

Forward Indiana

Slow down logging in state forests

Unintended consequences of well-meaning policies are as plentiful as Asian carp — and as dangerous. Those invasive fish were imported to clean commercial ponds in the 1970s, based on the best expert advice available at the time. Asian carp now clog the Ohio River. Preventing them from damaging the Great Lakes ecosystem is a full-time, and perhaps futile, exercise.

Examples abound. Who knew that pharmaceuticals like thalidomide could cause birth defects? Or that the radium that watchmakers painted on luminous dials led to radiation poisoning? Didn't we freely apply pesticides to crops and gardens without anticipating the toll on bees?

How to inoculate against unintended consequences? Hedge your bets. Each stock-market correction reminds us to diversify our investments. All-out efforts based on "what we know now" can backfire. Prudent policy makers rely on data but keep an eye on the evolving picture.

Particularly when experts disagree (don't they always?), it's wise to act with moderation. Nowhere is prudence more important than in managing the land, air and water resources we citizens own in common — those we trust our public agencies to steward and protect.

We propose moderation in managing Indiana's state forests. But the Division of Forestry is on a logging fast track. Let's slow it down before everything comes off the rails. Consider:

■ Forty percent of our state forest lands (60,000 acres) was set aside from logging prior to 2005. Now, it's 2.5 percent (less than 4,000 acres).

■ The volume of trees removed from state forests by logging has more than tripled since 2005, from 3-4 million board feet annually to 10-17 million.

■ Most other states log far less of their state forests.

Every tract of our state forests is set to be logged every 20 years. The requisite gravel roads and heavy machinery fracture habitat, crush species living on the forest floor and open the forest to invasion by non-native plants.

The uncertainty of the climate — severe floods, fierce storms and more frequent droughts — suggests we proceed with caution. Why log 97.5 percent of our public forest land, with irreversible consequences?

Gov. Robert Orr wisely urged the establishment of wilderness-like back-country areas in Morgan-Monroe and Yellowwood state forests in 1981. Some of those trees are now more than a century old.

Sure, we can log our state forests. But let's allow some areas to mature naturally into older forests. Call it a lesson from the Asian carp.

Rae Schnapp

Conservation Director, Indiana Forest Alliance