

In Vermont, a call to end logging in the Green Mountain National Forest

By **David Abel** Globe Correspondent, Updated November 25, 2022, 8:13 p.m.



Environmental activists stood atop a hill in a clear-cut section of the Green Mountain National Forest's Robinson Integrated Resource Project. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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ROCHESTER, Vt. — Along a hillside deep in the Green Mountain National Forest, where thousands of decades-old spruce, maples, and other hardwoods were thriving until earlier this year, there's now a wasteland of gnarled roots, freshly sawed stumps, and the

decomposing remains of a mature forest that stretched over the horizon.

When Glen Ayers got a look at the denuded hills, he was aghast. “This is an intentional disaster that will last for decades,” he said. “This area was established to protect the forest; what happened here is the exact opposite. It’s the destruction of the forest.”

Ayers, 65, was one of scores of climate activists who recently trooped up to the area to protest logging in the national forest, where federal officials in recent years have approved the harvesting of trees across 43,000 acres, and recently unveiled a controversial plan to allow timber to be removed from an additional 11,000 acres.

Environmental groups have long battled the timber industry over the sanctity of national forests, but the stakes in those perennial battles have risen in recent years. As global temperatures reach dangerous levels and result in more climate catastrophes, large, mature forests are increasingly recognized as playing a crucial role in sequestering the carbon dioxide that has caused much of that warming.

Last year, the United States and more than 140 countries agreed at the international climate summit in Glasgow [to halt global deforestation](#) by the end of the decade, which could reduce global carbon emissions by a third.

President Biden [pledged](#) billions of dollars to help restore at least 500 million acres of forests and other ecosystems around the world and said the United States would “lead by our example.”

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On Earth Day last April, he issued an [executive order](#) to protect mature forests on federal lands. “We can and must take action to conserve, restore, reforest, and manage our magnificent forests here at home,” Biden wrote in the order.

The order requires federal regulators to identify all the nation’s mature and old-growth forests within a year, and “institutionalize climate-smart management” policies to protect them. There are no existing federal rules to exclusively protect those older forests.

But with the US Forest Service now planning to substantially increase logging in the Green Mountain National Forest — across areas that amount to more than 10 percent of the federally managed land — local climate activists have been staging protests, arguing the agency is defying Biden’s executive order and acting hypocritically.

At a rally on an unusually balmy day this month in Rochester, more than 100 climate activists gathered in front of the Forest Service’s local ranger station, carrying signs such as “Stop the Chop” and “Clearcuts Fuel Climate Chaos.”

They urged the agency to halt clearcutting in the national forest, where many of the trees in the targeted areas are now nearing a century old. Older trees typically absorb [more carbon](#) than younger trees, but their larger size also makes them more valuable as lumber.

“The US is begging for forest protection in other nations while leveling mature and old-growth trees on our own national forests,” said Zack Porter, executive director of Standing Trees, an environmental advocacy group in Vermont. “The Forest Service is willfully flouting the intent of the president’s executive order, recklessly selling off our children and grandchildren’s future.”

Forest Service officials say such logging in the national forest is vital to support the local economy and regenerate ecosystems that rely on young forests.

“There are trade-offs in managing for many different values and needs,” said Christopher Mattrick, a district ranger for the Forest Service in Rochester, who’s overseeing logging plans in the Green Mountain National Forest. “Decision-making can be complex ... but it is based in science.”

Limited amounts of logging in the national forest, he added, enable clear-cut areas to be replaced with a more diverse range of trees. That creates more suitable habitat for a wider range of wildlife, while allowing the forests to be more resilient to the impacts of climate change, such as the increased risk of fire, drought, and the spread of invasive pests, he said.

As to Biden’s directive, Mattrick said the Forest Service is “working jointly with our colleagues at the Department of Interior to both determine definitions and complete an inventory of old-growth and mature forests.”

The areas where logging has been approved represent a relatively small fraction of the 416,000 acres of the Green Mountain National Forest, Mattrick said, and where it has been authorized, the clearcutting typically occurs on just a portion of that land. For example, in places where logging was approved this year, just about one third of those areas were harvested, he said.

