

THE SISKIYOU MOUNTAIN ADVOCATE

The BLM is now marking old-growth forests for logging in the Applegate

BY LUKE RUEDIGER

In my last article, I wrote about the Integrated Vegetation Management for Resilient Lands (IVM) Project and its potential impact on both our forests and the public's ability to participate in the public land management planning process. Unfortunately, since writing that article, the IVM has become an immediate threat, as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is designing and marking both the Penn Butte and Late Mungers timber sales above Williams and Murphy. They are using these sales to begin implementing the IVM Project, while largely shutting the public out of the process.

These timber sales are in Late Successional Reserve (LSR) forests, designated to protect old-forest habitat for the northern spotted owl and other species. The particular LSR of the Penn Butte and Late Mungers timber sales was designated to provide habitat connectivity between the Applegate and Illinois River watersheds. Unfortunately, if implemented, these timber sales would impact that connectivity by logging at the heart of some of the area's largest blocks of old forest on Mungers Creek, Marble Gulch, Mule Gulch, and upper Powell Creek. Additional remnant stands would also be targeted between Williams and Murphy and off Spencer Gulch Road.

These same old forests protect our watersheds by sheltering streams and holding moisture, and they protect our climate by storing large volumes of carbon in forest soils, downed logs, snags, and large living trees. They also tend to burn

at lower levels of severity due to their tall canopies, thick insulating bark, habitat complexity, relatively moist conditions, and dense canopy that suppresses understory growth, shades the forest floor, traps humidity, holds moisture in the soil, and reduces the effect of drying winds during wildfire events.

Our monitoring demonstrates that these timber sales are targeting old forests with degrading timber management practices. Since whole groves of trees, many over 30 inches in diameter, are proposed for logging, canopy conditions

would be dramatically compromised, fire risk increased, and wildlife habitats impacted. The IVM Project and the timber sales it proposes are an attack on the public process and constitute old-forest logging dressed up in the language of "restoration" and "resilience."

In late April, the agency issued a Draft Determination of NEPA Adequacy, claiming that the effects of the nearly 800-acre Late Mungers and Penn Butte timber sales have already been considered and that the sales therefore needed virtually no site-specific analysis. The agency simply did not publicly disclose the environmental impact of this logging project. No site-specific analysis was done during the IVM Project, and its approval does not negate the BLM's responsibility to consider the site-specific prescriptions, environmental conditions, management history, wildlife habitat needs, connectivity, and human or recreational uses in the area.

Although the impact on nearby communities will be significant, the agency is also offering far less opportunity to engage in the process than has historically been available. While the Penn Butte Timber Sale was being designed, citizens repeatedly requested information on the sale, which the BLM refused to provide. Meanwhile, the BLM began marking large, old trees in mature forest habitat adjacent to Williams and Murphy and only now, after the Penn Butte Timber Sale has been fully designed and marked, has the BLM approached surrounding communities for input. (*Ed. Note: BLM announced May 23 that the comment deadline has been extended to June 28.*)

Long-standing public involvement processes such as "scoping," where the agency provides an outline of potential project activities and vets them through the public, have been eliminated. Environmental assessments with robust scientific and environmental review are no longer required. Instead, a simple form is filled out, the timber sale is fully designed, in this case marked on the ground, and then tentatively authorized, all before the BLM discloses the location of the timber sale and the types of prescriptions proposed or initiates a public comment period or notifies the public of its activities.

In the face of climate change and world-wide biodiversity loss, the Applegate and southwestern Oregon deserve better. With less than 10 percent of Oregon's once vast old-growth forests remaining, we should protect what little is left. Here in southwestern Oregon, our forests could be part of the solution, whereas BLM timber sales continue to be part of the problem.

For more information on the Penn Butte Timber Sale, visit applegatesiskiyoualliance.org/blog.

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The Penn Butte Timber Sale has been leave-tree marked, meaning only trees marked with yellow or red paint will be retained. Luke Ruediger looks up at a large (33-inch diameter) ponderosa pine tree identified for removal. Photo: Luke Ruediger.

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