

GUEST VIEW

The tree of Oregon should unite us all

By Tim Palmer

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Douglas firs form the backbone of the timber industry, make homes for wildlife, protect watersheds and fish dependent on them, and grow taller than any other living thing in the Northwest. This conifer also happens to be the state tree of Oregon and the one that's proudly displayed on our license plates.

But global overheating is projected to eliminate a lot of those trees and slow the growth of virtually all. In Climate Change Resource Center, (fs.usda.gov/ccrc/climate-projects/stories/helping-forests-keep-pace-climate-change) the USDA reported that if projected climate change occurs, Douglas-firs "will shift inland from the coast and will become less productive."

Recent heat records have heightened the importance of that warning, and this year's drought across much of Oregon reinforces its urgency.

Forest Service maps show Douglas fir productivity shrinking sharply or disappearing by 2090 (fs.fed.us/rm/pubs_other/rmrs_2012_weiskittel_a001.pdf), and with it will go everything from jobs-to-owls. The OSU co-author of another report concluded, "Douglas fir will be less productive in the Pacific Northwest under a warming climate." (journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/704517?journalCode=jaere)

This change could dwarf anything we've seen in past conflicts about logging the last few percent of ancient forests that remain available versus letting them stand, or about clearcutting versus other timber prescriptions. A hotter climate will cut us all off at the knees if we don't do something about it.

Douglas firs are the best trees for lumber, and they represent 63 percent of Oregon's commercial harvest according to the Forest Service (fs.usda.gov/treesearch/pubs/9036). In economic shorthand that means 6 out of 10 jobs in logging and wood processing. Those jobs have shrunk to one-quarter of what they once were and about 1 percent of jobs statewide, according to state data (qualityinfo.org/-/oregon-s-wood-product-manufacturing-industry-is-still-important-especially-in-rural-areas), but they're still important, especially if it's your job. So, are we going to allow those trees and jobs to wither or disappear just because we insist on burning oil and gas like there's no tomorrow?

Virtually all climate scientists who are not paid by fossil-fuel industries agree that burning oil, gas, and coal accounts for the lion's share of greenhouse gases heating the earth and making life for Douglas firs miserable. Climate change is bringing heat waves and hot winds that burn timberlands and whole towns, it's pushing sea-level up toward homes and highways, causing some of the worst droughts in memory, and producing floods because our mountains are drenched in rain instead of snow. With our own eyes, we're all seeing those changes. Experts from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on down say that converting to renewable energy is the essential remedy.

Whatever thrives instead of Douglas firs is not going to compete for timber or ecosystem values. The forest that has enriched us all will be infected by pathogens and dwarfed from the grandeur and utility we've known. Of course, this won't happen overnight. The delay makes it easy for those of us who are focused on annual profits or rely on monthly paychecks to be unconcerned. But the fate of the next generation, and even the next decade, will be vexed if action isn't taken now.

Instead of fighting over who gets the last big tree in the woods — which is, to say, the battle of the last century — we should be working together to solve the problem of this century — one that threatens everyone's future.

Not to tell anyone how to do their job, but the log truck drivers convoying to Salem should be honking their horns — not in opposition to climate legislation, but in favor of it. Otherwise there will be no decent logs to load onto those trucks. And wouldn't it be logical for timber industry executives to support measures to keep their best product growing and thereby on its way to the mill?

Everyone who walks in the woods, cuts a tree, works at the plywood plant, fishes for salmon, or just looks with pleasure at a green mountainside from their porch or from the main street of town should care about this threat. The climate crisis is too often regarded as a fixation of people living in cities, but those of us in small towns and rural countrysides like mine stand to lose the most, including this tree that's emblematic of nothing less than Oregon.

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