Seeds of Change in the College of Forestry (CoF)

Doug Pollock - Sept. 29th, 2019

Broken Trust: I've been a firsthand observer of OSU's forestry management practices in the McDonald-Dunn Research Forest for more than three decades. I've also participated in OSU's past forest planning processes, attending meetings and giving input. In the mid-90's I was a founding member of the Soap Creek Watershed Council, a group formed in response to concerns about OSU's management of the newly-donated Cameron Tract. We met with the OSU President and initiated a public meeting with the dean of the College of Forestry (George Brown) and his research forest staff. Scores of neighbors showed up to express a wide range of concerns, ranging from herbicides polluting our wells, erosion from the planned clearcuts, and safety impacts of logging trucks on our narrow, twisty roads. The dean and his staff listened, but weren't able (or willing) to answer most of our questions. The dean promised to hold a second meeting to provide us with answers to our concerns. Several weeks later, Soap Creek neighbors received letters thanking us for our input - and notifying us that cutting would begin soon. There was no mention of the meeting we'd been promised nor answers to our questions! This was my first lesson in how college leaders deal with the public: they tolerate our input, but never embrace it; promises mean nothing.

When I discovered OSU had cut 16 acres of old growth near Baker Creek in May of this year, a whole new journey of discovery lay before me. Like the plot of some novel of deception and intrigue, the story unraveled in ways that felt both familiar and foreign. The forest manager who adamantly claimed they absolutely didn't cut 'old growth' and said the giant stumps we'd seen were left over from a harvest many decades ago...the phony claims that signs of mortality and rot justified the logging, the bizarre explanation that the road they'd cut into the adjacent old growth was for a "fire break access point"...each revelation and excuse only dug a deeper hole for the dean and his staff. The lack of honesty and integrity in OSU's response to the cutting only added fuel to the fire of community outrage and opposition. The cutting of old growth created enormous distrust and anger, while the denial and obfuscation by CoF staff further eroded the public trust of OSU.

Community Response: I organized a group of neighbors to form **Friends of OSU Old Growth** in response to the cutting of old growth and the College of Forestry's misguided forest management. We developed a website (www.friendsofosuoldgrowth.org) to advocate for preservation of the remaining, unprotected old growth in the forests managed by OSU. I was instrumental in getting veteran reporter Rob Davis of the Oregonian to write his exposé about OSU's cutting of the old growth earlier this summer.[1] The response from the broader community has been overwhelming. We now have over 500 members receiving email updates and more than 1200 signers of our petition. OSU faculty members, alumni, recreational users, and others who care about the forests have come together not only to preserve old growth, but also to call for change in OSU's forest management.

I've been even more surprised and gratified by the many CoF insiders (including several emeritus professors) who have contacted me to divulge details of past misdeeds within the College. A former employee told me how more than 700,000 board feet of timber (valued at ~$750,000) was stolen from the Blodgett Forest in the early 90s. When he started digging into the theft and asking questions, he was fired by OSU's research forest director. He subsequently reported the crime to the Oregon Governor's office. But by the time state officials investigated, evidence of the theft had been erased from the college's records. Another employee told of research requests that were routinely used to justify much larger harvests (against the wishes of the researchers). Others told me OSU had deliberately logged old growth many times in the past, in violation of forest management plans. An OSU researcher disclosed that a former

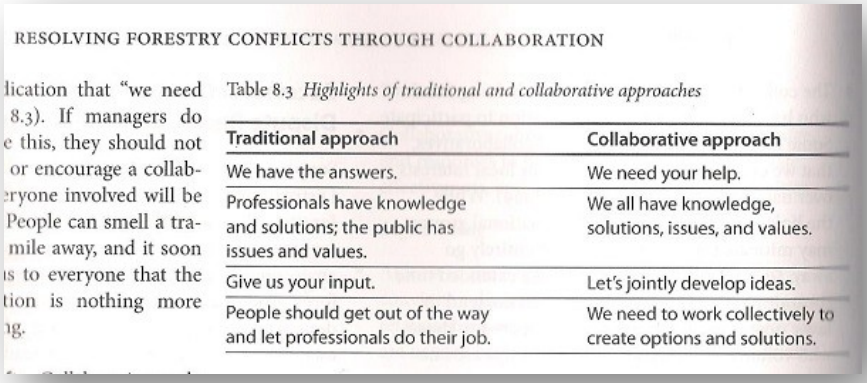
1 *Rob Davis,* 'Majestic' Douglas fir stood for 420 years. Then Oregon State University foresters cut it down, Oregonian/OregonLive.com, July 26th, 2019.

