

EXCLUSIVE: The Forest Service is using the threat of wildfires to meet timber targets

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27–34 minutes

The agency has sought to minimize environmental oversight and used authorities critics say incentivize the logging of older trees



Who profits? The Forest Service says this commercial logging operation near Hood River, Ore., “helps to make forests healthier and provides benefits like wildlife habitat, reduced wildfire risks and healthier stands.” Photo: Preston Keres/USFS

This is the first in an ongoing investigation into ways the U.S. Forest Service is applying powers granted to it for fire prevention to boost sales of timber to logging companies. — Editor

By Nathan Gilles. February 6, 2025. The year 2015 marked a turning point for the U.S. Forest Service. For the first time in its history, the agency spent more than 50% of its budget on wildfire management, according to an agency [report](#) from that year.

The burden of dealing with the wildfire crisis has even led the agency to “[borrow](#)” funds from its other programs, including wildfire prevention programs, to [pay for](#) putting out fires.

Recognized as both a legacy of the agency’s past fire suppression policies and the effects of climate change, the wildfire crisis now [consumes a significant chunk](#) of the [Forest Service’s time and resources](#).

In crisis, however, the agency also sees opportunity, according to both public reports and internal Forest Service documents obtained by the nonprofit WildEarth Guardians through a public records request and shared with *Columbia Insight*.

Internal documents show the Forest Service discussing—both internally and with the timber industry—how its various legal and policy “tools” and emergency authorities related to its wildfire prevention programs could be and have been harnessed to increase sales of board feet of timber.

The documents discuss how “barriers” to achieving these “timber targets,” including civil litigation from environmental organizations, might be overcome through “streamlining” environmental oversight by using legal exemptions to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

For the Forest Service and the timber industry, “streamlining” means removing some NEPA red tape. It’s a necessary step, they argue, on the way to creating a win-win scenario that will help prevent wildfires, increase board feet of timber, and, in the process, grow rural timber jobs.

Critically, many of the preferred wildfire crisis tools also allow the agency and its partners to hold onto the timber revenue rather than send it to the U.S. Treasury.

While the timber industry has applauded the Forest Service’s efforts to “streamline” NEPA and has advocated for many of the same tools, many conservationists are skeptical.

Critics say it’s unclear whether the Forest Service and other public agencies that oversee these treatments are applying the best available science or if their legal and policy tools and the wildfire crisis itself have instead incentivized the agencies to cut mature and old-growth trees, as well as bureaucratic corners, in their pursuit of both wildfire prevention and timber sales.

This story examines the tools identified in both internal and public-facing Forest Service documents the agency is using to simultaneously increase timber volume and address the wildfire crisis. As most of the documents relate to the Pacific Northwest, it highlights the region’s efforts to meet its timber targets and the tools used to that end.

The Forest Service denied multiple requests for interviews from *Columbia Insight* for this report.

Congress lights a fire under USFS

From 2014 to 2023, the Forest Service consistently [failed to meet](#) its annual timber targets, according to a December 2024 U.S. Government Accountability Office [report](#) ordered by Congress.

More recently, the agency has also fallen short on reducing the risk of wildfires.

The scale of the problem was illustrated in April 2024, when a contrite Forest Service Deputy Chief Chris French [testified](#) about the wildfire crisis and timber targets before the House Committee on Natural Resources.

When asked by Rep. Cliff Bentz (R-OR) about progress the agency had made in reducing the nation's hazardous fuels, French highlighted the 4.3 million acres treated by the Forest Service in 2023.

Asked by Bentz to put this in context, French noted that his agency oversees 193 million acres, prompting the congressman to comment, "So, there's a ways to go."



More wood, less local benefit: At a Port of Coos Bay export terminal, these unprocessed logs from Oregon bypassed local mills and workers on their way to Asia. Photo: Francis Eatherington

In recent years, Congress has pushed the Forest Service to better protect national forests from wildfires, providing the agency with extra money and legal authorities to accomplish the task.

Both the 2021 [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#) and the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act [provided](#)

[funds](#) for wildfire prevention. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law also provided the Forest Service with emergency authorities to fast-track [prevention treatments](#).

Around the same time, lawmakers called on the agency to investigate how it might increase its annual timber sales.

Internal documents include letters dated April 27, 2022, sent by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack (who oversees the Forest Service) to members of the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies.

The letters were written in response to an [order](#) from lawmakers for the Forest Service to investigate how it could increase its timber sales to 4 billion board feet annually.

