

Guest column

# Urge Gov. Holcomb to be conservative with state forests

By P. David Simcox | special to the *Bloomington Herald-Times* | January 21, 2018 |

*This guest column was submitted by P. David Simcox, a biochemist, a founder of Mind the Gap — Protectors of the Low Gap Backcountry and vice president of the Indiana Forest Alliance board of directors.*

Gov. Holcomb's advisers have put Indiana on a high-risk path regarding state forest management. He would be wise to dial back the pervasive logging of recent years and take a more conservative approach. It's a straightforward matter of risk management.

The governor oversees a range of state agencies and responsibilities. Recommending and implementing wise practices requires staff with the expertise to manage based on solid data, best practices and balanced interests.

While Indiana's Division of Forestry cites science and best practices to support ramped-up rates of logging in state forests, many Hoosier scientists are on record as disagreeing — 240 of them have signed a letter to the governor urging him to set aside appreciable areas of our state forests from logging.

The issue here is not whose science is right; it is that Indiana is taking unnecessary risk in managing these resources for the future.

Scientific guidance about how we eat, sleep or exercise has changed over time. Science is not absolute; it evolves. There will always be new research to consider. For example, the Division of Forestry at one time brought in non-native plant species to manage erosion and provide habitat.

Now we know that these were invasive plants that spread in our woodlands, crowding out native plants and destroying — not enhancing — habitat. Experts had recommended the practice based on what they knew then. Unfortunately, they were wrong.

Suppose your financial adviser said, “I found an exciting, high-growth stock. Let’s take 97.5 percent of your retirement savings and invest it there!” You likely would look for a new adviser. You never want to take an irreversible or unrecoverable risk. You should always seek a balanced investment portfolio, spreading risk and opportunity.

Caring for publicly owned resources carries a special responsibility for careful stewardship. It is all about risk management.

The Division of Forestry’s current policy protects only 2.5 percent of our 158,000 acres of state forests from logging. Other Midwestern states are more prudent. Pennsylvania exempts nearly 30 percent and Ohio 15 percent of their respective state forests from logging.

Current policy ignores larger ecological concerns. The forest flora and fauna being studied are complex and intricately connected, and much has yet to be learned about the impact of logging on these ecosystems. As recently stated by Purdue University’s emeritus professor of forestry William Hoover, “Soil science needs to go beyond structure, nutrients and moisture. Increased understanding of the ‘biology of soil’ is needed.”

The Division of Forestry itself has tacitly acknowledged this uncertainty through its involvement in the Hardwood Ecosystem Experiment study. This 100-year project seeks to determine how best to manage the state’s forests. The operative word here is “experiment.”

The Division of Forestry knows it does not have all the answers — it is, after all, an experiment. So data collection continues as Indiana risks nearly everything on logging in our state forests.

Our state forests are precious resources and should be managed conservatively. Past administrations of both parties have set aside as much as 40 percent of these lands from logging.

This prudent policy began to change in the early 2000s, accelerating like wildfire in 2005 with the appointment of a strongly pro-logging head of the Division of Forestry.

Hoosiers deserve a policy that balances timber harvesting with ecological concerns, not one that risks all our chips on one bet. Let's not gamble with Indiana's natural heritage.

Please urge Gov. Holcomb and your state legislators to do the right thing — to be conservative in managing our natural resources. Let's seek a balanced policy.

*[https://www.heraldtimesonline.com/news/opinion/urge-gov-holcomb-to-be-conservative-with-state-forests/article\\_69f4ce3e-384f-5cfc-95d2-c2330f52f695.html](https://www.heraldtimesonline.com/news/opinion/urge-gov-holcomb-to-be-conservative-with-state-forests/article_69f4ce3e-384f-5cfc-95d2-c2330f52f695.html)*