dean had declared that spotted owls nesting in the OSU forests were “IRRELEVANT!”, emphatically contradicting OSU's own spotted owl expert. I heard numerous stories of unrepentant hardliners within the college who worked to oppose the preservation of old growth (including the Baker Creek and Sulphur Springs stands). These hardliners dominated the management practices of the research forests for many decades, giving OSU a dark reputation as a tool of the timber industry. An owner of a forestry consulting business stated he won't even consider hiring OSU forestry graduates because they are so lacking in appreciation of ecological forestry values. He said an entire generation of OSU forestry grad’s are stumped when asked, "*Who was Aldo Leopold?*"

OSU's Response: As the story of OSU's cutting of an old growth forest gained national attention, the dean's narrative changed in sadly predictable ways. His initial admission that it was a "mistake" and did not align with OSU's principles, morphed into conflicting variations. He later told a reporter from the Oregonian that they were following the principles of the (abandoned) 2005 research forest plan but, “*that doesn’t mean we follow it to a ‘T’*". In a July 23rd CNN.com story, he said, "*For years we've had plans that these trees would be harvested, our mistake was in sticking to that (2005) Plan*"[2]. Recently, the director of the research forests gave a private tour of the 'No Vacancy' clearcut and adamantly stated it was NOT a mistake to cut the old growth, that they were merely following the plan. The same conflicting message is reportedly being told by OSU's team working on the Elliott State Research Forest project with the Oregon Department of State Lands (DSL).

In response to public concerns about OSU's forest management, the dean and his staff held a public meeting (on August 28th, in Adair Village). Many participants expressed concerned about the unbalanced format of the meeting, following the traditional, "You have the questions, we have the answers" structure. This predictable, outdated response is captured in the following table from the authoritative text, Ecological Forest Management (written by former OSU faculty). Like former deans, the interim dean has resisted requests to change to a more collaborative approach.

The traditional vs. collaborative approach to solving forestry issues[3]:



RESOLVING FORESTRY CONFLICTS THROUGH COLLABORATION

lication that “we need 8.3). If managers do e this, they should not or encourage a collab- eryone involved will be People can smell a tra- mile away, and it soon is to everyone that the tion is nothing more ng.

Table 8.3 *Highlights of traditional and collaborative approaches*

Traditional approach	Collaborative approach
We have the answers.	We need your help.
Professionals have knowledge and solutions; the public has issues and values.	We all have knowledge, solutions, issues, and values.
Give us your input.	Let’s jointly develop ideas.
People should get out of the way and let professionals do their job.	We need to work collectively to create options and solutions.

The dean's chatter about his childhood, sense of place and optimizing forestry to solve the climate and sustainability crisis stood in stark contrast to how he and his staff have been managing the research forests. This disconnect is at the heart of these issues, leaving many folks deeply mistrustful of OSU. The rhetoric from college leaders just doesn't match the long history of OSU's forestry mismanagement.

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2 Doug Criss, “An Oregon university let loggers harvest a 420-year-old tree. The school says that was a mistake.”, CNN.com, July 23rd, 2019.

3 Jerry F. Franklin, K. Norman Johnson, and Debora L. Johnson, Ecological Forest Management, (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2018)

Violations of the Plan: Unfortunately for the dean and his staff, the many violations of the 2005 Plan are as plain to see as the growing number of clearcuts in the forests. A recent assessment by OSU's esteemed former faculty (Debra L. and K. Norman Johnson)[4] provides unequivocal documentation of OSU's forestry plan violations. The report reveals how the cutting of old growth at Baker Creek and numerous other harvests all violated the plan's commitment to maintain the (1,585 acres of) nesting/roosting/foraging (NRF) habitat for northern spotted owls. The report estimates that the total owl habitat has been reduced by ~166 acres or more than 10% in the past three years. It also points to a dozen clearcuts in the southern zone of the McDonald Research Forest that greatly exceeded the 4-acre harvest limit. These are not minor oversights or adjustments. They are egregious violations of the plan's principles. The Johnsons were involved in developing and implementing both the 1993 and 2005 Research Forest Plans. No one speaks with more authority and credibility when it comes to OSU's forestry plans. For the dean and his staff to insist they are following the principles of the plan is shamefully dishonest.

