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Logging on public lands has increased despite President Biden's forest protection efforts

There is concern among scientists and conservation groups that the administration isn't doing enough to preserve old growth and mature forests on public land.

By: Clayton Sandell

Deep in the Stanislaus National Forest in northern California, it's the sound you hear first.

Once you get closer, it's harder to miss. Large bulldozers and machines called feller bunchers are clearing the mountain landscape of large trees in one of the oldest national forests in the United States.

"They're taking thousands and thousands of mature trees off the landscape. They're hauling away the tree trunks for lumber, and then they're stripping out the branches and the treetops, and then taking the small trees and putting them in giant piles," says Chad Hanson, a forest ecologist and director of the John Muir Project, a conservation group that wants to stop commercial logging like this on public lands.

Hanson spots a particularly large tree stump in a new forest clearing.

"This tree is about almost four feet in diameter at the base," he says, climbing up. "Generally a tree of this size is going to be about 200 years old."

It is these old growth and mature forests that scientists say play a critical role in the growing climate crisis... by storing huge amounts of heat-trapping carbon dioxide.

"But once, of course, it's cut. It can't do that anymore. And most of the carbon that's in it ends up in the atmosphere," he says.

Fighting the climate crisis by protecting forests is a top priority for President Joe Biden.

"I'm announcing a new plan to conserve global forests, which will bring together a full range of U.S. government tools — diplomatic, financial, and policy — to halt forest loss, restore our critical carbon sinks, and improve land management," the president said in 2021.

"Through this plan, the United States will help the world deliver on our shared goal of halting natural forest loss and restoring at least an additional 200 million hectares of forests and other ecosystems by the year 2030," President Biden said.

The president has issued executive orders to protect public lands from logging and spent time talking directly with scientists, too.

"What can we do most?" President Biden asks forest ecologist Susan Pritchard in a video the White House posted to YouTube.

"Conservation," Pritchard tells the president. "Letting these trees do what they do best, which is to grow and sequester carbon."

But now there is concern among scientists and conservation groups that the Biden Administration isn't doing enough to preserve old growth and mature forests on public land, and that since the president took office, logging has actually increased.

According to U.S. Forest Service records obtained by Scripps News, the volume of trees logged equaled about 2.3 billion board feet in 2021, the year Biden was inaugurated. But by 2023, that number had risen to nearly three billion board feet, a 24% increase.

"Basically, the Forest Service is acting like a rogue agency, and the Biden administration is doing nothing to rein it in," Hanson says.

U.S. Forest Service deputy chief Chris French insists his agency has not gone rogue. He points out that compared to the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the amount of logging is down dramatically. But he says forests being logged today are part of the agency's effort to protect communities from wildfire.

"We lose thousands of acres to wildfires every year and the best way to protect forests and communities ... is to thin these forests," French says.

Hanson and a growing number of climate scientists — some who work for the Forest Service itself — say research increasingly shows that thinning forests to reduce the wildfire threat may actually be making the problem worse.

"It tends to make the fires burn faster, it kills more trees, than it prevents from being killed. It increases carbon emissions, and it puts communities at greater risk because the fires spread faster through those thinned areas," says Hanson.

He believes the Forest Service is rushing approvals of new logging projects like this one before any new protections are put in place.

"We're seeing numerous new logging proposals targeting mature and old growth forests and mature and old growth trees across the West, and in many cases in the East, too, that are tens of thousands of acres in size. In some cases hundreds of thousands of acres in size for a single logging project," he tells Scripps News.

The Forest Service denies that it's rushing approvals, and French says the fact that he gets pressure both from the logging industry and environmental groups is proof the agency is acting in the best interest of the forest.

"The thing that makes us relevant is that people want to see these forests persist and we have to take actions to make sure that we're not just managing for today, what we're managing for my children, their children and generations to come," says French.

But Chad Hanson is worried that the increase in logging and the looming threat of climate change demands a new and urgent approach to protecting forests.

"What's their management prescription? 'Hey, let's remove a bunch of trees from the forest,' which means most of that carbon goes into the atmosphere, makes climate change worse," Hanson says. "And I think more and more scientists, more and more policymakers are saying, 'You know what? Stop the bus. This is where I get off.'"