

Brown County Democrat

Speaking for the trees: Yellowwood logging protests to continue

By [Suzannah Couch](#)
11/14/17 - 2:01 PM

Over the yells of protesters, nearly 300 acres of the Yellowwood State Forest backcountry area were auctioned off outside the forest office last week.

The Indiana Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry organized the logging of three tracts in the backcountry area totaling 299 acres. About 1,733 trees will be cut, demonstrators said.

A logging company listed as “Hamilton” bid \$108,785 to log an estimated 447,644 board feet in Yellowwood and Morgan-Monroe state forest. There is a Hamilton Logging Inc. registered in Martinsville.

Daniel Antes, owner of Distinctive Hardwood Floors, offered to buy the acreage for \$150,000. The money came from hardwood executive Bobby R. Bartlet, who was willing to pay the DNR to save the trees from being cut, according to a letter Antes read to the crowd. However, Antes was unable to bid because he is not a licensed timber buyer, said David Seastrom with the Indiana Forest Alliance and Wild Tecumseh Friends.

The timber sale was announced in August. Since then, concerned residents and members of various environmental groups — including the IFA, Friends of Yellowwood, the Sierra Club and Mind the Gap — have been calling and writing to state legislators and Gov. Eric Holcomb.

When they did not get responses, Seastrom said, they decided to act by creating an encampment on Possum Trot Road and protesting the sale Nov. 9.

“There are trees that we have measured in the backcountry that are pre-Revolutionary War, pre-settlement of Indiana,” he said. “This is one of the oldest growth areas in the entire 13-state forest system that is left.”

Antes and IFA executive director Jeff Stant spoke to the crowd gathered at the park office before the sale.

“They can sell these trees, but they best not assume that we are going away,” Stant told the crowd.

“We are going to come out of the woodwork. If they want a political fight, we will give them one. We are going to knock on every door in Brown County, every door around Indianapolis. We’re going to put those ‘Tell Gov. Holcomb to stop logging Yellowwood’ (signs) all over Indianapolis like picket fences.”

DNR officials were stationed at the sale at the front of the office and refused to answer questions.

Not anti-logging

One of those yellow Holcomb signs can be found at the end of Possum Trot Road, where Seastrom lives, and alongside the private property where the encampment was created to peacefully protest the logging.

On Nov. 7, protesters were installing a woodburning stove in a large tent that will be used as a meeting hall, community kitchen, first aid station and warming station.

Though the timber sale took place as planned Nov. 9, the protesters are not going away. The property has 10 acres people can camp on, Seastrom said.

“We’re under the ‘build it and they will come’ concept. We’re putting the invitation out to anyone who wants to come out and join us,” he said.

Demonstrators are going to invite musicians to play at the camp, and there are plans to bring in lecturers to speak about wildlife topics.

It is important to the demonstration organizers that everything remains peaceful.

“No illegal activity will be tolerated,” Seastrom said. “We will not allow anyone to sabotage logging equipment or spike trees or do anything like that. ... In fact, we will be the ones turning them in. This is a peaceful demonstration.”

Seastrom said this is about Hoosiers making a “powerful statement that we are unhappy with how the forests are being managed.”

“We feel it’s important to behave ourselves because we’re trying to influence legislators and the governor. We’re just regular folks,” Seastrom said. “We’re just trying to hang on to what we already have.”

A load of firewood was delivered that afternoon that all campers will be able to use. “We’re not against logging,” Seastrom said.

“I’ve built log cabins. I am a woodworker. I’ve got a chainsaw in my truck right now. I am not at all against logging. What I am against — and what we are against — is the irresponsible management we’re seeing right now.”

John and Hannah Boggs were helping set up camp and welcoming people Nov. 7. The couple just moved back to Brown County in October.

John Boggs said he grew up camping and hiking in Yellowwood. He and his family have been avid mushroom hunters for generations, too.

“Any mushroom hunter knows you’re not just hunting for mushrooms, you’re hunting for trees. Trees are really an important part of that ecosystem. You remove the trees, you’re destroying the mushrooms, the ground they’re in, and they don’t really come back,” he said.

“For some people it’s the hiking or the erosion or this or that. I am just like, ‘Man, what about the mushrooms?’”

The family-friendly Yellowwood encampment is the place for anyone who likes to root for the underdog, the couple said.

