

New Hampshire Bulletin

DECISION 2024 STATE HOUSE HEALTH EDUCATION ENERGY + ENVIRONMENT COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY

All forests are important. Old forests are priceless.



JIM FURNISH

DECEMBER 9, 2024 1:30 PM



Forests are complex ecosystems, beyond our full comprehension. But making the right call for the future of our national forests shouldn't be nearly as complicated. In fact, some decisions are downright easy.

During 35 years with the U.S. Forest Service, I had the privilege of working on behalf of our nation's federally managed forests from coast to coast. But there is a special place in my heart for New England's North Woods, where I started my career in 1968.

I sent many trees to the mill. I also changed. As a close observer of the Forest Service for a half century, I am deeply troubled by the agency's persistent, mistaken focus on timber production when there are larger issues at stake for our communities, the climate, and biodiversity.

Against science and common sense, logging projects in the [White Mountain National Forest](#) in New Hampshire and Maine, and in the [Green Mountain National Forest](#) in Vermont, target invaluable mature and old-growth forests and roadless areas. It's time for a fundamental reconsideration of the value of our nation's public forestlands.

In an [op-ed in Politico](#), world-renowned old-growth forest experts Jerry Franklin and Norm Christenson wrote: "Most people understand that trees and forests play an important role in reducing climate change – that's one reason there are so many popular efforts aimed at planting trees. But what many people don't understand is that not all forests are alike. ... New trees are no substitute for old trees and the ecosystems they nurture."

Old-growth forests are [lifeboats for biodiversity, reservoirs of clean water, and carbon-storage warehouses](#). They excel at mitigating floods, droughts, and fires, all of which are exacerbated by climate change. In New England, mature forests could store [two times more carbon by the end of the century](#) if they are simply allowed to grow old. Older forests also support many of the region's most imperiled species, including pine marten, brook trout, cerulean warblers, and northern long-eared bats. But as much as we have learned about old-growth forests, there is far more that we do not – and perhaps never will – understand about their complex web of life.

In the Northeast, few old-growth forests are left and what few remain are poorly protected. By the [Forest Service's own estimates](#), less than 1 percent of the White Mountain and Green Mountain national forests is old-growth. The numbers are similar for all of New England. Unfortunately, these sobering statistics don't appear to induce humility in Forest Service leaders, nor apparently in the leadership of well-heeled nonprofit organizations that [recently took aim at a lawsuit](#) seeking to protect mature and old-growth forests and roadless areas in the White Mountain National Forest.

A large percentage of our nation's old-growth and mature – or *future* old-growth – forests [are on state and federal public lands](#). In New England, state and federal public lands provide [less than 4 percent of the annual timber harvest volume](#). Protecting publicly owned mature and old-growth forests will have minimal impact on the timber supply, and immense benefits for fish and wildlife, the climate, and the tourism and recreation economy.

Balanced, pragmatic, multiple-use management requires a whole-landscape perspective. Logging in mature and old-growth forests as well as roadless areas, as is currently ongoing in both the White and Green Mountain national forests, is foolish and shortsighted. The vast majority of New England's forests are already available for timber harvest. Slicing and dicing our healthiest forests at taxpayer expense for short-term private profit fails “the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run” mantra that the Forest Service is sworn to honor.

Decisions today about the future of our forests will reverberate for generations. Wise forest managers understand that ecosystems are more complex than we can grasp. But there's nothing complicated about deciding to protect mature and old-growth forests on public lands. Just do it!



Our stories may be republished online or in print under Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. We ask that you edit only for style or to shorten, provide proper attribution and link to our website. AP and Getty images may not be republished. Please see our [republishing guidelines](#) for use of any other photos and graphics.