

**STATEMENT OF HENRI BISSON  
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, RENEWABLE RESOURCES AND PLANNING  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
before the  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS MANAGEMENT  
on  
OLD GROWTH ON OUR NATIONAL FORESTS**

**October 2, 2001**

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman. Thank you for inviting the Department of the Interior to discuss the status of old-growth forests on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Approximately 48 million acres of diverse forests and woodlands are managed by the BLM throughout the western United States, of which 2.7 million acres are located in western Oregon and northern California. Public Domain forest and woodlands managed by the BLM outside of western Oregon comprise approximately 46 million acres, including 28 million acres in Alaska. The BLM's largest forest management program is centered in western Oregon and northern California. Therefore, my comments will focus primarily on this program. However, I will also address Public Domain forest management and some of the challenges we face in that program as well.

In 1995, the BLM incorporated the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) into its land use plans for the six western Oregon districts and three northern California field offices covered by the NWFP. The NWFP's system of land use allocations and operational standards and guidelines represent the management framework from which the plans were developed. The main tenets of the NWFP are: 1) to protect and enhance late-successional and old-growth forest ecosystems and habitats for associated species; 2) to provide an ecosystem-wide framework for maintaining and restoring aquatic ecosystems; and 3) to provide for a sustainable supply of timber. These tenets are reflected in these locally-based land use plans. Each of these tenets are equally important in achieving the balanced implementation of the plan.

**Late-Successional and Old-Growth Forests**

Although definitions differ by ecosystem, under the NWFP late-successional forests are defined as stands which are generally 80 years and older, and old-growth forests are defined as stands which are 200 years and older. Old-growth forests, as defined in the NWFP, are a subset of late-successional forests. At the onset of NWFP implementation:

- In Western Oregon, approximately 48 percent of the forests on BLM's 2.2 million acres were 80 years or older. Approximately 16 percent of those forests were 200 years or older.
- In northern California, approximately 60 percent of the forests on BLM's 146,000 acres were 80 years or older. Approximately 25 percent of those forests were 200 years or older.

**Reserve Land Use Allocations**

The Northwest Forest Plan established a series of reserves that cover approximately 80% of the total Plan acres. The principal types of reserves are:

- Late-Successional Reserves (LSR) -- These reserves are large blocks of land which include both younger and late-successional forest types. They encompass the majority of both the existing ecologically significant late-successional and old-growth forests. The objective of LSRs is to protect and enhance conditions of late-successional and old-growth forest ecosystems. Thinning of younger forests within the LSRs is allowed in order to foster old-growth development. Large scale commercial harvesting of trees is not permitted in LSRs.

- Riparian Reserves -- The Riparian Reserve allocations, located along rivers and streams, are responsible for maintaining and restoring riparian structures and functions. They maintain habitat for riparian-dependent and associated species, and for species that are dependent on the area between the upslope and riparian areas, and provide safe travel corridors for many terrestrial animals and plants. Riparian Reserves are an important component of the old-growth system. Timber harvest restrictions are approximately the same as for LSRs.

Congressionally-Reserved Areas -- Congressionally-reserved areas, such as National Parks and Wilderness Areas, also form an important part of the NWFP strategy for protection of old-growth.

### **Matrix Land Use Allocation**

The term "Matrix" is defined as that area in the NWFP that is managed for timber production. The Matrix, which represents 20 percent of the BLM-managed NWFP area, is the focus of the social and economic component of the Plan. The objective of the Matrix is to provide a steady supply of timber that can be sustained over the long-term without degrading the health of the forest or other environmental resources. There are a variety of standards and guidelines, protection measures, and environmental requirements in place for the management of these lands:

- Standards and guidelines, applied in association with timber harvest, require the retention of snags, live trees, down logs and woody debris, measures designed to promote diversity and protect late-successional and old-growth forests and associated species.
- "Survey and Manage" standards and guidelines have resulted in management recommendations for 301 rare and little-known species. Recent changes in the "Survey and Manage" standards and guidelines were instituted via a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) and Record of Decision (ROD), which was signed by the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture on January 12, 2001. These changes should enable us to conduct surveys in a more timely way, to establish an annual species review process, and to create a better adaptive management process. As the newly revised standards and guidelines are undertaken, activities on some matrix lands are expected to resume, while protecting many species dependent on the region's old growth ecosystems.

The Matrix lands available for timber harvest are managed using a variety of treatments, including thinning and regeneration harvest. Thinning treatments remove individual trees to enhance the growth and health of the remaining stand. These partial harvest treatments are generally applied in forest stands less than 80 years of age. Regeneration harvest treatments remove most of the merchantable timber while retaining 6 to 25 live trees per acre to provide a "legacy" of older forest components. After a regeneration harvest, trees are planted to produce a young forest stand developing along side the older forest legacy trees which were retained. In addition, consultation is conducted with the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service when actions may effect threatened or endangered species.

