

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Testimony

Testimony of The Wildlife Society before the
House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health Concerning
Wildlife Conservation on National Forests Lands

Presented by

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Good morning, Madam Chair, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is James E. Miller, and I am President of The Wildlife Society. The Wildlife Society is the association of nearly 10,000 professional wildlife biologists and managers dedicated to excellence in wildlife stewardship through science and education. Since our founding in 1937, The Wildlife Society has recognized that forests and the diversity of products and values (including wildlife) are renewable natural resources and that carefully designed forest management practices are very important to achieving wildlife management goals. However, ill-conceived timber harvest and management, without adequate consideration of wildlife needs, can severely harm wildlife conservation. I am pleased to place into perspective four key aspects of wildlife and timber management in national forests: (1) recognition of wildlife needs in forest management; (2) even-aged forest management; (3) continued site conversion to single species management; and (4) management and conservation of old-growth forests. These positions were developed through a careful consensus-building process within the wildlife profession.

RECOGNITION OF WILDLIFE NEEDS IN FOREST MANAGEMENT

Structure and species composition of plant communities may be altered by forest management practices with significant effects upon wildlife. While some specific wildlife populations may increase or be unaffected, other species' populations may decline or disappear on intensively managed areas. Wildlife species with a narrow range of tolerance for habitat change usually require special attention in forest management.

Positive effects of management may be optimized and negative effects minimized when wildlife requirements are coordinated and integrated with forest management. Such varied practices as maintaining diversity of tree species, age classes, and stand densities; retaining snags; and varying size, shape, age and juxtaposition of stands are used to meet wildlife management objectives established for individual forested areas. Flexibility to conform forest and wildlife plans to specific local conditions is particularly important. Management practices must be selected and prescribed to match site conditions, plant and animal species involved, successional relationships, and other local factors to help ensure that a broad spectrum of wildlife and other forest management objectives are met.

Each forest management decision has a set of consequences for wildlife and their habitat requirements and therefore, wildlife should be an intentional product of any well-managed forest. It is the wildlife biologist's or manager's responsibility to point out these consequences to the land administrator. The latter's responsibility is to review and consider the consequences of forest management and other activities on wildlife, and to acknowledge the wildlife management objectives and implement appropriate actions to benefit wildlife survival and production in managed forests.

The Wildlife Society recognizes:

1. That all forest management must be designed to maintain healthy functioning ecosystems.
2. That wildlife is an integral part of each forest ecosystem.
3. That to be ecologically acceptable, forest management must include considerations and actions for wildlife.

It is therefore, the policy of The Wildlife Society to recommend and advance wildlife considerations and actions in forest management to accomplish the following:

For Public Forest Lands

1. Ensure that all provisions of law concerning wildlife on public lands be met adequately.
2. Ensure that all public forest lands are managed with full consideration to wildlife as an integral product of these lands.
3. Ensure that certified or other similarly qualified wildlife biologists and managers participate in all planning and management of public forest lands so that wildlife population survival and production needs are identified and provided.
4. Ensure that each forest management plan sets forth objectives for wildlife management and describes in detail the processes by which these objectives are to be met.
5. Ensure further development and application of approaches and systems by which the impact of forest management activities on wildlife and their habitats may be predicted.

For Other Forest Lands

1. Encourage that forest lands be managed, giving full consideration to wildlife as a product of those lands.
2. Encourage use of certified and other similarly qualified wildlife biologists and managers in forest planning and management processes to ensure that wildlife and their habitats are maintained and enhanced to the extent possible.
3. Advocate coordination of forest and wildlife management plans to include detailed objectives for wildlife and their habitats and to provide an analysis of the anticipated consequences of forest management activities on wildlife.

For All Forested Lands

1. Encourage research necessary to determine and predict consequences of forest management activities on wildlife.
2. Urge strengthening and expansion of comprehensive research and extension programs to help maintain and enhance wildlife, forest and rangeland resources.

EVEN-AGED FOREST MANAGEMENT

The Wildlife Society endorses forest management that will benefit a wide array of wildlife species as well as provide timber, recreational opportunities, aesthetic values, and watershed protection. We understand that disturbance is an integral component of the ecology of forests. Historically, recurring disturbance prompted the development and maintenance of shade-intolerant forest communities and their constituent faunas dependent upon them. Today, the effects of fire are largely precluded from the landscape by the deliberate actions of humans for protection of lives and property. These effects are essential to the maintenance of shade-intolerant forest communities and the fauna dependent on them.

Positive effects of even-aged management can be enhanced and negative effects lessened by judicious planning and consideration of resource diversity goals at the national, regional, state, and local levels. Even-aged management practices should include maintaining a diversity of forest types, tree species, stand age classes, and stand densities; and retaining snags, den trees, and streamside management zones, by varying the size, shape, structure, and juxtaposition of forest stands. Site-related ecological and social considerations are important in determining which, if any, silvicultural treatment is appropriate for prescription on any given forested site. All silvicultural treatments should be available for use by natural resources professionals to best ensure that diverse resource and management objectives can be met. Precluding or mandating specific silvicultural treatment prior to site-specific analysis in a landscape context is inappropriate and counter to wise resource management.

Therefore, The Wildlife Society supports the use of even-aged and uneven-aged forest management, as well as prescribed fire, when properly executed and balanced with other forest and wildlife management objectives.

