

## OLD GROWTH FOREST PLAN

## Northwest forests get more protections under new federal plan

Alex Baumhardt *Oregon Capital Chronicle*

America's oldest trees, most of which are in the West, will get added protection from wildfire and climate change under updated forest plans from the U.S. Forest Service.

In announcements last month, officials from the Forest Service said they would begin the process of amending forest management plans affecting all 128 of the agency's forest and grasslands, including the Northwest Forest Plan governing federal forests in northern California, Oregon and Washington. The amendments, both nationally and in the Northwest, are meant to bolster forest health to combat climate change and to further protect the last of the nation's old-growth trees, many of which have been threatened by growing wildfires, drought and diseases.

While updates would limit timber harvests in old-growth areas, logging would likely be allowed to continue in some mature stands in the Northwest.

Susan Jane Brown, founder and attorney at the Oregon legal nonprofit Silvix Resources, said the idea of leaving mature forests on the table for logging makes conservationists a bit "queasy," but she said it is inevitable on federal forestlands managed for multiple uses.

"Given that, I want to see that harvests occur in the most ecologically sensitive way, that also honors cultural traditions, and I think we can do that," she said. "I think that we can have timber harvests that focus on cutting the right trees in the right places for the right reasons."

Updating these federal forest plans are part of the Biden administration's strategy to "ecologically manage" the nation's forests to be more resilient to wildfires and to



A patch of old-growth trees in Oregon's Coast Range. *Jamie Hale, file*

better sequester climate-warming carbon dioxide. Living trees suck up and store climate-warming carbon dioxide. When cut or burned, they release it into the atmosphere. Older trees also contribute to the health of the water, soil and ecosystems, allowing better carbon and water storage for other trees and plants.

The decision to "amend" rather than "revise" the plans will allow changes to be adopted more quickly. The Forest Service has set a deadline of 2025 to finalize plans. Environmentalists hope this deadline is met to avoid derailment by any new presidential administration.

The plans will focus on protections

for old growth. The more than 20 million acres of federal forestlands protected in the Northwest Forest Plan contain 25% of the remaining old growth in all federal forests and grasslands in the lower 48 states, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. About half of Oregon's forests are owned and managed by the U.S. Forest Service. This includes 10 national forests spanning 16 million acres.

The term "old growth" encompasses different ages for different tree species, but in general denotes tree stands and surrounding habitat that has not undergone any major human-caused changes for 100 years. The trees remain part of healthy, diverse ecosystems that are largely unmanipulated.

Mature stands are typically close to a century old and characterized by their large size relative to younger trees, multi-layered canopies and the health of the soil around them.

The U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management oversee about 278,000 square miles of forests — an area about the size of Texas and Vermont combined. A recent inventory from the two agencies found that about 45% of those forests are considered "mature" and about 18% are considered "old growth."

Most old growth and mature forests are in Western states such as Idaho, California, Montana and Oregon. Few stands still exist east of the Mississippi River. There are some left in New England, around the Great Lakes and in Arkansas, Kentucky and West Virginia, according to the Forest Service.

The announced changes focus on five key updates to the Northwest Forest Plan, which covers 17 national forests across 20 million acres in Washington, Oregon and

Northern California. It was approved in 1994 following lawsuits under the Endangered Species Act, alleging unsustainable logging was leading to the decline and loss of critical species, including the Northern spotted owl. These owls rely on old growth and mature forests for nesting. In many ways, the plan succeeded in conserving old growth and improving habitat for land and aquatic species.

But over the last 30 years, growing threats from wildfire as well as drought and invasive pests and disease from climate change warrant an update to the management plan, according to Alexi Lovechio, climate program manager with Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center, a nonprofit conservation group based in Ashland:

"Since 1994, our environment has changed and new scientific data has emerged," Lovechio said. "We didn't know nearly as much about climate change and the impacts it would have on wildfire severity or water quality and wildlife habitat as we do today. So that's why this amendment is so important."

The updates include managing and preserving mature and old growth forests, protecting them from climate change, including tribes in forest management, preventing and suppressing wildfires and supporting rural economies.

Brown of Silvix Resources said when the plan was written it was missing some critical input.

"The 1994 plan was written without the government-to-government consultation with tribes, and as a result, there is no language at all in the plan about indigenous stewardship and uses of these lands," she said. "I think we will, I hope that we will, make that change in our amendment."

## ASANTE ROGUE REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER

## Report: Families say deaths tied to alleged fentanyl diversion by nurse

Buffy Pollock *Rogue Valley Times*

Medford police have launched an investigation after authorities were contacted about a patient's death at Asante Rogue Regional Medical Center in Medford.

