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Colville National Forest Plan is Not Collaborative

On October 21, U.S. Forest Service Regional Forester Glen Casamassa signed the Record of Decision finalizing the revised Forest Plan for Colville National Forest in northeast Washington. The plan signals a major increase in logging – including clearcuts – up to 25,000 acres per year across the 1.1 million acre Colville Forest and above prior recommendations. The Colville’s 5-year logging levels are projected at 100 to 150 million board feet per year equivalent to about 20,000 to 30,000 log trucks full each year.

The visual impacts are going to be very, very significant and increasing each year from now for the next 20 years as hundreds of thousands of acres are logged. The visual landscape-scale degradation is already in full swing and visible now on Sherman and Boulder Pass, but it’s just the beginning.

I and hundreds of local stakeholders participated in countless Forest Service-led plan revision collaborative meetings since 2004 and never once did anybody ask for more clearcut logging. The Forest Service told us ‘forest restoration’ would be the goal of the new Forest Plan. Apparently, their definition of ‘restoration’ includes clearcutting, which has been renamed a “regeneration harvest.”

The Forest Service’s “Forest Summit” ran from March 2006 to January 2007 and in which over 80 people participated. Public comments from the Summit and subsequent public meetings were then used to create two Plan drafts in 2011 and 2016. Both drafts recommended far less logging and far more wilderness acres be preserved than the Final Plan.

The Forest Service promised those of us who participated in the Plan’s development that our comments would be used to craft a plan we could feel good about. But the current Forest Supervisor Rodney Smolden did an about-face, increasing annual acres logged by 75 percent while reducing by 40% the amount of lands managed to protect wilderness qualities or about a quarter of the 240,000 acres of wild forests.

Wildlife from grizzly bear to salamanders need wild forest ecosystems to survive. Unlogged wild forests have been shown to contribute significantly the health of fish, wildlife and solitude-seeking recreation that supports rural economies. And wild forests are a primary source of clean water.

Forest health problems that exist today were historically created by Forest Service logging and fire-exclusion management, now the agency is applying the same old clearcutting ancient forests and bulldozing wilderness as the path to restoring forest health.

I am a cofounder of the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition (NEWFC) considered to be the most successful forest collaborative in the country. Over its 17 years of collaboration, NEWFC has brought wealth and fame to the Colville National Forest. Today, the Colville has the highest timber volume production in the entire National Forest System due in large part to NEWFC's collaboration.

I believed the Forest Service had changed its plantation forestry ways and a taking a new direction caring for our public lands, thinning ponderosa pine and dry forest ecosystems and applying fire management to restore health.

NEWFC's successes turned the Colville Forest from conflict-ridden to high functioning, ending the so-called "The Timber Wars. Its "Blueprint" agreements between the Timber Industry and environmental community went so far as to support a third of the Colville in active forest management, a third in old growth forest restoration and a third in protected status, including wilderness and conservation area management.

The reality is the process for NEWFC to reach these agreements took five years and another ten years to implement. But it seems good deeds are mere gestures. It's beyond logic that Supervisor Smolden stabbed collaboration in the back as he has -- and even timed release of the final plan to coincide with Halloween. The trick is on us and future generations.

National Forests are storehouses of carbon. Climate change has been linked to unprecedented wildfire-related catastrophes destroying entire communities, mass extinctions of wildlife, warming oceans and loss of coral reefs. Two recent carbon emission corroborative research studies found that timber management was a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions <https://sustainable-economy.org/osu-research-confirms-big-timber-leading-source-greenhouse-gas-emissions-oregon/>.

Time and again the public has told state and federal forest managers it does not want public lands managed like tree farms," Coleman said. "I believe we truly are living in the state of amnesia.

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Celebrating 43 years of conservation work

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