CONVERSION OF HARDWOOD AND MIXED PINE-HARDWOOD STANDS TO SINGLE SPECIES PINE STANDS

The Wildlife Society is opposed to the Forest Service's continued use of harvesting, site preparation and reforestation, and Timber Stand Improvement (TSI) for the specific purpose to convert hardwood and mixed pine-hardwood stands to single species pine or other conifer forests. This is an especially severe problem in the Southeastern United States. Such conversion is neither cost-effective nor favorable to the maintenance of biological diversity. In addition, site conversion to single species management eventually leads to forest health problems that result in long-term damage to, and losses of, native flora and fauna including endangered and threatened species.

MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION OF OLD-GROWTH FORESTS

Old-growth forests in the United States have been reduced to less than 5% of their original extent. Remaining old-growth stands are being eliminated rapidly, primarily by timber harvest, and cannot be

replaced under current silvicultural programs. Old-growth forests function in a number of important ways in forest ecosystems, including providing critical habitat for several species of wildlife. Plans for maintaining old-growth forests must be developed and implemented if values of old-growth forests are to be retained.

Old-growth or virgin, forests are usually mosaics of variable size trees, ranging in age from seedlings to dominant, 200 + -year old trees. They are dynamic, steady-state ecosystems in which total plant biomass is high and net biomass accumulation is low. Also of concern are old forests, defined as virgin stands that are "old" compared to the average interval between natural or man-induced disturbances, and in which biomass accumulation is nearly zero. Old forests are the closest facsimile to old-growth forests throughout much of the United States. They possess some of the attributes of the original old-growth forests and may, with time, become increasingly similar to old-growth.

Old-growth forests are especially valuable for timber. Most (over 95%) of the original old-growth forests in the United States, have been cut or lost to fire or other natural events, and much of the rest is being harvested rapidly. The remaining stands are concentrated on public lands in northern California, western Oregon and Washington, and south-coastal Alaska except for some relict stands that occur elsewhere in the United States, primarily in designated wilderness areas. Old forest stands occur in many forested areas in the United States.

Old-growth forests are unique environments. They provide critical habitat for such species as the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest, Sitka black tailed deer in southeast Alaska, and red-cockaded woodpecker in the southeastern United States. Marten, red tree voles, Northern flying squirrels, bald eagles, pileated woodpeckers and other cavity- nesting birds, Vancouver Canada geese, marbled murrelets, elk, mountain goats, mountain caribou, brown/grizzly bears, and several species of bats extensively use old-growth forests. Old-growth forests also are valuable in forest ecosystems because they provide important pathways to fix nitrogen, retain and recycle nutrients, and help ensure supplies of high quality water.

Management and conservation of old-growth forests are mandated by laws (e.g. the National Forest Management Act) that deal with maintaining viable populations of native vertebrates, managing habitats for threatened and endangered wildlife, and perpetuating biological diversity. In the past, however, efforts to consider old-growth forests in land use planning have been fragmentary and limited in scope, and there has been little coordination between and within state and federal agencies. As a result, major questions remain about how much old-growth forest still exists, where it is, and how much should be maintained for wildlife and other uses.

Agencies responsible for managing public forested lands in the United States, especially the USDA Forest Service (FS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), should take an active and vigorous role in conducting their mandate to ensure the long-term existence of sufficient old-growth forests. Priority should be placed on inventorying and classifying old-growth forests, assessing regional wildlife habitat relationships related to old-growth forests, and developing management plans that conserve old-growth ecosystems.

The policy of The Wildlife Society, in regard to management and conservation of old-growth forests in the United States, is to:

1. Recognize that old-growth forests are rare and unique ecosystems providing critical habitat for some wildlife species, and that maintenance of old-growth stands of appropriate size and distribution is essential for maintaining biological diversity.

2. Recognize that old-growth forests cannot be recreated with current silvicultural practices and that efforts to maintain old-growth forests therefore must be initiated with existing old-growth stands and include provisions for replacing these stands through time.
3. Recognize that federal land management agencies (primarily the FS, BLM) control the destiny of nearly all old-growth stands that exist outside of National Parks and Wilderness areas.
4. Recognize that federal land management agencies are directed by laws and accompanying regulations of the United States to maintain diversity of plants and animals and viable populations of native wildlife, and that special efforts must be made to prevent the decline of threatened or endangered species.
5. Call for state and federal land management agencies (especially the FS and BLM) to define, inventory, and map existing stands of old-growth forest.
6. Call for state and federal land management agencies to implement plans for maintaining old-growth forests that incorporate analyses of long term cumulative effects, including clearly stated objectives about wildlife populations and biological diversity, and use an ecosystem approach in addition to focusing on high profile species.
7. Call for the FS, BLM and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to expand research programs on wildlife-habitat relationships in old-growth forests.
8. Call for the FS and the BLM to maintain a sufficient quantity and distribution of old-growth stands with comparatively high volumes of wood per unit so that associated wildlife and other ecological functions are maintained.
9. Call for state and federal land management agencies to retain adequate old forest stands in all areas where the number, size, or distribution of old-growth stands are insufficient.
10. Recognize that information presently is not available to determine the number, size, and distribution of old-growth stands required to maintain associated wildlife and other ecological values. In the absence of such information, sufficient old-growth stands should be maintained to permit the widest possible array of management options for the future.
11. Encourage the President and Congress to recognize the unique values inherent in old-growth forests, to provide adequate funding for research into the ecological relationships of old-growth ecosystems, and to direct the FS and BLM to provide for the conservation and management of the remaining old-growth forests.

Thank you for considering the views of professional wildlife biologists and managers on wildlife needs in forest management; even-aged forest management; conversion of hardwood and mixed pine-hardwood stands to single species conifer stands; and old-growth forest conservation and management.

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