

PO Box 897
Ridgecrest, CA 93556
Telephone: 530-273-9290



2 Massachusetts Ave NE #2908
Washington, DC 20002
Office: 202-657-7270

Increased Forest Protection is Essential to Overcome the Climate Crisis

Protecting U.S. forests from logging is an essential part of an overall climate strategy to (1) prevent the substantial carbon emissions resulting from logging, and (2) bolster the carbon sequestration and storage benefits of unlogged forests needed to draw down atmospheric CO₂. Currently, the U.S. is the world's biggest culprit in terms of annual carbon emissions from logging, since more logging occurs in the U.S. than in any other nation on Earth,¹ resulting in annual carbon emissions comparable to those caused by burning of coal in the U.S.²

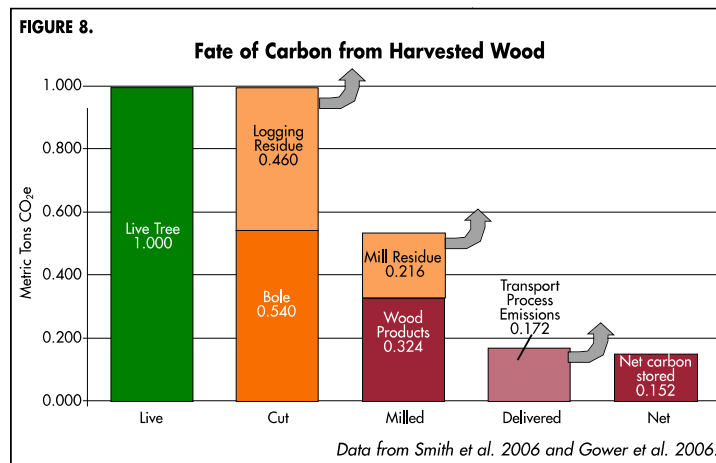
Protecting forests from logging does even more than prevent those carbon emissions. Because of the long persistence time of CO₂ in the atmosphere,³ stopping new emissions from fossil fuels alone won't prevent temperatures from rising more than 1.5°C. To have a livable world, we also need to draw down CO₂ already in the atmosphere. Carbon sequestration and storage by forests is a natural and proven way to do so. Globally, protecting forests from logging can provide *approximately half* of the needed CO₂ drawdown to limit warming to 1.5°C.⁴

If we protected all federal public forestlands in the U.S. from logging, it would increase annual drawdown of CO₂ by 84 million tons per year,⁵ and far more CO₂ drawdown could be accomplished if additional forests received similar protection. Some logging proponents claim that cutting more trees for wood products is good for the climate because it "restores" forests and "protects" forest carbon from wildfires. These claims are not scientifically credible.

Even big wildfires only consume about 1% of tree carbon,⁶ and this small amount is quickly recouped and then some due to natural post-fire vegetation regrowth, which is stimulated by the nutrient cycling resulting from the fire.⁷ In contrast, when trees are removed from the forest through logging, most of their carbon is rapidly emitted into the atmosphere (see figure on p. 2), and their removal significantly reduces the carbon sink (drawdown) potential of forests.⁸ The strong weight of scientific studies finds that logging, including "thinning", does not stop wildfires, creates a hotter, drier and windier microclimate that often makes fires burn more intensely, kills far more trees than it prevents from being killed, and can triple carbon emissions per acre relative to wildfire alone, whereas denser forests tend to have lower fire intensity.⁹

Further, research has documented a sweeping pattern of scientific omissions and misrepresentations by U.S. Forest Service-funded scientists, causing a "falsification of the scientific record" regarding historical forest density and wildfire regimes.¹⁰ The corrected scientific record reveals that historical forests were far denser and more carbon-rich than the Forest Service falsely claimed, and they were shaped by somewhat less frequent mixed-intensity fire, which included low-, moderate-, and high-intensity fire patches.

Logging takes carbon out of the forest and puts it into the atmosphere, while protecting forests from logging contributes to an overall solution to the climate crisis.



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Endnotes

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