“Everyone is in good spirits. Everyone is smiley. There’s a real sense of community, like it’s a tribe,” John Boggs said. “Everybody is really warm and sweet. There’s a lot of teamwork going on despite the rain and despite the weather.”

Like John Boggs, Charlie Johnson grew up bicycling, hiking and camping in the Low Gap Area and Yellowwood State Forest. The Low Gap Area is near Lake Lemon, near Orcutt, Bear Creek and Possum Trot roads.

The IFA identified the 3,750-acre Low Gap State Wild Area as one of the 13 backcountry areas in the state forests worthy of permanent protection. It already was designated by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources as a protected area in the 1980s, but two tracts already have been logged, along with three new areas just auctioned, according to the group Mind the Gap.

Johnson is a member of the IFA. He worked overseas in Asia for years before returning to Indiana for the forests. “That’s what brought me back,” he said. “I get solace when I come out into the woods.”

Johnson said people “either feel it or you don’t” when it comes to logging.

“Either the woods mean something to you, or they don’t,” he said.

“I can’t think of anything more important. Everything else I am doing in my life can be recreated in a few years or by somebody else. Anybody can do the other things I’ve done, but this — once this is gone, it’s gone. You cannot recreate it.”

Main concerns

There are 900 acres of old-growth forest in the Yellowwood portion of the backcountry area. Of those acres, 300 are slated for logging, according to Linda Baden with Friends of Yellowwood.

She said the wood taken out of this area will account for a little more than 3 percent of the DNR Division of Forestry’s annual logging quota.

“Yet, the damage to the forest and the backcountry experience will be great and long-lasting,” she said.

Baden and Charlie Cole live in Yellowwood. Cole is a 37-year Brown County resident. “I own three chainsaws. I fish. I hunt. I hike. I worked with the DNR for many, many years in constructive endeavors before 2005,” he said.

Cole said that in 2005, the way state forests were managed changed under a new director, and when then-Gov. Mitch Daniels decided to increase timber cuts to make up for loss in revenue from the legislature.

“I’ve built log cabins. I can’t understand why they are basically destroying Brown County’s tourist resource. We get 15 percent of the net (proceeds). Each fire department gets enough to almost outfit one fireman, so it’s chump change,” he said.

The backcountry also includes the Ecoblitz study area, where scientists from all over the Midwest are conducting a complete inventory of all living things in the forest.

“The very heart of the study area is in one of the three tracts they are about to sell,” Seastrom said.

He calls himself an “accidental activist because they came to destroy my home.”

Demonstrators also are concerned about the Tecumseh Trail, a volunteer-built, 42-mile trail that runs through Yellowwood. The DNR is in the process of selling timber along every mile of it, Seastrom said. “They are destroying it.”

One of the three tracts sold Nov. 9 included a small portion of the Tecumseh Trail. The DNR has said it will create a buffer around that section in the backcountry, Seastrom said.

“They’re not doing that anywhere else in the state, so, in a way, they made this announcement to make it sound like this logging will be more respectful and less harmful than the way they’ve been managing the rest of the state forest — which begs the question, ‘Well, why not manage the rest of the state forest this way?’” he said.

Seastrom said the DNR has promised to respect hiking trails and to do five to seven tree cuts per acre.

Seastrom said that’s an average. “In fact there are acres where they are cutting way, way more than that. They are going to totally change the character of that,” he said.

“Judging from the difference in how they are conducting the logging now and what it was 20 years ago, they’re turning our forest into an industrial tree farm.”

The heavy equipment the loggers use also damages the forest ecosystem, he said. “These machines arrive in a tract covered in mud from the previous tract, and they are spreading invasive plants while doing that,” he said, including Japanese Stiltgrass, a highly invasive plant. The DNR also has promised to have washing stations for trucks, he said.

He said it’s difficult to know how many timber sales are under way in Brown County. The public is given notice in newspaper legal advertisements, but this week’s sale was not advertised in the Brown County and Monroe County newspapers; it was placed in the newspapers in Bartholomew and Morgan counties, Baden and Cole said.

Seastrom said he went on a hike a few weeks ago on a section of the Tecumseh Trail behind Waycross Camp. “We found a huge section that has just been marked for timber sale,” he said.

According to the IFA, areas along the Tecumseh Trail have been logged in 14-plus locations in the past seven years, resulting in trail closures and re-routes.

Logging near such trails is a concern for the tourism industry, too.

“As one of Indiana’s most forested areas, we value the natural beauty that surrounds us, as well as understand the importance it has upon our local economy,” wrote Jane Ellis, executive director of the Brown County Convention & Visitors Bureau in a letter to Holcomb in October, according to a press release from the Indiana Forest Alliance.

Ellis said the recent logging in Yellowwood has “hurt the state forest’s reputation.”

“We have heard negative feedback from many visitors who have been to Yellowwood State Forest, either on their own accord or based on our recommendation. Not only is this hindering interest and visitation to Yellowwood, but if it continues, it could possibly negatively impact Brown County’s notoriety as a premiere outdoor destination, as well as revenue generated by tourism,” she said.

Not going to stop

After the sale, Stant said the demonstrators were determined to keep the effort alive to save the Yellowwood backcountry area “for wilderness recreation, the public’s benefit and for the creatures that need interior forests in Indiana.”

Volunteers will continue to go door to door in Brown County, in surrounding counties and in Indianapolis to encourage people to contact their state legislators and Holcomb “to demand the sale be cancelled and that we start setting these old forest areas aside in the state forest for the public’s use and benefit.”

Seastrom said he was still hopeful Holcomb would step in and stop the logging. That didn’t happen before last week’s sale.

“I am appalled at the sale, but I am absolutely heartened to see so many Hoosiers come out and express their displeasure with this sale,” he said.

If logging occurs, Seastrom said those at the camp will be there to document it.

“Every time they violate their management guides, we will publicize and make sure every Hoosier in Indiana knows this,” he said. “Every single logging event I have personally witnessed has many of those violations.”

A letter signed by more than 200 Indiana scientists was delivered to Holcomb’s office by retired Earlham College biology professor Leslie Bishop. It also appeared in the Nov. 8 Brown County Democrat.

It asked Holcomb to conserve major portions of state forests and allow them to return to old-growth conditions in order to ensure the “viability of Indiana’s native forest ecosystems for the future and for Hoosier’s future quality of life.”

The Democrat requested a comment from Holcomb’s office but had not received one by press time.

He told Indianapolis’ Channel 6 news last week that “I want to review and read every word. That’s what I do. I’m data-driven. But I think we share the same goal, and that is to have healthy forests.”

State Sen. Eric Koch, R-Bedford, said he has received dozens of contacts from his constituents expressing concern about the logging, but that the decision to stop the logging rests with the governor.

Koch said he has spoken with people from both sides of the issue since the beginning of this year when Senate Bill 420 was introduced.

“Each has a different interest, each has a different perspective. In many cases they have different views of the science and economics of the issue,” Koch said.

SB 420 would have required the DNR to set aside 10 percent of each state forest to not be managed in any way, including the removal or planting of trees. However, it would still have permitted hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, mushroom gathering, mountain biking and horseback riding in those areas.

The DNR made an informal commitment to setting aside 10 percent of state forests as old growth, Koch said.

“That number, over the years, from my understanding, has been as high as 40 percent. But this is not in statute, and it’s an agency policy,” Koch said.

The purpose of SB 420 was to codify a percentage in Indiana law, but the bill did not make it out of a committee last legislative session.

Koch said he’s been wanting the state legislature to look at the issue. “I’ve actually been on legislation that has called for that, but we’ve not received a hearing on those bills. I have always felt that this is a policy choice that best resides with the legislature. When the legislature doesn’t act, then that policy choice kind of defaults back to the agency, which has been the situation here.”

SB 420 also would have required 10 percent of each state forest to be set aside in whole parcels, preferably a minimum of 500 acres per parcel. Ten percent of all state forest land would total 14,971 acres.

“Whether it’s zero, whether it’s 100 percent, whether it’s somewhere in between, which it probably is, I think there needs to be a discussion of that and allow people to bring in their science,” Koch said of old-growth areas. “There are people who disagree on the science, the economics. Hearings are a chance to vet that, for people to put forth their science and their economics and others to challenge it on both sides. We’ve never had that opportunity.”

“My view is when you’re trying to find a balance here, then I’d like to have a legislative conversation about that,” he said.

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