

## Tully: Indiana targets Yellowwood State Forest for desecration

**Matthew Tully, IndyStar | Published 7:14 a.m. Aug. 25, 2017**

I'm neither a forestry expert nor a scientist.

But it doesn't take either one of those to walk through the back country of Yellowwood State Forest and wish that Gov. Eric Holcomb's administration would slow down and make sure everyone on every side has a chance to be fully heard on a plan to let the timber industry chop down thousands of old trees in one of Indiana's few undisturbed state forests.

I hiked through the Brown County forest for a couple hours past week with the head of the Indiana Forest Alliance and a scientist who has helped identify the life that thrives there. We passed century-old oaks and towering poplars. We saw animal tracks and insects I didn't know existed. We saw, in the words of retired Earlham College entomologist Leslie Bishop, "a forest whose ecology has been determined by nature, not human beings."

Imagine that.

Unfortunately, if the Indiana Department of Natural Resources has its way, a large section of Yellowwood backcountry will soon be home to a massive logging initiative, joining many other state forest lands that have been ravaged by an aggressive pro-logging government stance for the past decade or so.

"They're going into the heart of the area and logging 300 acres," Jeff Stant, executive director of the Forest Alliance, told me as we hiked. "It's a gross violation of the promises that were made decades ago. When they're done, there will be no way you can walk in here and think you're in a backcountry anymore. It will look like an area made for timber production."

Standing in the forest, listening to nothing but the sounds of nature and looking at trees reaching toward the clouds, it's hard to imagine the roar of machinery, the building of gravel roads and the erosion that will come with a large-scale logging operation. Well, it's not that hard to imagine. There are plenty of examples of just that nearby.

The Forest Alliance has complained about the vagueness of the proposal, and the lack of input they had in crafting it. As the timber industry has cheered the state's decisions in recent years, Stant said his group has worked to catalogue the Yellowwood area to make clear the unique role it plays in a state where such sites are rare.

"There's such an opportunity for DNR to look at our data and collaborate with us," he said. "What a missed opportunity."



As I said, I'm not a forestry expert. But it doesn't take one to understand that our beloved state far too often tosses environmental concerns to the side of the road, and that it has been on a pro-logging mission in state forests for years now. On many topics, Gov. Holcomb has shown a greater willingness to listen to a broader group of interests than his predecessor. Here's another opportunity: He should tell the DNR to slow down, step back and fully air out this issue.

I should make clear that plenty of groups support the plan, and I am not about to dismiss their arguments. I heard from hunting and wildlife boosters. Dan Gehring, who advocates for hunters, argued the state plan would “improve forest biodiversity and regenerate the disappearing young forest.”

There isn’t even unanimity within the environmental community. The Nature Conservancy supports the harvesting of timber in state forests, in general, because it believes that can lead to a stronger forest of oaks, which are critical to many forms of animal life. “We see a lot of old oak trees, but not their replacements,” said Allen Pursell, the group’s director of forest conservation.

Longtime DNR State Forester John Seifert said the plan is the result of recommendations from state employees in the field. He argued for logging by pointing to problems caused by “drought, overstock and ash,” and said the plan is in the long-term interests of the forest. He acknowledged the department budget is funded in part by logging fees, but insisted that was not its motivation.

“What is a healthy forest?” he said. “That is the debate.”

The problem is, we’ve not had that debate. In this case, the department quietly announced its plans, kicking off a 30-day comment period. Those behind the proposal don’t sound inclined to make big changes, based on criticism from groups such as the Forest Alliance.

The easy thing for me to do would be to write an angry column demonizing the state for another move to alter a stunning example of Indiana hardwood forest. But that is not today’s message. The message is this: Let’s step back and have a real conversation about what is best for the forest and for Indiana. A quick comment period won’t do that. A decision-making process that has been far too one-sided in recent years won’t do that.

In the Yellowwood forest, Bishop showed me a tree limb covered with what looked like white fuzz. It was actually several dozen tiny Woolly Adelgids, a strange-looking insect that is one of about 4,000 species of life that have been catalogued by scientists. They all add up to a wonderfully diverse ecology that is reshaped each time a towering oak falls on its own. Indiana needs lands that shape themselves, Bishop said.

Nearby, I met a hunter, David Shoopman. The retired 69-year-old was out with his loyal Australian Shepherd, named Shepp, looking for coyotes. He lives down the road from a forest that could soon be home to a thriving timber business.

“It’s a pristine forest and they’re just going to come in here and change everything,” he said.

It’s a real concern. And while there are thoughtful arguments on both sides of this issue, the stakes are too high to rush forward. The governor should demand a more thorough and thoughtful conversation.