In 2021, the agency sold 2.8 billion board feet, according to the 2024 GAO [report](#).

Following the nudge from lawmakers, the Forest Service increased its timber targets.

Critics say “stewardship contracts” incentivize the Forest Service to make more large-diameter trees part of timber sales.

A February 23, 2023, internal email sent to the agency’s regional directors regarding the increase describes how the Forest Service chief and deputy chief intended to use funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) for “restoring resilient landscapes in the face of climate change and supporting rural economic develop.”

“In consideration of this,” the email continues, “the Chief has asked the Agency to increase to a 4 billion board foot program annually starting with an incremental increase in FY23 to 3.45 billion board feet ...”

In addition, the email assigned timber targets for each of the nine Forest Service Regions.

The Pacific Northwest, known as Region 6, was assigned 575 million board feet of timber for fiscal year 2023 and 653 million board feet for FY 2024.

Region 6 fell just short of its FY 2023 target, selling 565.39 million board feet, according to the GAO [report](#). In FY 2024, it [attained](#) 594 million board feet of its 653 million board feet target.

Emergency authorities, “streamlined” NEPA

The February 2023 email was written by David Lytle, then director of forest management, range management and vegetation ecology for the National Forest System in Washington, D.C. (In May 2023, Lytle switched positions at the Forest Service, taking on the role of deputy chief for Forest Service Research and Development.)

In his email, Lytle illustrated how the wildfire crisis might be harnessed to meet the new timber targets. It included his recommendation that the agency develop a series of “talking points” to be shared “internally and with partners, including industry.”

One of the letter’s talking points reads: “The Agency is focused on a predictable, consistent volume sold each year as a result of our work to protect communities, support restoration goals, meet fuel reduction objectives, and supports rural economic development.”



David Lytle, USFS deputy chief for Forest Service Research & Development. Photo: Serena Mankiller/USGS

Lytle’s email further recommends the agency “identify a variety of approaches, including tools and authorities to be identified under the Secretary’s emergency declaration to meet expectations to help meet target expectations.”

The “Secretary’s emergency declaration” is likely a reference to Agriculture Secretary Vilsack’s announcement in February 2023 that he was invoking [emergency authority](#) to reduce fuel loads under expanded powers granted to the USDA and, by extension, the Forest Service, by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

“Using the right tools in the right places,” a February 2023 agency [press release](#) reads, “the emergency authorities provide the Forest Service the opportunity to accelerate planning, consultation, contracting, hiring and implementation of fuels and forest health treatments across the 250 high-risk firesheds.”

Firesheds are the wildfire equivalent of a watershed. Most average around 250,000 acres each, or roughly 390 square miles.

The core message of Lytle’s internal email has also been stated publicly, if not as candidly.

Even before the 2023 push to reach 4 billion feet annually, the Forest Service investigated

ways to use legal authorities associated with the wildfire crisis to meet its timber targets.

This is stated clearly in the agency's Fiscal Year 2022 Timber Targets Report. The [report](#) reads: "There is an opportunity for additional new authorities or clarification on expediting environmental analysis for active forest management projects, including fuel reduction and timber sales, especially in the wildland-urban interface setting. By increasing efficiency in environmental analysis, we can add some capacity to rebuild 'shelf volume.'"

"Shelf volume" is an agency term that refers to the amount of logging projects far enough along in the National Environmental Policy Act process to most likely be approved and result in timber sales.

To ensure a predictable supply of timber, and because the NEPA process can take years to complete, national forests tend to backlog their logging projects, creating a "[NEPA shelf stock](#)."

Timber production increases create a problem for that shelf stock. The 2022 report spells this out, noting, "Recent increases in timber volume output have outpaced the agency's ability to prepare enough project areas and has exhausted most of the agency's available NEPA-approved projects."

"Civil litigation" is identified in the report as one of the "Barriers to achieving and sustaining higher timber outputs."

The 2022 report includes a promise that the agency will update its "NEPA compliance guidance and other practices."

Internal documents also show the Pacific Northwest's Region 6 office discussing ways to change its use of NEPA and overcome the impacts of environmental litigation.

To this end, a February 2018 internal PowerPoint outlines how Region 6 staff should apply the federal agency's Environmental Analysis and Decision Making (EADM) change effort.

EADM, according to the Forest Service's [website](#), is an "effort that intends to reduce the time and cost of our environmental analysis and decision making [sic] processes ...