The [proposal](#) to allow logging in an additional 11,000 acres of the national forest, in an area known as the Telephone Gap, “does not represent a decision to change the pace or scale of this management,” he said.

But Mattrick acknowledged that the amount of logging has been growing, and that over the next five years, loggers are scheduled to harvest as much as 62 million board feet of lumber from the national forest — more than double the amount in the past five years.

Representatives of the logging industry argue the Forest Service should allow far more

logging in the Green Mountains.

As a surge in interest rates has hurt the housing market, the price of lumber has plummeted, reducing the supply of timber from private lands, they said. Private landowners tend to hold off harvesting their stands when lumber prices are low, often leaving the timber industry to depend on public land to continue operating.

“For the survival of the forest products industry, the timber from these public forests could be what helps us survive,” said Kenneth Johnson, co-owner and general manager of A. Johnson, a Bristol-based mill that has supplied lumber to the region for more than a century.

He compared the wood from the national forest to “a security valve,” saying it is vital to moderating the volatile price of lumber and sustaining jobs when home building and other development declines.

With the timber industry [employing](#) some 9,100 people and generating \$1.4 billion in sales in Vermont, he and others said it was vital to harvest in the national forest to protect the economy.

“We know it doesn’t look good when you cut timber, and people have an emotional reaction to that,” Johnson said. “But we’re supporting the families of Vermont, and as far as I’m concerned, that’s part of the function of the public forests.”

While acknowledging the economic benefits of harvesting the national forest, climate advocates pointed to a range of studies showing older forests [are more resilient to climate change](#), [store more carbon](#), [produce cleaner water](#), and are better at [reducing the floods and droughts](#) expected to increase with climate change.

They also disputed a logging industry contention that less cutting in public forests would lead to more harvesting on private land or more lumber being brought from faraway, noting that much of Vermont’s timber is [exported](#). Moreover, they counter industry

arguments that harvested trees continue to store carbon, pointing to [studies](#) showing that much carbon is lost in the processing of timber into lumber.

“The cessation of logging of public lands, and especially of old-growth, mature forest, is a crucial and readily enacted first step toward recognizing and acting upon the well-established need to reverse policies that are causing and exacerbating climate change,” said Rich Holschuh, chair of the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs and a leader of the state’s indigenous Elnu Abenaki tribe, who was among the protestors.

He called plans to log more of the national forest “short-term human economic gain over everyone and everything else.”

Others pointed to a recent [report](#) by a group that includes Harvard University’s Harvard Forest division that found protecting New England’s older forests could make a substantial impact in reducing the region’s emissions.

The report estimated that trees in New England already absorb about 27 million tons of greenhouse gases every year, amounting to about 14 percent of the region’s overall carbon emissions in 2020. Additional protections to allow more of the region’s forests to grow older could increase that to about 21 percent, or the emissions of roughly 1.3 million homes, the report estimated.

The report recommended reducing development to protect woodlands and a host of other measures, but it didn’t address harvesting timber in the region’s national forests and other public lands.

David Foster, a coauthor and director emeritus of Harvard Forest, said, “We should be concerned with logging everywhere.”

But he wasn’t prepared to call for a ban on harvesting in the Green Mountain National Forest or other federal lands, noting that they were set aside, in part, for logging purposes, and that cutting there tends to be done more carefully, with more protections for the environment.

That said, Foster called for a more comprehensive approach to protect the region's older forests, one that would do far more to keep private lands wild.

"We must balance environmental concerns with producing natural resources," he said. "It doesn't have to be environmentally destructive."

As he clambered up the shorn hillside in the national forest, Glen Ayers wasn't willing to accept that clearcutting had any upsides.

Most important, he said, instead of serving as a carbon sink, it was likely now a source of carbon dioxide emissions. [Studies](#) have shown, he noted, that clearcutting loosens the soil in forests, resulting in more carbon being released into the atmosphere.

"This isn't right," he said. "It's an abuse."

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