

## Plan for logging in Yellowwood alarms forest group

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A remote 299-acre stand of old forest in northwestern Brown County straddles Yellowwood State Forest's Possum Trot Trail and crosses the Tecumseh Trail between Shipman Ridge and Bear Lake.

Proposed logging in the area that would take down between 1,500 and 7,000 mature trees — depending on which side you ask — has upset people who frequent the rugged trails that are flanked by majestic red oaks and towering hickories.

A July 30, 1981, news release from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources announced that a 2,700-acre area in Morgan-Monroe and Yellowwood state forests had been designated as "back country," a place free of roads and other man-made improvements, intended to remain in a primitive, natural state.

Thirty-six years later, the DNR's Division of Forestry is planning to log on 299 acres of this back-country forest that features some good-sized tulip poplars, sugar maples and northern red oaks, some nearly 200 years old.

The advocacy group Indiana Forest Alliance is incensed at the plan and is calling on people to write letters to Gov. Eric Holcomb asking him to stop the logging. Sept. 3 is the final day the state will accept public comment on the logging initiative. Calls, emails and letters have been arriving in a steady flow.

"These stunning plans are devoid of any recognition of the extremely high quality of this forest," IFA Executive Director Jeff Stant wrote in an Aug. 12 email to forest alliance supporters, asking them to write letters to the governor stating their opposition. "Urgent!" he called the request to contact the governor's office.

"It is imperative that Gov. Holcomb hear from you about this planned forest destruction. Ask him to hold the (Division of Forestry) to its commitment to manage all of the forest within this back country area as 'older forest' and stop these logging plans from moving forward," Stant wrote.

Protect primitive land?

When former DNR director James Ridenour established the primitive hiking and camping area, he said it would be "managed under the policy of 'multiple use' in order to obtain the maximum benefits from recreation, timber production, wildlife production and watershed protection." Logging opponents point out that two Republican governors, Otis Bowen and Robert Orr, supported keeping the backwoods intact and logging at bay.

The DNR claims timber production and sales always were part of the plan for the Morgan-Monroe and Yellowwood back country. "Although this recreational designation was given to the area, the original guidelines and all guidelines published since have included this area as multiple use to include hiking, hunting and timber management, among others," the forestry division logging plan for the 299 acres states.

DNR guidelines for forest management in back country areas state that from the beginning, "parameters were set to allow for hunting and a 'wilderness type' recreation experience while also allowing for continued timber management using single-tree selection process."

The proposed logging "is consistent with the single-tree management approach designated for state forest back country areas when they were established," the plan states. "It will target diseased and declining trees, as well as ash being ravaged by emerald ash borer. Selection weighs each tree on its own merits, as well as the health and impacts to the forest area."

DNR spokesman Phil Bloom said trees to be felled have not yet been identified and marked, but that in a typical single-tree selection harvest, about five trees are removed per acre. If that number holds true in this instance, about 1,500 of the estimated 34,400 trees in the designated area would be cut down.

But the forest alliance estimates the logging would produce between 475,200 and 712,800 board feet of timber "in what can only be described as an aggressive selection cut." Stant said the number of trees to be cut ranges from "a few dozen to 40 or more trees on nearly every acre," a far cry from the five Bloom suggested. If Stant's numbers hold true, between 7,200 and 12,000 trees will fall if the plan goes forward.

Stant conceded that his estimate of 40 trees per acres may be too high. He said the forestry division's plan is vague and doesn't specify how many trees will be cut, so he based his calculations on the kinds and sizes of trees in the backwoods when he made his estimate.

The forest alliance says the area has specialized plants and a diverse mix of wildlife and birds, documented by volunteers the past few years, that shouldn't be disturbed without more study. The argument is that the forest should remain primitive and in its natural state, allowed to mature without interference from forest management practices. Giant feller bunchers brought in to clear out trees often bring along invasive-species plants in the blades, and the weeds spread and choke out native plants such as mushrooms and ginseng.

"No guys are going in there with chain saws," said David Seastrom, who lives on 27 remote acres near the area set for logging. "It's just one guy. And a big machine."

Wilderness at stake?

Stant said the forestry division didn't inventory species that live in the area, and he called the variety of plants in the forest "among the most natural and pristine in the state." He said logging will destroy the "wilderness character" of the backwoods and also cause soil erosion that will deposit silt into nearby Lake Lemon.

But DNR's Bloom pointed to a decade-long study of the hardwood ecosystem at Morgan-Monroe and Yellowwood state forests that showed animal species using mature forests prior to timber harvesting remain after trees have been cut. The study also showed "substantial increases in native species using recently harvested sites" and that forests with higher levels of habitat diversity "are likely to have higher levels of animal, plant and insect biodiversity."

He also cited a 2008 study that indicated DNR forest management practices do not adversely affect the breeding habitat of the state-endangered cerulean warbler as the forest alliance claims.

Environmentalists disagree. "The Indiana Forest Alliance has documented many rare, threatened, endangered bats, shrews, snakes and birds that inhabit this forest," Stant's message to supporters said.

Charlie Cole is a longtime member of Friends of Yellowwood, and he lives on Yellowwood Road. "I'm a tree farmer; I've cut trees to build cabins and I burn wood for heat," he said. "We are not against the DNR and logging. We are against irresponsible logging like they're proposing here."

Two hikes early on a cool Friday afternoon revealed the differences between a forest where trees have been culled and one that has been left to grow wild in the backwoods, where you can pitch a tent and stay for up to 14 days to live and explore.

A state forest tract near Seastrom's property that underwent a single-tree selection harvest four years ago is devoid of large trees. There are gaps with no trees, and wide pockets of sunshine fall onto the once-wooded ridge. Many of the trees that remain are not-so-tall poplars. Invasive Japanese stiltgrass that covers that ground inhibits the spread of native plants.

A short drive from there, a gravel lane off Possum Trot Road ends at the trailhead to the backwoods. A 30-foot-wide abandoned dirt road is the main trail, and it goes on for miles into undisturbed forest. The height of the towering trees is stark compared with those in the logged area down the road. The woods are deep, and the sun filters in just on occasion. The forest here is lush compared with the one that had been logged.

Seastrom and Cole are adamant that logging in this area be stopped. Seastrom noted budget cuts at the DNR, and accused the agency of destroying its own resources to help make up for the shortfall. "The DNR is trying to fund their operations by selling our heritage," he wrote in a letter about the issue. "To pay for their operations, they are devouring the very thing they are charged to protect."

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