Faced with such blatant disconnects and dysfunction, it is reasonable to ask how might one go about changing OSU's deeply-entrenched and outdated approach to forestry. With contributions from the timber industry permeating the college and funding the dean's position, is there any hope of substantive change? Before considering these questions, it is helpful to take a moment to discuss the theory of change in large organizations. In Ecological Forest Management (ECM), the authors cite research showing that natural resource policies in the US have evolved in ways that are very similar to biological systems[5]:

Four Phases of Policy Development and Change

1) Initial robust policy implementation followed by increasing rigidity over time as the policy matures and bureaucracies become committed to it.
2) Challenge to the policy by activities based on differences between expectation and observation, which can create a crisis and lead to policy collapse.
3) Catalysts for change taking action, helping create a bridge to a new policy.
4) Development of new policy alternatives followed by policy selection and implementation, and the cycle beginning again.

The ECM authors write:

> *"Initially robust policies become rigid, often with a single-minded emphasis on maximizing one aspect of resource management. The responsible agency becomes so invested in the policies, and the social forces that benefit from them are so powerful, that the agency cannot adjust as problems and circumstances change. Political and legal activists eventual take actions that result in policy disintegration, followed by individuals and groups whose ideas serve as catalysts for change"*

Following in the Footsteps of the USFS: The authors of Ecological Forest Management also cite the highly relevant example of federal forest policy and over-harvesting, leading up to the Northwest Forest Plan of 1994. OSU's College of Forestry seems to be following a similar trajectory:

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4 Debora L. Johnson and K. Norman Johnson, "Damaging Ecological Resources Protected by the 2005 Forest Plan: Recent Harvests on the OSU McDonald-Dunn Forest", September 25th, 2019.

5 Lance H. Gunderson and C.S. Holling, eds., Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems, (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2002), 450 pp

Box 11.1 **Federal forest policy in the Pacific Northwest: An illustration of policy development, rigidity, collapse, and renewal**

The pent-up demand for wood for housing after World War II, combined with the inability of private forests to meet this demand, led to a major expansion of harvests in the magnificent old-growth Douglas-fir forests on the national forests of western Oregon and Washington. The Forest Service encouraged construction of new lumber and plywood mills to process the timber, and many communities expanded to accommodate the arrival of more mill workers and loggers. For the first time, these federal forests harvested their entire ***allowable cuts***, which were based on the principle of sustained yield. Federal timber harvest became a central element in the regional economy. Tens of thousands of people found employment logging and milling the harvest. Through the 1950s and 1960s, timber management was the dominant use of these federal forests, and this emphasis was strongly supported by the congressional delegations of the two states.

By the early 1970s, the Northwest's federal timber economy functioned as a highly efficient machine, clearcutting thousands of acres of old forests each year to provide logs for hundreds of mills and replacing the cut forests with fast-growing plantations. Allowable cuts were based on the promise of intensive management and high yields from the plantations. Other uses of the forest were given only modest consideration, under the presumption that a sustained yield of timber harvest, carefully done, would benefit the other resources, whether they were fish, wildlife, or watersheds.

Passage of the National Forest Management Act (1976), in large part a reaction to the increased emphasis on timber production in the national forests, required development of integrated forest plans following procedures specified in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970. The necessity for interdisciplinary planning and development of integrated forest plans resulted in a major challenge to the mantra that sustained yield provided for all uses. Through the 1980s, the Forest Service worked on developing forest plans, but meeting nontimber resource goals frequently required reductions in allowable cuts, which resulted in major opposition from both internal and external sources. Largely ignored were repeated pleas from district rangers that existing allowable cuts could not be sustained without damaging other resources and scientific studies that documented the threat of these harvest levels to wildlife and to forest ecosystems. Each year the Chief of the Forest Service sat before congressional appropriation committees and assured them the Forest Service could maintain the harvest level, and the allowable-cut juggernaut rolled on.

