

Legislator disturbed by close-up look at post-logging Yellowwood



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Indiana state Rep. Matt Pierce, D-Bloomington, views the stump of an 80- to 90-year-old tree Thursday in the back country of Yellowwood State Forest in Brown County, where loggers cut down trees over the winter. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

Matt Pierce took a hike through Yellowwood State Forest’s backwoods Thursday afternoon to get a close-up look at the results of a controversial timber cut this year that removed 1,733 trees the state forestry division sold to loggers for \$110,000.

Pierce, a Democratic state representative from Bloomington, proposed legislation in 2014 that would have protected the forests, keeping a portion of the state-owned lands in Yellowwood, Morgan-Monroe, Jackson-Washington and Clark state forests free from motorized access, commercial activity and logging.

The areas were set aside three decades ago by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources in order to maintain wilderness areas in a way similar to how they would have been a

century ago, disturbing the forests as little as possible. But in 2013, plans surfaced to cut down trees there.

Pierce's bill got 40 percent of the votes, not enough to pass. But on Thursday, after a walk deep into the area post-logging, Pierce vowed to reintroduce the legislation.

He had been invited by Brown County resident Dave Seastrom to view the forest, now that the logging is finished. Most of the logs have been hauled away, although muddy conditions mean some remain. Brush is piled everywhere.

This timber sale, held last November, called for the felling of selected trees that state foresters marked with bright blue paint. Pierce, who took pictures with his cellphone, was surprised at the 20-foot-wide swaths through the forest made by bulldozers that left thick tracks in the mud. The berths lead to the trees selected for cutting, some of them with rings on their smooth stump tops indicating they were 80 to 90 years old. The wide, clear-cut paths go on and on.

Pierce was disturbed by the devastation. Seastrom told him the logging was actually carried out well, and that it looks as if steps had been taken to help preserve the soil, limit erosion and keep invasive species from spreading in the native forest.

"So you're saying I'm seeing the best of it?" Pierce asked. Seastrom, an Indiana Forest Alliance supporter who opposed the logging, said he's seen much worse.

Pierce, clearly, is not an avid hiker. But he's been hearing from constituents, "a lot of them," and decided to take a look at the impact of the timber harvest himself. "I've been trying to protect this backwoods area," he said, while trying to understand the state forestry division's stance that culling the old, majestic trees is good for the forest, opening up the canopy and promoting healthy growth.

He harked back to the 1981 DNR announcement that a 2,700-acre tract 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.

“This,” he said, standing amid stumps and brush cut from logged trees, “does not seem consistent with that.”

Pierce said he would like to see 30 to 40 percent of state forest land protected from logging. “I’ll keep at it,” he said Thursday, before hiking back to his car. “I think it’s very important for the public to be aware of what is going on in their state forests. Once it’s disturbed like this, it will take a while to come back, for this forest to regenerate.”