Reform of the Forest Service's National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) policies and procedures is a key activity within the EADM effort."

After highlighting the wildfire crisis and showing how EADM can be used to "provide excellent customer service," the Region 6 PowerPoint clarifies the problem: Region 6's annual timber sales have frequently fallen below its yearly timber targets.

The document appears to blame environmental litigation for the shortfall, breaking down the number of projects litigated for each Region 6 national forest.

The document goes on to call on Region 6 employees to decrease the cost and completion time of NEPA analysis by utilizing “at least one new streamlined NEPA decision tool that reduces time and effort ...”

One possible tool, according to the document, is “[Farm Bill CE](#).” This is possibly a reference to so-called “categorical exclusions” to the NEPA process in either the 2014 or 2018 Farm Bill.

Categorical exclusions

Categorical exclusions allow the Forest Service and other federal land management agencies to speed up logging projects by exempting them from the NEPA requirement to conduct environmental assessments and environmental impact statements.

According to Randi Spivak, public lands policy director for the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity, a major problem with the use of CEs is that they give an agency the authority to label a project as having no environmental impacts without the legal and scientific burden of proving it through NEPA.

“It’s basically a done deal,” says Spivak. “There’s no transparency and no ability for the community to engage.”



Thin men: South Gifford Pinchot Collaborative foresters discuss thinning options in Washington’s Gifford Pinchot National Forest. Photo: Jurgen Hess

Publicly, the Forest Service has credited the use of categorical exclusions as helping it achieve its timber targets.

In February 2020, the agency published its “Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Justification.” The

report credits National Environmental Policy Act categorical exclusions with helping it sell 3.27 billion board feet of timber in Fiscal Year 2019. However, how much of that 3.27 billion board feet categorical exclusions provided is open to debate.

Andy Geissler, federal timber program director for the American Forest Resource Council (AFRC), a trade association representing logging and related industries in the Pacific Northwest, says categorical exclusions aren't being widely used by the Forest Service.

"It hasn't seemed to accelerate the general pace of management out there, but we're definitely seeing some forests utilize them," Geissler told *Columbia Insight*.

Litigation is one reason CEs aren't used more often, according to Geissler.

"I've talked directly to district rangers who have told me flat out, 'I'm not going to use CEs for anything that includes commercial timber, because I've talked to my local environmental organization, and they said they would sue me.' So that's real. And it's unfortunate," says Geissler.

During the same interview, Nick Smith, AFRC's public affairs director, clarified that his organization isn't calling for the repeal of NEPA.

"The question is always how it's implemented and ultimately whether it helps us achieve important conservation outcomes on these public lands," says Smith. "[NEPA] still takes too long, and it costs too much money for the Forest Service to develop and actually implement a project that makes a difference on the ground."

Stewardship contracts, Good Neighbor Authority

Although categorical exclusions might not have accelerated the approval of logging projects, as Geissler claims, there is clear evidence that other wildfire tools have.

In addition to mentioning CEs, the ["Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Justification"](#) credits two other legal tools with helping achieve sales targets, tools that also show up repeatedly in public and internal documents: "stewardship contracting" and the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA).

The agency's Fiscal Year 2022 timber-targets [report](#) highlights the importance of stewardship contracts and GNA, noting that nationally "the agency increased timber volume offered for sale through the GNA from 6% to 9% of overall timber volume offered for sale" in Fiscal Year 2021.





Andy Geissler, federal timber program director for the American Forest Resource Council. Photo: AFRC

A 2023 Forest Service [report](#) notes how “the Good Neighbor Authority and stewardship agreement mechanisms” have created “new opportunities for increasing timber harvesting.”

Stewardship contracts and the Good Neighbor Authority were also identified as tools to address the wildfire crisis in the agency’s January 2022 “[Wildfire Crisis Implementation Plan](#).”

Stewardship contracts and the Good Neighbor Authority work in similar ways. Both use logging revenue from the sale of larger trees to pay for forest restoration, including the logging of low- to no-value smaller trees that are cut down to reduce fuel loads.

Stewardship contracts are logging contracts designed to compel timber companies to do ecological restoration work. They do this by contractually obligating companies to complete restoration and other “work items,” says AFRC’s Geissler, by frequently including high-value timber.

In some stewardship contracts, the value of the timber does not exceed the restoration cost. When this happens, additional funding is needed for the timber company to complete its work.

Timber companies don’t always perform restoration work under stewardship contracts themselves, but outsource it to other organizations, including environmental nonprofits.

