forestry school still doing clearcuts of older forest, burning logging slash, and spraying herbicides? They should be leading the industry to a better, more sustainable future. They are cutting an 80+ year old stand of beautiful forest in our valley right now. I can hear the big trees crashing to the ground.

The Oregon Chapter of the Sierra Club (with 57,000 members and supporters) shares my concerns. The organization's June 5th letter to the OSU President and Trustees cited a long history of problems

and called on OSU to, "halt the current biased forest planning process for the McDonald-Dunn and honor the commitment to a transparent and collaborative process."

Executive Director Damon Motz-Storey implored the trustees to, "lead OSU toward better stewardship of the public forests". They believe OSU's current "working forest" research model is, "at odds with the needs of society and proper stewardship of these public forests."

> *"The decision to fund research forest management from logging revenue means that large sections of the McDonald-Dunn will continue to be managed as tree farms, while diminishing research opportunities not associated with logging. The university can best serve its students, researchers, and the environment by removing the financial pressure to continue the harmful industrial forestry model of clearcuts and toxic spraying on these forests. Further, the targeted destruction of mature forests, including the recent sale of older forest in the Dunn, and the open burning of slash are directly contrary to efforts to incorporate meaningful carbon sequestration, carbon inventories and climate-smart forestry on state forest lands."*

As Wednesday's meeting approached the three hour mark, College leaders appeared visibly sad and tired. Whether they are willing or able to change their approach to forest planning remains to be seen.

It really gets down to the money. The annual budget of the research forests is only about two million dollars.   That's one thousandth of OSU's current fundraising goal.   OSU could easily fund the operational costs of the forests without destroying them. But excess revenue from logging is especially lucrative because it is unallocated funds. In 2019, a substantial chunk of OSU's Blodgett Research Forest was liquidated to raise $6M for cost overruns associated with OSU's newest forestry buildings.

Generations of College deans have used these public forests as a "cash cow" to fund pet projects and pay the salaries of the guys who manage them mostly for timber production. But putting their "cash cow" out to pasture wouldn't please their industry sponsors. Imagine what they would say if our nation's "leader in forestry education" decided that **trees are worth more standing.** The timber industry would hate that!

Doug Pollock is the founder of the [Friends of OSU Old Growth](#) conservation group. He has been exploring the McDonald-Dunn Forests for nearly 40 years.