Hospital officials confirmed police are investigating one death at Asante in Medford, although families of two alleged victims have confirmed the loss of loved ones in interviews with the Rogue Valley Times.

Lauren Van Sickle, Asante communications manager, said she was unable to comment on any reported deaths because police are investigating.

"We were distressed to learn of this issue. We reported it to law enforcement and are working closely with them," Van Sickle said over the weekend.

Medford police Lt. Geoff Kirkpatrick confirmed in a text, "We are investigating a case at Asante Rogue Regional. It is in its very preliminary stages and we have no further information we can release."

Multiple hospital sources, who declined to be identified, confirmed dozens of patients injured by medication diversion — the act of replacing a medication with another substance.

Sources allege that a hospital nurse was removing fentanyl from IV bags and replacing it with tap water. Two families shared their stories with the Times, which first learned of the investigation Dec. 23.

Grants Pass resident Garrett Atwood received a Dec. 18 phone call in which he learned that his brother's death — more

than a year before on Nov. 11, 2022 — was allegedly caused by a central line infection that resulted after a hospital nurse replaced fentanyl with non-sterile tap water, he said.

Atwood's brother, 36-year-old combat veteran Samuel Allison, entered the hospital on Oct. 14, 2022, for liver failure. Atwood said his brother's condition had stabilized and his prognosis was good. Shortly after leaving the ICU, he presented with an infection, was transferred to Oregon Health & Science University in Portland and died within days.

Atwood claimed Asante officials informed family members that his brother's pain medication was "tampered with." Atwood further claimed hospital officials said the infection he developed "was directly linked to the tap water that the nurse in question was replacing it with."

Atwood said hospital officials told him the employee was "no longer working in the medical field, as they were reported to both the medical board and police."

Klamath Falls resident Diane Rogers said she was notified by Asante officials that the July 26 death of her husband, 74-year-old Barry Samsten, had been caused by a bacterial infection after fentanyl was replaced with non-sterile tap water.

Samsten, a retired transportation planner for the Southern California Association of Governments, was being treated for a bed sore. His death certificate lists his cause of death as multiple organ failure and septic shock.

"I remember thinking, 'How does a bed sore go downhill so bad?' And to do that in the ICU, it's like they were picking the ones who were the worse off or couldn't talk," Rogers said. "He kept looking at me and his eyes would roll back. I'd say, 'He's in pain,' and the nurse would say, 'No, he isn't.'"

Multiple sources also told the Times that water supplies in the Intensive Care Unit and Coronary Care Unit — which are in an older part of the hospital — are unsafe for use on patients, even for face washing. The hospital made numerous public statements during 2023 pertaining to infections and water quality issues.

Central line infections are reported to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services as part of the Hospital Inpatient Quality Reporting Program. Infections are also reported to the Oregon Health Authority on a monthly basis.

According to the Health Authority's Hospital Healthcare-Associated Infections database, Asante Rogue Regional had low instances of central line infections between 2016 and 2021.

Infection rates were as low as one per year in 2016 and 2018; two per year in 2017 and 2019; and three in 2021. Infections in 2020 topped out at seven during the onset of the pandemic.

Data for 2022 and 2023 is not posted on the state database, but a statement released by Asante on July 6, weeks before Samsten died, reported "ongoing efforts" to reduce hospital-acquired infections.

"The statement read, 'After a spike in ...

cases over the winter, ARRCM's clinical and support teams rallied to examine processes, aseptic technique and the environment to break the chain of transmission. ... This diligence brought a drop in central-line-associated blood infections."

The report went on to say that the hospital had "engaged the Oregon Health Authority and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for an assessment of Asante's action plans and to solicit feedback on other potential contributors."

Prior to July, the hospital released statements in March and April addressing water quality concerns. A March 2 report indicated 10 central line infections between September 2022 and February 2023 in the Intensive Care Unit and one in the Coronary Care Unit.

Six weeks later, on April 14, a second statement addressed "water quality rumors."

"From September through December 2022, several central line infections in the ARRCM critical care units were linked to waterborne bacteria," the statement said. "Currently, there is no known water contamination at ARRCM or any of our facilities."

Rogers voiced frustration at a lack of information being released to the public.

"The man that called me, he said, 'You got any questions?' And I said, 'Well, I've got a lot of questions, but you're not gonna answer any of them for me.'"

Rogers added, "It's shocking that somebody can do this. The least they could have done was use bottled water."