Jim Furnish, retired deputy chief of the Forest Service turned Forest Service critic, told

Columbia Insight that stewardship contracts incentivize the logging of large-diameter, older trees in another way. By law, revenue from conventional timber contracts is sent back to the U.S. Treasury. Stewardship contracts, by contrast, allow a national forest to hold onto that money locally.

Asked if he thought the Forest Service has consciously used stewardship contracts for this reason, Furnish responded, “I was one of the early practitioners of stewardship contracting. That was sure on my mind.”

Furnish [died](#) in January of this year. He was 79.

Logging-restoration revenue loop

The [Good Neighbor Authority](#) also allows for the recycling of timber revenue to fund forest restoration work.

Lauded by state and federal agencies as a way to address the wildfire crisis, the Good Neighbor Authority allows the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to enter into agreements with state, county and federally recognized Tribal government agencies to participate in timber projects and restoration efforts.

Depending on the GNA contract signed with their federal partners, local agencies can retain revenue from those timber harvests, which can be used to fund the creation of more timber harvests.

GNA funds can even be used to pay for ecological monitoring and NEPA environmental analyses.

While perhaps news to the public, the Forest Service’s use of fire-prevention authorities to meet timber targets is well-known inside the timber industry.

Oregon state agencies have been participating in GNA since 2016. The state of Washington has participated in the program since 2019.

In an interview with *Columbia Insight*, the Oregon Department of Forestry’s Kyle Sullivan-Astor, who oversees his state agency’s involvement in the GNA via the Federal Forest Restoration Program, estimates revenue from timber sales provides about a third of his program’s budget.

According to Sullivan-Astor, through GNA, timber harvested on federal lands in Oregon has paid for restoration and monitoring work done in the state.

Timber revenue through the Good Neighbor Authority funds about 30% of the Washington Department of Natural Resources’ Federal Lands Section of the agency’s Forest

Resilience Division, according to Trevor McConchie, federal lands assistant division manager, who oversees DNR's involvement in GNA.

Sullivan-Astor says timber revenue is often used within the Oregon GNA projects he manages "to generate some revenue from a portion of that project area and spend it in a different portion of that [area]."

This is done, he says, "to ensure that you're treating the entire project for what it needs from a forest health perspective."

Echoing comments about stewardship contracts made by AFRC's Geisler, Sullivan-Astor says this is often necessary because the trees logged for restoration and other "non-commercial fuel reduction" reasons tend to have low commercial value.

When asked if DNR similarly designed its GNA projects, McConchie said: "We try to do the treatment as specified for what's needed in the stand. We don't try to add in bigger trees to make the pay better; that's not how we operate. We try to do the work that is needed based off of all the science that's gone into the analysis."

"Perverse incentive": Logging old trees to pay for forest restoration

Because they recycle timber money to pay for restoration, both stewardship contracts and GNA agreements have come under scrutiny from conservationists.

John Persell, a staff attorney at the environmental nonprofit Oregon Wild, says that by design both stewardship contracts and GNA agreements incentivize the Forest Service to make more high-value, large-diameter trees part of timber sales, trees that under some circumstances might qualify for legal protections.

"I've seen the Forest Service time and again say that they have to go after some bigger, older trees in order to make the sale commercially viable in order to get the other restoration components complete," says Persell.





Fuel reduction: The Forest Service received funding through a stewardship contract to clear debris left over from a logging operation in Washington's Gifford Pinchot National Forest. Photo: Jurgen Hess

Persell says this is frustrating because restoration funded by stewardship contracts and GNA agreements often includes prescribed burning and other “genuine restoration activities” that Oregon Wild might otherwise support.

The Center for Biological Diversity's Randi Spivak was less diplomatic when asked to comment on GNA agreements.

“GNA agreements create a perverse incentive that can damage, not restore, forests and watersheds, including increasing wildfire risk,” says Spivak. “Allowing states to keep revenues generated from commercial timber sales to do more GNA projects creates a self-perpetuating mechanism which results in targeting larger, older trees because they are the ones that fetch higher prices. But these trees are also the most fire resilient, and they store the most carbon.”

Wanted: “Feedback from industry!”

While perhaps news to the public, the Forest Service's use of GNA agreements, stewardship contracts, National Environmental Policy Act “streamlining,” categorical exclusions and other tools and authorities to meet its timber targets is well-known inside the timber industry, in part because the Forest Service has made an effort to keep the industry in the loop.