After more than a decade of work, the national forests released forest plans that called for slight reductions in allowable cuts; old-growth forests would still provide much of the harvest. The plans were litigated over protection for the northern spotted owl, and the courts granted an injunction prohibiting harvest in northern spotted owl habitat until the agency developed a scientifically credible plan for conservation of the owl. With that injunction, timber harvesting on national forests in the region essentially ceased, with wrenching disruptions in the lives of thousands of people.

After the Forest Service failed repeatedly to satisfy the courts with new plans that protected the owl while maintaining relatively high harvest levels, the agency created a team of scientists with expertise in the ecology of the northern spotted owl and charged them with developing a forest management strategy that would satisfy the courts. The science team developed a strategy based on the principles of conservation biology, greatly increasing the area that would be placed in reserves and also modifying management practices in intervening areas to facilitate dispersal of owls between the reserves. However, the White House would not allow the Forest Service to adopt the strategy because of protest from Congress.

Congressional committees concerned with national forest management recognized that the owl was just one of many issues that needed to be addressed. They chartered another scientific committee and charged it with synthesizing relevant information in developing and evaluating management alternatives for conserving old-growth forest ecosystems and their constituent species, aquatic habitat for at-risk fish stocks, and species listed as threatened or endangered such as the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet. While accepting the alternatives that the scientists developed as a fair representation of the choices, Congress did not pass legislation that addressed the issues involved—the reduction in timber harvest needed to conserve species and ecosystems was just too great.

Building on the preceding reports, newly elected President Bill Clinton created yet another scientific committee, which included social scientists for the first time, to develop alternatives that could provide the basis for a comprehensive plan for these forests (FEMAT, 1993). These efforts culminated in his decision to adopt what became the Northwest Forest Plan in 1994. This plan placed conservation of biodiversity and watersheds first and timber harvest second, reversing historical post-WWII priorities on the national forests, and substantially reducing the timber harvest level.

All elements of the adaptive cycle appear in this story: (1) initial robust growth of a vibrant policy for advancing social well-being, with rigidity and inflexibility developing as maintaining allowable cuts became too economically and politically important to modify; (2) abrupt collapse of the policy after being challenged in court; (3) development of new policy ideas and alternatives by ad hoc groups of scientists outside of agency control; and (4) adoption of a policy by a decision maker (President Clinton) that put the federal forests of the region on a new path.

A history of federal forest policy in the Pacific Northwest leading up to the NW Forest Plan[6]

After decades of overcutting by the timber industry and the systemic failures of the Forest Service and Congress to come up with meaningful protections for threatened and endangered species, newly-elected president, Bill Clinton, got involved. The result was the 1994 **Northwest Forest Plan** which "placed conservation of biodiversity and watersheds

6 Jerry F. Franklin, K. Norman Johnson, and Debora L. Johnson, Ecological Forest Management, (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2018)

first and timber harvest second". An outside decision maker (President Clinton) delivered a new policy which forever changed the path of forestry in the Pacific Northwest[7].

The analogies to the OSU College of Forestry are particularly relevant and powerful - at least up to the point of crisis and dysfunction. As my opening story relates, the managers of the research forests have had a long history of ignoring public input, and even their own carefully-developed, management plans. The current plan was developed in 2005 and abandoned for a full decade starting in 2009. The next plan isn't expected to be completed for at least three more years (now a 20-year lapse). College leaders operated the research forests without an updated forest inventory or GIS specialist for a full decade. How can a public entity managing 15,000 acres of land justify such flagrant malfeasance?

Priorities of the CoF: Revenue generation has clearly been given priority over other values in the management of the College forests and previous planning processes. The Oregonian's reporting mentioned earlier revealed that, "*$6 million in accelerated timber sales from the school's forest near Clatskanie are being used to help defray cost overruns for...the Oregon Forest Science Complex*". These cuts happened after college leaders abandoned their innovative 1997 management plan for this forest (where timber theft in the early 90's was covered up by a previous dean and his staff). The suspension of the plans for both the McDonald-Dunn and Blodgett Research Forests (last updated in 2005 and 1997 respectively) paints a picture of a decidedly insular organization, focused primarily on revenue generation, not research and education. The failure to incorporate carbon assessments (as called for in the 2005 Plan) or any meaningful changes to forestry practices to reduce climate change is another serious omission.

