

| | | [More from Globe Opinion](#)[Submit a Letter to the Editor](#)[Meet the Editorial Board](#)[Globe Op-Talks](#)

## OPINION

# US Forest Service should let forests grow

Letting forests grow would support the full range of native biodiversity while removing carbon from the atmosphere.

By **Juliette N. Rooney-Varga and William R. Moomaw** Updated December 13, 2022, 3:00 a.m.



Environmental activists gathered to protest the US Forest Service for moving forward with plans to log mature forests at Telephone Gap and in several other projects in the Green Mountain National Forest at the Rochester Ranger Station in Rochester, Vt., on Nov. 12. This clearcutting of forest sections follows President Biden's recent executive order from Earth Day to conserve mature and old forests on federal public lands. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

President Biden made history on Earth Day when he issued [an executive order that directs federal agencies to inventory and protect mature and old-growth forests on](#)

[federal public lands](#), including New England's White and Green Mountain National Forests.

Unfortunately, despite Biden's executive order and bold pronouncements to end deforestation by 2030, the US Forest Service seems determined to take federal forests in the wrong direction, jeopardizing US credibility on the world stage. Federal officials overseeing the Green Mountain National Forest have scheduled [double the amount of logging in the next five years over the previous five](#), including potentially many thousands of acres of forest over a century old. Instead of implementing Biden's pledges, they continue to implement decades-old practices. A district ranger for the Forest Service in Rochester, Vt., overseeing the logging plans [told the Globe](#) that logging is good for the local economy and the health of the forest. "Decision-making can be complex ... but it is based in science."



The Robinson Integrated Resource Project, approved in December 2018, authorized logging in 9,277 acres of the Green Mountain National Forest near the town of Rochester, Vt. The US Forest Service has approved logging in 43,000 acres of the national forest. JOHN GERRY

However, the science and forest health he refers to is focused on maximizing logging output. In contrast, today, the most urgent challenge is to rescue the climate needed to sustain forests and society. Our research and that of countless others shows that public forests must be protected to maximize the amount of carbon they store, keeping carbon safely out of the atmosphere.

ADVERTISING



The White and Green Mountain National Forests contain some of the largest blocks of intact and connected forests in the Northeast. The US Forest Service motto is to manage public lands for “the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time.” But what is the “greatest good for the greatest number” that national forests can provide? As society grapples with the linked climate and extinction emergencies, the answer is clear: Let the public forests grow to support the full range of native biodiversity while removing carbon from the atmosphere.

For a safe climate, fossil fuel carbon must be kept in the ground. Similarly, the carbon stored in tree trunks, limbs, roots, and soil must be kept in New England’s forests. The Northeast’s forests are a US carbon stock that is second only to the Pacific Northwest. These forests currently store only a fraction of what they could if they were allowed to

grow old — something they haven't been left to do since Europeans arrived four centuries ago and swiftly laid waste to the region's forests.

Meanwhile, the scarcity of older forests has created a crisis for New England's biodiversity. Species that evolved with undisturbed old forests, from the [American marten](#) to the [endangered northern long-eared bat](#), struggle to survive.

Less than [1 percent of New England's original forests survive](#), and only 3 percent manage to grow old. [Research shows](#) that allowing existing forests to grow to their full potential for biodiversity and carbon accumulation — [proforestation](#) — is the most effective way to maximize carbon storage in New England's forests. Proforestation has the potential to accumulate [two to four times more carbon](#) than the forests currently store — far more than planting trees. Older forests produce superior-quality water, protect against flooding and drought, and support high-quality habitat for New England's native species.

Private forests are the source of more than [96 percent of the wood supply](#) in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, the states where the Green and White Mountain National Forests are located. Public forests, spanning just 9 percent of New England, [contain 30 percent more carbon](#) than private forests on average. Significant portions of public lands are well on their way to recovering the characteristics of older forests. Federal and state policy should allow this trend to continue.

Old-growth forests take centuries to develop and are best restored at scale, requiring a long-term commitment over a large land area. The US Forest Service should issue a rule that protects mature and old-growth federal forests to serve the greatest good now and for future generations.

World leaders are in Montreal for the COP15 [United Nations Biodiversity Conference](#). The United States is not a party to the Convention on Biological Diversity, but it is involved in negotiations. Will the Biden administration seize the opportunity to lead by example, committing to durable protections for mature and old-growth forests on federal

lands? Or will the United States place blame on other nations while turning a blind eye to reckless logging in America's national forests?

Protecting public forests is a low-cost, high-reward investment in the long-term recovery of our planet's life support systems. The mature forests of today can be the old-growth forests of tomorrow, but only if we match words with action.

*Juliette N. Rooney-Varga is director of the Climate Change Initiative and codirector of [the Rist Institute for Sustainability and Energy](#) at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. William R. Moomaw is professor emeritus at Tufts University and visiting scientist at the [Woodwell Climate Research Center](#).*

©2022 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC