

# Biden signs order that goes to the heart of Oregon's forest politics

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President Joe Biden signs an executive order intended to help restore national forests devastated by wildfires, drought and blight, during an event at Seward Park on Earth Day, Friday, April 22, 2022, in Seattle. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)AP

By [Ted Sickinger](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

President Joe Biden signed an executive order during his visit to Seattle Friday that aims to safeguard mature and [old growth forests](#) on federal land, step up forest maintenance and tree planting projects across the country, and combat global climate change by increasing diplomatic efforts to fight aggressive logging in the Amazon, Africa and Southeast Asia.

Among other things, the order directs the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to define and inventory mature and old growth forests within a year and develop policies to protect them from [climate change and wildfire risks](#).

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“We’ve reached the point where the crisis on the environment has become so obvious, with the notable exception of the former president, that we really have an opportunity to do things we couldn’t have done two, five, ten years ago,” Biden said before sitting down to sign the order in Seattle’s Seward Park.

The order centers on some of the most fraught politics in Oregon. It is laden with language about reducing [wildfire risks](#) - packaging perhaps designed to make it more palatable to rural communities and the timber industry, which have long pushed the federal government to more aggressively “manage” forests by stepping up logging.

Major appropriations for forest restoration in the federal infrastructure bill will almost certainly bring new jobs into those communities and more logs into local mills. But Friday’s executive order was clearly focused on protecting trees, increasing carbon storage in forests and delivering on the administration’s climate agenda.

Nick Smith, a spokesperson for the logging industry group American Forest Resource Council, said Friday in an email that the federal government should be focused on reducing emissions from large wildfires by managing unhealthy and overstocked federal forests and providing wood products that store carbon.

“We are concerned the President’s Executive Order only adds more bureaucracy to our broken system of federal forest management and will divert more resources away from work that needs to be done on the ground right now,” he said.

But the order to inventory and protect “mature forests” is welcomed by environmental groups, who say the biggest threat to forests and the climate still comes from chainsaws, not wildfire. They are cautiously optimistic the order will establish long-sought policy guardrails on what can and can’t be cut, stopping the agencies from gradually whittling away what old growth still exists and establishing protections for maturing trees that are crucial for storing carbon.

“It’s not enough to just protect the remnant ancient forests,” said Steve Pedery, conservation director at Oregon Wild. “It’s the trees that are growing, these 80-plus year-old stands, that are a big deal. We’re thrilled to see them include these mature forests in the order.”

Together, the Forest Service and BLM manage about 30 million acres of land in Oregon, making them the largest land managers in the state. Most of Oregon’s true old growth has already been logged, but its wet forests west of the Cascades are some of the fastest growing and most carbon-dense in the world.

The Earth Day executive order also arrives as the first tranche of the \$8 billion of forest-related money included in the federal infrastructure bill is beginning to flow. Some \$5 billion is geared to reduce wildfire risks in forests nationwide by thinning small trees, removing dead vegetation and introducing more prescribed fire into the woods. It will also fund other wildfire mitigation programs

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around the country, including a \$1 billion grant program for community wildfire defense and \$600 million to increase firefighter pay.

It's still not clear how much of that funding will come to Oregon. But where to spend it is already the subject of deep controversy.

Earlier this month, the Forest Service released an initial list of forest restoration projects that will be funded out of the infrastructure bill. It includes \$4.5 million in 2022 to clean up 5,000 acres in the Deschutes National Forest, and an additional \$37 million in the following two years to ultimately treat 50,000 acres northwest of Bend.

This week, Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley announced another \$11.7 million in funding - partly from the infrastructure bill - that will flow to five projects around the state to "thin overgrown forests, support better ecosystems, reduce the threat of wildfires and create more jobs."

The money comes as local residents in [Bend are furious with the Forest Service](#) for a timber sale that involved logging older, fire-resistant trees along a popular mountain bike trail outside town in the name of wildfire prevention. That's just one example of the kind of timber sales around the state where environmentalists say federal agencies offer up older trees to make the sales more economically attractive to timber companies.

"That's Oregon's dirty little secret," said Pedery, pointing to [timber sales on BLM land west of the Cascades](#) "where we enthusiastically log old growth. We just don't tell anybody."

Biden's executive order does not ban logging mature or old growth trees, or provide any new protections for them. But the agencies are ordered to produce the inventory in an expedited time frame, put it out for public comment and develop "science-based" policies that address the threats from wildfire and climate impacts.

The infrastructure bill will significantly expand reforestation projects on federal land, and the order directs the agencies to develop a plan to boost cone and seed collection and expand nursery capacity.

It also directs the State Department to detail how to reduce or eliminate U.S. purchases of agricultural products grown on illegally or recently deforested lands, and coordinate with other agencies to use foreign assistance, trade tools and finance mechanisms to combat aggressive logging internationally.

[A year after he took office](#) amid a flurry of climate-related promises, Biden's ambitious climate agenda has been marred by setbacks. The president hosted [a virtual summit on global warming](#) at the White House last Earth Day. He used the moment to nearly double the United States' goal for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, vaulting the country to the front lines in the fight against climate change.

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A year later, [his most sweeping proposals remain stalled](#) on Capitol Hill despite renewed warnings from scientists that the world is hurtling toward a dangerous future marked by extreme heat, drought and weather.

In addition, Russia's war in Ukraine has reshuffled the politics of climate change, leading Biden to release oil from the nation's strategic reserve and encourage more domestic drilling in hopes of lowering sky-high gas prices that are emptying American wallets.

Timber sales from federal forests nationwide more than doubled over the past 20 years, as both Republicans and Democrats have pushed more aggressive thinning to prevent wildfires.

While the Forest Service and BLM have allowed older trees to be logged for years, former U.S. Forest Service Deputy Chief Jim Furnish said the funding from the infrastructure will reduce the need for the agencies to subsidize thinning of smaller trees and the removal of flammable vegetation by including older trees in their sales.

Many environmental advocates and academics believe mechanical thinning projects, unless surgically applied, are an ineffective, expensive, Sisyphean solution that damages forest soils, removes carbon and needs to be regularly revisited as smaller trees and vegetation grow back. They believe such treatments actually increase fire risks by opening up the canopy, drying out the soil and allowing wind driven fires to spread faster. They say federal funding would be best spent on helping make homes more fire safe and launching defensible space projects in at-risk communities

Dominic DellaSala, chief scientist at Wild Heritage, an organization focused on forest protection, said the executive order is a good first step. But, he said, the process needs to move quickly, as the peer-reviewed science already exists, researchers know where the mature and old growth forests are and understand the threats to them.

His biggest concern is that the Forest Service is going to be swimming in cash, targeting large landscapes and potentially going after big trees while the process plods along.

"Everything's in the fine print," he said. "I hope what we're going to see in the meantime is a cessation of logging in mature and old growth forests. That needs to stop so the process can play out."

-The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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