

NEPA and Forests

Smarter planning leads to healthier forests.



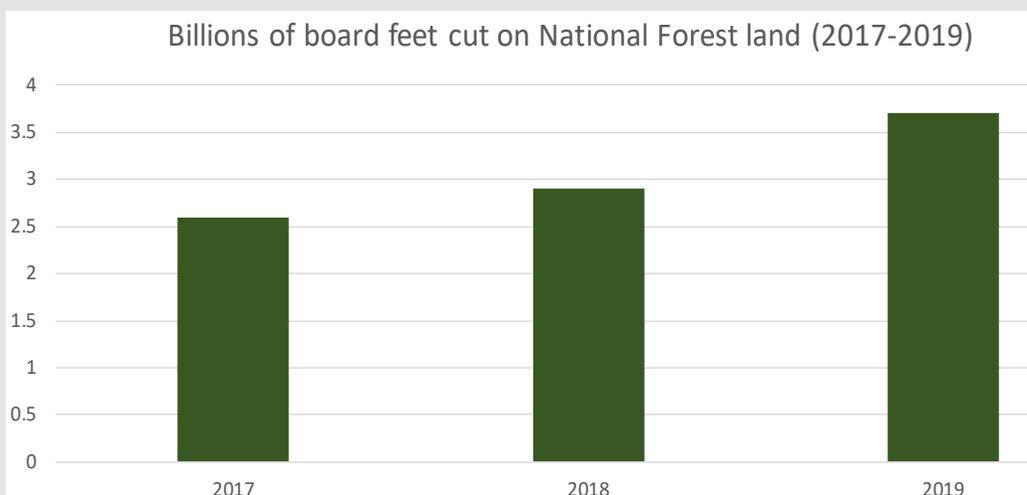
The 191-million-acre National Forest System and 265 million acres of public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are overseen by different agencies, but both systems are subject to a variety of competing uses including livestock grazing, mining, oil and gas exploration, recreation, and timber harvesting.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) helps federal agencies balance these sometimes competing uses of our national forests and ensures public input from local communities in government decision-making – NEPA helps to ensure that no single use or priority eclipses any other.

By demanding that our government make decisions based on the best available information, NEPA ensures that forest management remains the product of consensus, science-based decisionmaking.

DID YOU KNOW?

Logging levels are the highest they've been in decades, but fire seasons are still getting worse. In 2013, a total of **2.6 billion board feet** were cut in our National Forests. In 2017, that number increased to **2.9 billion**. For 2019, the Forest Service estimates a total of **3.7 billion board feet** will be cut in our National Forests



NEPA REDUCES THE RISK OF DANGEROUS WILDFIRES BY PROMOTING RESPONSIBLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

Large swaths of western forests remain at severe risk of fire, and decades of data show that intense logging has contributed to the problem. Logging operations have historically removed the largest and most fire-resistant trees. The young trees that replace cut trees are highly susceptible to fire and serve as fire ladders, allowing the fire to reach up into the canopy of the forest.

Thinning and other forest management activities designed to remove hazardous fuels can and do limit the dangerous prospect of out of control wildfires in dry forests where regular surface fires have not been occurring, but such activities must be science-driven and should only be carried out after an environmental review has been completed.

While opponents in Congress and the Trump administration refuse to acknowledge the role that climate change has played in fanning the wildfires plaguing Western states, the NEPA process does require the federal government to take the impacts of climate change into account in its decisionmaking. By demanding that federal agencies analyze a project's impacts on climate change and the significant effect of climate change on our country's forests, NEPA helps to identify and mitigate risks to fire vulnerable communities, reintroduce fire as a natural component of the ecosystem, and reduce the severity of unnatural forest fires across the West.

NEPA'S ENSURES ROBUST PUBLIC COMMENT AND HELPS TO NURTURE NASCENT FOREST COOPERATIVES

NEPA and the environmental review process has allowed communities to engage on important decisions and has been instrumental in facilitating collaboratives. Not only do stakeholders take each other seriously in collaboratives because they know NEPA will consider all of their voices, but the collaborations also benefit from the information on impacts that NEPA provides.

For example, in North Carolina the Forest Service began work in 2015 to revise the long-term management plan for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest - the first management plan to be amended under the agency new regulations emphasizing the value of public engagement. The agency received over 15,000 public comments. Michelle Aldridge, planning and NEPA officer with the Forest Service, called the degree of public involvement “unprecedented.”

NEPA has also played a crucial role in steering forest management away from the timber wars of the 1980s and nurturing forest collaboratives. These collaboratives have helped opposing parties reach compromise on controversial projects. In Montana, for example, a collaborative was established on the Bitterroot National Forest in 2007 to bring together conservationists, motorized users, outfitters, loggers, and mill operators – in the eleven years since, environmentalists haven't sued to stop a single logging project in the forest.

KEY LEGISLATIVE THREATS

Dozens of bills were introduced in the 115th Congress seeking to weaken, waive or undermine NEPA review for prescribed forest projects.

- **Resilient Federal Forests Act:** Since 2015, House Republicans have promoted this piece of legislation calling for dozens of rollbacks to responsible forest management including a provision exempting up to 30,000 acres of clear-cutting in national forests from any environmental review whatsoever.

KEY ADMINISTRATIVE THREATS

The Trump administration has also moved aggressively to increase timber cuts and roll back environmental reviews on National Forest land.

- **Forest Service NEPA rollback:** The Forest Service is currently in the process of rewriting its entire NEPA regulations. A proposed rule is expected to be released this Spring.
- **Executive Order 13855:** Released in December 2018, this EO shortcuts responsible environmental review and opens up National Forests to large-scale logging and clear-cuts by calling for an increase of board feet cut to 3.8 billion by the end of 2019.
- **Roadless Rule rollback:** The USDA announced in 2018 it intends to create an “Alaska state-specific” version of the Roadless Rule, a gift to timber companies.

EXISTING FOREST SERVICE NEPA AUTHORITIES

The Forest Service already possesses a sweeping number of Categorical Exclusions (CEs) that it can use to carry out emergency activities (e.g., thinning, hazardous fuel reduction, prescribed burns, and post-fire rehabilitation).

Congress has also passed legislation giving the Forest Service additional flexibility.

- The **Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HRFA)** already established special NEPA procedures for EAs and EISs prepared for authorized hazardous-fuel-reduction projects.
- The **2018 Farm Bill** retained multiple categorical exclusions from the 2014 farm bill allowing more clearing of forests and included a new 4,500-acre categorical exclusion for forest management in sage grouse and mule deer habitat.
- Other legislative measures include the **Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act**, which waives NEPA procedures for certain actions carried out within a Presidentially declared emergency or disaster area.

In extreme emergency circumstances **federal agencies can also consult directly with the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to make alternative arrangements.** The Forest Service has used this on multiple occasions.