### **First Decade Growth and Harvest**

At the onset of the NWFP, BLM managed lands with approximately 1,061,000 acres of forests 80 years or older (late-successional), and 357,000 acres of forest 200 years or older (old-growth). BLM anticipated that approximately 3% of late-successional and old-growth forests would be harvested during the first decade of the NWFP's implementation.

During the first three years of the NWFP, harvest rates of late-successional forests closely aligned with the Plan assumptions. However, during the last three years, the BLM sold only 20 to 30 percent of the Plan assumed levels. The reduced harvest is primarily a result of litigation, including recent litigation on anadromous fish and the northern spotted owl, and from our efforts to implement the Survey and Manage standards and guidelines. As a result, significantly less than the 11,000 acres of old-growth projected to be harvested in the first decade was actually harvested on BLM-managed lands in western Oregon.

Since FY 1998, there has been very little harvest of old-growth or other late-successional forests in the Northwest. The majority of harvest during this period has come from thinning in forest stands less than 80 years of age.

The majority of the existing late-successional and old-growth forest is protected. Given the extensive reserve system and the standards and guidelines under which the Matrix allocation is managed, the development of late-successional and old-growth forests will exceed the rates of harvest.

### **Public Domain Forest Management**

Management of the Public Domain forests and woodlands is guided by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the BLM's Public Domain Forest Management Policy. The Public Domain Forest Management Policy requires that forest ecosystems be maintained. In addition, over the past decade, our forests have been managed to maintain or create desired forest conditions which are intended to reflect their potential natural community, including related contributions to biodiversity and wildlife habitats. The BLM's policy directs managers to conduct and maintain current inventories of forest land and to use the Bureau land use planning process to map desired future forest conditions and implement management actions needed to achieve those conditions. The Bureau recognizes the role that remnant old growth forests play in providing unique historical, ecological niches across the landscape. As such, program emphasis has shifted away from supporting commercial treatment actions to a strategy aimed at maintaining, restoring and improving forest sustainability and health.

The Bureau faces significant challenges in managing Public Domain forests and woodlands. Inventory data on these lands is outdated. However, we are drafting a proposal to participate more fully with the Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program of the USDA Forest Service in order to fill the gap in our inventory data. We are also poised to launch a new Bureau-wide inventory program, the Forest Vegetation Inventory System (FORVIS). This inventory database will be implemented over the next 2 - 3 years.

Our professional forester workforce declined over 36% between 1991-1996, and we currently estimate that 75% of remaining professionals will be eligible for retirement within the next five years. In the event all of these individuals were to retire, we would be left with a mere 15% of the forester workforce of 1991. We are currently exploring ways to address this problem, including contracting, funding positions using fire plan funds, and sharing staff with the U.S. Forest Service.

A certain percentage of "old growth" occurs in non-commercial forest types such as the pinyon-juniper woodlands of Arizona, New Mexico, and Nevada. With the expansion of pinyon-juniper woodlands outside of their natural range, due primarily to fire exclusion, there is a need to identify appropriate ecological sites for this forest type and to initiate actions to return it to the "natural" range. Currently, old growth trees are considered those native species that are at least 150 years old. Several states are piloting projects to manage their pinyon-juniper stands, and, where ecologically appropriate, reduce it's wildfire potential where fire exclusion has allowed for its unchecked expansion. Materials produced as a by-product of this ecologically based management strategy may provide measurable benefits for bio-energy production.

Forest restoration treatments, particularly in dry forest types, are being undertaken with the complimentary objectives of protecting communities and providing forests that are resilient to disturbance factors, such as insects and disease. In other areas, such as the Mt. Trumbull area in the Grand Canyon Parashant National Monument, projects are designed to protect and enhance old growth forests and restore historically-based natural conditions as they existed prior to intensive livestock use and fire suppression.

The Bureau, with the approval of Congress, has been able to augment forest health activities through the Forest Health and Ecosystem Restoration Fund. This revolving fund has funded over \$50 million worth of on-the-ground forest health and restoration treatments since it's inception in 1993.

Overall, the BLM's Public Domain Forestry Program manages those areas which contain old-growth stands where they exist in their natural range. The continued health and vigor of these older trees is considered in the treatments that are designed to improve forest resiliency, reduce wildfire hazards, and support a high level of biodiversity.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I will be pleased to answer any questions that you or other members of the Committee might have.