

As We See It: August 2022
Mature and Old-Growth Trees
Defining Ambiguity

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Ox-y-mo-ron: a figure of speech in which apparently contradictory terms appear in conjunction and are self-contradictory. Such as Responsible Government, in this case – Forest Management.

Washington DC has been described as embodying the best of northern hospitality and southern ingenuity. Not necessarily the epitome of functionality. On “Earth Day” President Biden signed an Executive Order directing the Forest Service and Department of Interior to “define, identify and complete an inventory of old-growth and mature forests on Federal lands.”

It is the “defining” of old-growth and mature timber where the concern should be for the forestry professionals and forest products industries. The variations in regions, species, management practices and numerous other factors create such a level of ambiguity (the quality of being open to more than one interpretation; inexactness) that it is impossible to define a single standard. Hence, defining the undefinable and the oxymoron - defining ambiguity.

Regardless “Old-Growth” has been employed by anti-forest management groups to obstruct forest management to the point of predisposing millions of acres to burn annually. All in the name of protecting the forests. Now throw “Mature Forests” into the equation.

The Climate Forests Coalition, a group of dozens of environmental organizations including Environment America, the National Resource Defense Council, the Center for Biological Diversity, and the Sierra Club prepared a report claiming that logging is the greatest threat to mature and old-growth forests.

The objective of this exercise in defining Old-Growth and Mature Forests is evident: further obstacles to federal forest management. Significant restrictions and limitations already exist regarding Old-Growth forests on federal land. The addition of the new category of “Mature Forests” opens a Pandora’s box that would create a new weapon in the arsenal of regular legal challenges to federal forest management efforts.

“Commercial forests are often grown to maturity and then harvested before they reach old-growth status” Len Montgomery, Environment America Public Lands Director

The irony of this statement is very revealing in that it would advocate that “mature” timber not be harvested in order to allow it to reach “old-growth” status, at which time it cannot be harvested either. This would suggest that timber should be harvested before it reaches maturity, which would be contrary to the position that mature timber is necessary to develop old-growth timber because, under that premise, immature timber must be protected to allow it to become mature timber and later old-growth timber. Hence, under the guise of old growth and mature forest scrutiny, no timber harvest on public lands is the ultimate objective of opponents of professional forest management.

For a government that professes to follow the science, I would suggest that they consider Silviculture. Generally, silviculture is the “science” and art of growing and cultivating forest crops, based on a knowledge of silvics (the study of the life history and general characteristics of forest trees and stands, with particular reference to local/regional factors). The focus of silviculture is the control, establishment, and management of forest stands. The primary benefits of silvicultural practices are; it produces abundant raw materials for the forest products industry; it increases forest cover which is necessary for the conservation of wildlife; and it maintains a perfect water cycle in nature.

The practice of silvicultural-based forest management identifies the process as a stand that is tended, harvested, and re-established. Silviculture is a cycle that requires all aspects of the process to be completed. The harvest age class cycle is based on maturity, which varies from region and species.

The science of silviculture identifies the optimal point, and maturity, at which timber should be harvested. Mature trees are those that have reached their maximum product value, or the point where vigor, health, or growth are declining. Harvesting timber after the point of maturity renders dead, rotten, and diseased forests that are prone to diminish the merchantable value.

Therefore, any consideration defining Mature Forests and Old-Growth Forests, must be based on the science of silviculture and not an environmental agenda of no timber management or harvest. The latter is not scientifically based and is an obvious attempt at creating another false premise to obstruct science-based silviculture forest management practices.

“You must remember that the forest which contributes nothing to the wealth, progress, or safety of the country is of no interest to the government”, President Theodore Roosevelt, America’s “Conservation President”, 1903 speech to the Society of American Foresters, the USDA and the DOI.

This is an exercise in semantics that will accomplish nothing positive toward the forest management goals and objectives of the United States. Implementation of language defining “Mature Forests” will, on the contrary, “create forests which contribute nothing to the wealth, progress or safety of the country, and should be of no interest to the government.”

In conclusion, if the USDA/USFS and DOI were to dangerously attempt to define “Mature Forests”, without basing it on the facts and science, it is merely a pandering exercise in futility that would contribute nothing to the objective of improving forest health and reducing wildfires by forest professionals, but instead would result in another obstruction to federal forest management objectives and healthy forests.