Forest Plan Revision for the Colville, Okanogan, and Wenatchee National Forests
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Old Growth and Forest Plan Revision

Old growth forests are important resources which are in scarce supply across the landscape of the Colville, Okanogan, and Wenatchee National Forests. The revision of the land management plans for these eastern Washington forests is an opportunity to develop and implement a strategy which would help to maintain, increase, and sustain old growth forests throughout the east side of the Cascades and northeast Washington.

The topic of old growth forests usually generates keen interest for many members of the public. One of the reasons for the high level of public interest is due to the fact that old growth forests are highly valued by many in our society as areas of solitude, and as spiritual retreats from the hectic modern world. Essential habitat for a diverse array of wildlife species is also provided by old growth forests, and is also an issue of concern for many.

Does one size of old growth fit all?

Old growth can be a difficult concept to define since different environments support different forests which develop different attributes as they age. Forests of the Colville, Okanogan, and Wenatchee National Forests consist of diverse forest types with climates varying from dry to cold and moist. The varying environmental conditions and resulting diverse vegetation create a large variety of old growth conditions and characteristics in different forest types across the east slopes of the Cascades and northeast Washington.

Old growth is defined by the kind of forest that is present and is characterized by a number of attributes in addition to size of trees. These different forest attributes that vary by forest type include size of trees, amount of tree decadence, number of canopy layers, number of snags per acre, and amount of woody debris present. For example, a forest type known as “Cold Dry Forest” which consists mainly of lodgepole pine and subalpine pine exhibits different forest characteristics and attributes at various seral stages (stages of forest stand development) than a forest type known as “Cold Moist Forest” which consists mainly of cedar, hemlock, and pacific silver fir. These differences between forest types are evident within the late seral stage, (also know as old growth forest) as well.

All vegetation data being used in forest plan revision is based on satellite imagery. Old growth attributes such as amount of woody debris, etc. can not be mapped since they do not appear in the satellite imagery. Forest plan revision will provide definitions for old growth that will be useful for project implementation. For purposes of strategic analysis, the more general “late seral forest” concept proves to be more useful.

Common Public Understanding of the Old Growth Issue is Essential.
In the current forest plan revision process, the emphasis on timber production is reduced from the level evident in the original round of forest planning. Old growth stands today are far more likely to disappear due to threats such as catastrophic fire caused by an excessive amount of fuels, woody debris, and "ladder fuels" than by timber management activities. Other current threats to old growth include tree root diseases, and insects including pine beetles and Douglas-fire beetle.

Fire exclusion, past timber management activities, and 19th century grazing practices changed the route of forest development to the overstocked stagnant stands that are currently prevalent across the landscape. Insects and disease are triggered by the overstocked condition of these forest stands. Thinning treatments employed to date have been insufficient to resolve the problem.

How can Forest Plan Revision Improve the Situation?
Revised forest plans can provide a strategy which would help maintain, sustain, and increase the amount of old growth forests present on the Colville, Okanogan, and Wenatchee National Forests. Forest planning will emphasize that the desired condition of our forests is to retain and increase acreages of late seral stage forests.

Future forest management could employ techniques that could reduce the risks to stands that are currently in the late seral stage of development. Techniques could also be used which promote and speed up the development of stands into stands which contain old growth characteristics and attributes. These techniques could include methods such as "thinning from below" which remove small tree "ladder fuels" and retains larger trees. This type of thinning could be accomplished through non-commercial and commercial thinnings. Use of prescribed fire could also be used to reduce the amount of excessive fuels. Location of treatments and the specific techniques to be used are the business of project level planning and are outside the scope of forest plan revision. Public involvement will be welcome as site specific projects are planned in the future.