Lack of Integrity: The lack of transparency and bias toward revenue generation has also characterized the dean's "Tier 1 Advisory Committee", a group tasked with updating the mission and goals governing the research forests. This committee met for nearly two years, without public notice. It was given a mandate to come up with $2 million in revenue from timber harvests, biasing its work from the start. The sole public representative on the committee refused to even disclose the names of the committee members. When I pressed him, he said the director of the research forests (Stephen Fitzgerald) had told him not to talk to me! It took three escalating email requests to get the dean to just disclose the names of the committee members. Key questions about the committee's work remain unanswered after repeated requests to the dean and OSU's communication director, Steve Clark. The orchestrated withholding of information related to this key committee dealing with the research forests clearly violates OSU's Core Values[8]:

> **3) Integrity.** ***We value responsible, accountable and ethical behavior in order to maintain an atmosphere of honest, open communication and mutual respect throughout the Oregon State community.***

Genesis of Change: Given the long history of mismanagement, the seriousness of the problems, pressure from timber industry interests and revenue needs, it seems doubtful change will come from within the College of Forestry. Many insiders and alumni concede that change has to come from outside the college, starting with the university administration. Just as the timber industry of the 80s and 90s only changed course when powers beyond their control forced it upon them, a higher authority must intervene to change OSU's outdated management of the research forests. We now have growing awareness of climate change and the huge carbon impacts of logging and timber production. The societal pressure on the OSU's forest management will only increase. Decades of data and consensus among the world's climate scientists (including many at OSU) tell us this is so. Furthermore, citizens increasingly understand that these forests belong to the public. They expect OSU to steward them for the public good. Citizens will demand a collaborative

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7 Jerry F. Franklin, K. Norman Johnson, and Debora L. Johnson, Ecological Forest Management, (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2018)

8 As of 2025, OSU's "Core Values" are no longer to be found on the university's website. The OSU Code of Ethics appears to be the primary document governing university values.

role in the forest planning process, a change that surely frightens the traditionalists within the college. In addition, the huge power of social media, email, and the Internet mean that OSU can no longer control the dialogue or message. When the story of OSU's old growth cutting showed up as the lead story in the Oregonian and on CNN.com, it left a lasting, negative impact on the university. Restoring this loss of public trust and academic reputation will be exceedingly difficult, but the long-term success of the College of Forestry depends on it.

Seeds of Change: If the OSU administration is truly committed to changing the College of Forestry, it will need to lead the process. Here are some specific steps to take:

1) Restore the management plans for the McDonald-Dunn and Blodgett Forests (and follow them to a 'T'). This must be done with a strong public commitment.

2) Make the study and mitigation of climate change the highest priority for all college operations. Do detailed carbon assessments (as called for in the 2005 Plan). Stop all burning of logging slash piles. Make the research forests a leading example of ecological forestry management.

3) Play the leading role in transforming practices of the timber industry to minimize climate change and prioritize ecological functions through education, research and advocacy. Exhibit this leading role by demonstrating the very best practices (prioritizing ecological values and carbon storage and mitigation) in the OSU research forests.

4) Publicly commit to preserving ALL late-successional reserves on OSU lands, not just trees over 160 years old. Late-successional forests (80 years of age and older) are now largely protected in our federal forests. OSU should be matching or exceeding this relatively low bar. Start by changing the status of the Sulphur Springs stand to protect the remaining 36 acres of old growth.

5) Disconnect timber industry funding from key positions within the College of Forestry, including the dean's endowment. This funding presents an enormous conflict of interest, biasing decisions at all levels of the college.

6) Fully disclose all sources of funding for the college in an annual report presented to the public. This includes revenue from each timber harvest, donations to the endowments, funding of the new forestry building, research, and education. The public has a fundamental right to know where the money is coming from and where it is going.

7) Change the planning process for the next research forest plan to make it a truly collaborative process with public involvement. Make sure that the planning team is NOT biased toward revenue generation, but rather prioritizes ecological values and carbon mitigation and storage.

8) Develop an independent assessment process with clear performance metrics to gauge the college's compliance with their forest management plans. Publish the results. Hold a public meeting each year to present the results and discuss management plans for the coming year. Hold public tours on an annual basis to demonstrate management and research activities.

9) Choose a new dean who is truly committed to positive change within the College of Forestry.

10) The OSU President, Executive Committees, and Board of Trustees must provide leadership and support for these changes. History has shown change will not come about without high-level support.