



National Old-Growth Amendment

The Forest Service is currently working through the National Environmental Policy Act process to develop an Environmental Impact Statement. The National Old-Growth Amendment is the first-of-its kind proposal to amend all 128 forest land management plans. The proposed amendment is intended to provide consistent direction to conserve and steward old-growth forest conditions in response to rapidly changing climate conditions.

The National Old-Growth Amendment process is anticipated to be completed in early 2025 following intensive public scoping and analysis of comments. A draft Environmental Impact Statement is slated for completion this summer. Input from a wide variety of audiences will help inform the effects analysis and decision-making process. Analysis and consideration of [input](#) from the initial scoping period, which closed Feb. 2, 2024, are currently underway.

During the National Environmental Policy Act process, current versions of land management plans remain the local guidance for ongoing management of all national forests and grasslands until a Record of Decision is signed for the old-growth amendment.

The proposed amendment is based on information from national forests and current old-growth conditions and was informed by substantial public input. A 2023 [threat analysis](#) of mature and



A Western Red Cedar (left) and Western Hemlock (right) lean on each other, seemingly hugging in the Tongass National Forest, Alaska. (USDA Forest Service Photo by Karen L. Dillman)

old-growth forests on National Forest System and Bureau of Land Management lands suggests that current management activities may not be responsive to rapidly changing disturbances and conditions that threaten old-growth forests including wildfire, fire exclusion, insects and disease, extreme weather, climate, temperature and more.

The proposed amendment focuses on wildfire resilience, climate change adaptation, tribal inclusion, sustainable communities, and overall old-growth forest health. If the proposed amendment is approved, the agency will use the best available science, including Indigenous Knowledge, to provide consistent direction related to old-growth forest conditions across national forests and grasslands.

Old-growth forests offer biological diversity, carbon sequestration, wildlife and fisheries habitat, recreation, soil productivity, water quality and aesthetic beauty. These forests also reflect diverse tribal, spiritual, and unique, local cultural values.

BACKGROUND

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Why was the National Old-Growth Amendment proposed? What actions led us here?

The proposed National Old-Growth Amendment is part of an [overarching climate-informed strategy](#) to change the course of increased wildfires, combat climate-related impacts and help retain carbon. This effort responds to [Executive Order 14072](#), Strengthening the Nation's Forests, Communities, and Local Economies, issued by the Biden Administration on April 22, 2022. In addition, this and subsequent work on old-growth and mature forests supports the [Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#).

The executive order required the agency to [define, inventory](#) and [analyze threats](#) to mature and old-growth forest conditions on federal lands and informed the proposed action for the amendment. An initial threat analysis of mature and old-growth forests on National Forest System and Bureau of Land Management lands suggests that current management activities may not be responsive to rapidly changing disturbances and conditions. Mortality from wildfires is currently the leading threat to mature and old-growth forest conditions, followed by insects and disease, with tree cutting a relatively minor threat compared to climate-amplified disturbances. Past management practices, including timber harvest and fire suppression, have also contributed to current vulnerabilities in the distribution, abundance, and resilience of old-growth forest characteristics. The amount and distribution of mature forests across the National Forest

System suggest that these lands have the inherent capability to sustain old-growth forest conditions into the future.

This proposed action was also informed by public feedback received on the Climate Resilience Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking the Forest Service initiated in April 2023 which gave the public an opportunity to provide input on how the Forest Service should respond to the changing climate through forest management activities and possibly future policies.

What will be answered/addressed in the draft Environmental Impact Statement?

The draft Environmental Impact Statement will explain the purpose of and need for action, describe the proposed action (and any modifications as informed by scoping and evolving internal understanding of the potential impacts of the amendment), any action alternatives, and explain any environmental and socioeconomic consequences. The draft Environmental Impact Statement will also include information that explains what laws and regulations apply and provide rationale that demonstrates compliance with these laws/regulations, to include but not limited to the:

- National Environmental Policy Act;
- National Forest Management Act and the associated 2012 planning rule;
- Endangered Species Act;
- National Historic Preservation Act; and
- Clean Water Act.

Through this process, the national old-growth team will consult regional, and forest/grassland subject matter experts as needed to gather place-based knowledge and local management context to inform the draft Environmental Impact Statement.

How will the amendment impact management activities? Does the proposed amendment ban the harvest of old-growth?

The amendment, as currently proposed, would prohibit vegetation management within old-growth forest conditions when the purpose is to grow, tend, harvest, or regenerate trees for economic reasons. However, the amendment would allow vegetation management (to include ecologically appropriate harvest) in old-growth forests for the purpose of proactive stewardship to promote the composition, structure, pattern, or ecological processes necessary for the old-growth forest conditions to be resilient and adaptable to stressors and likely future environments. Exceptions are also provided for hazardous fuel reduction in the wildland urban interface, to protect public health and safety, to comply with other statutes and regulations, to support culturally significant

practices, and in cases where it is determined that the direction in this amendment is not relevant or beneficial to a particular forest ecosystem type.

How does the proposed amendment impact existing land management plans and those currently in revision?

Current land management plans remain the local guidance for ongoing management of all national forests and grasslands until a formal Record of Decision is signed. If the amendment is approved, it would amend all 128 land management plans, including those in the revision process. As stated in the [Notice of Intent](#), this proposal is not intended to replace existing direction in plans but rather to add language that provides consistency across all plans. If existing plan direction provides more restrictive constraints on actions that may affect existing or potential old-growth forest conditions, those more restrictive constraints would govern. The amendment also outlines an adaptive management approach for the development of local strategies given old-growth forests are unique based on their geographical location, cultural and socioeconomic value.

Will forest supervisors and regional foresters have the ability to make local level decisions?

The proposed amendment was designed to be informed by place-based knowledge. Local management is based on old-growth forests conditions gathered from regions and forests, as well as current and possible future threats to those conditions. The proposed amendment provides a framework for management and monitoring to maintain and improve old-forest conditions. Forest supervisors and regional foresters will be able to make decisions and implement management actions informed by local geography, ecology and social settings.

Why are some projects moving forward in areas where there is old-growth?

Current forest land management plans provide direction and guidance on management activities, until such time a Record of Decision is signed. The proposed National Old-Growth Amendment, while not in effect yet, is not anticipated to prohibit activities in old-growth conditions for ecological purposes. The project was carefully reviewed at a national level and will not have a negative effect on old-growth forest conditions.

Given this is an old-growth amendment, does it also provide guidance for the management of mature forest conditions?

The proposed amendment is primarily about old-growth forest conditions; however, an associated guideline is being proposed to encourage proactive stewardship actions to increase amounts and improve distributions and climate resilience of future old-growth conditions. The guideline applies to forests that do not currently meet old-growth

definitional conditions but that may contribute to the development of those conditions over time. The proposed amendment addresses management of mature forests with guidelines that present a suite of methods that can be used to promote old-growth conditions where appropriate based on local determinations. There is not an existing specified amount for mature forests managed toward old-growth conditions.

How will the mature and old-growth definition, inventory and threat analysis inform the old-growth proposed amendment and draft Environmental Impact Statement?

The [initial inventory](#) identifies the amount of mature and old-growth forests nationwide, and by region, which sets the context for local evaluation under the draft Environmental Impact Statement. The initial threat analysis outlines regional differences in primary threats to mature and old-growth forest conditions that inform evaluation of alternatives in the draft Environmental Impact Statement.

Helpful Resources:

- [USDA Forest Service Sustainability and Climate, Climate Change Policy and Initiatives](#)
- [USDA Forest Service Resources Planning Act Assessment](#)
- [National Old-Growth Amendment Planning Direction](#)

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