According to internal documents, Region 6 staff met and discussed timber targets and wildfire tools with representatives from the American Forest Resource Council at the organization's April 2024 meeting held at the Skamania Lodge in Stevenson, Wash.

A handout created by Region 6 staff for the meeting describes how GNA and stewardship contracts have aided Region 6's efforts to reach its timber targets.

Under a section headed “Successes,” the document prepared for a breakout session between timber industry reps and Region 6 staff notes that, “Since 2018, 30,000 acres have been treated through Good Neighbor Authority (GNA). Currently every forest in the Region has at least one GNA.”

In fiscal year 2020, stewardship contracts made up 49% of the region's timber volume, according to the document.

The document credits the region's use of the NEPA streamlining effort (the Environmental Analysis and Decision Making program) with helping it stock its "NEPA shelf for timber sale projects" until the end of Fiscal Year 2026.



Big loss: Following the 2020 Thielsen Fire north of Crater Lake National Park, some large, resilient trees were cut down in the name of public safety. Photo: Francis Eatherington

The trove of internal records shared with *Columbia Insight* also includes meeting minutes, reports and other documents associated with multiple joint meetings between the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and the timber industry association the Federal Timber Purchasers Committee (FTPC).

During these meetings, Forest Service staff reported to timber industry reps, detailing how they planned to meet timber targets.

During a May 2022 FTPC Joint Meeting held in Sacramento, the Forest Service's David Lytle—whose 2023 email to regional foresters called for the creation of "talking points" to be shared "internally and with partners, including industry"—discussed timber targets, wildfire risk, the "growing forest products industry" and the Good Neighbor Authority, according to meeting minutes.

Timber industry representatives present at the meeting included the AFRC's Andy Geissler; Bill Imbergamo, executive director of the Federal Forest Resource Coalition; and Amanda Sullivan-Astor from the Associated Oregon Loggers, a timber organization representing small businesses and foresters across rural Oregon.

Sullivan-Astor has advocated for both stewardship contracts and the Good Neighbor Authority.

Amanda Sullivan-Astor is married to Kyle Sullivan-Astor, the state employee who oversees the Oregon Department of Forestry's involvement in GNA.

In her March 2, 2023, public testimony to Oregon lawmakers, Amanda Sullivan-Astor called for expanding the state's involvement in GNA and additional funding for the ODF program her husband runs.

Amanda Sullivan-Astor has not responded to *Columbia Insight's* request for comment.

In an email to *Columbia Insight*, Joy Krawczyk, public affairs director for the Oregon Department of Forestry, confirmed that her agency is aware that Kyle and Amanda Sullivan-Astor are married, writing that this "doesn't inherently create a conflict of interest under state law. Kyle advises and consults on policy and operational matters related to the Federal Forest Restoration Program, but decisions about the program and its funds are made by agency leadership."

In addition to documents from Federal Timber Purchasers Committee joint meetings, internal Forest Service documents included internal timber industry documents as well. Among these is a PowerPoint created by the Federal Forest Resource Coalition's Imbergamo for the FTPC's May 2, 2023, industry-only meeting held in Denver.

In his PowerPoint, Imbergamo calls for "Expedited NEPA," including the use of categorical exclusions, "Expanded Good Neighbor Authority" and "Permanent Stewardship Contracting."

Imbergamo has not responded to *Columbia Insight's* requests for an interview.

At a May 3, 2023, meeting between Forest Service and BLM staff, Forest Service Deputy Chief Chris French discussed timber targets, "NEPA efficiencies," "stewardship contracting," categorical exclusions and wildfire funding from the Inflation Reduction Act, according to meeting notes.

"Lots of the money came in the form of fuels reduction, but we have been creative in doing fuels reduction that produces volume and forest products," said French, according to meeting notes.

French also discussed Region 6's use of his agency's Environmental Analysis and Decision Making effort.

"R6 under Glens [sic] leadership did not embrace EADM and Liz is now being told to use EADM in a more efficient manner," French reportedly said.

This appears to be a reference to the leadership of Glenn Casamassa, Region 6's previous regional forester, and Liz Berger, the acting regional forester at the time of the meeting.

At these joint meetings, the Forest Service also presented reports that included data on the relative contribution of GNA agreements and stewardship contracts to timber volume, both nationally and on a region-by-region basis.

One of these reports is titled “FY22 USFS Timber Volume Status Report to FTPC.”

The agency report to industry is included in a document created for the October 2022 joint meeting of the FTPC held in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

According to the report, in Fiscal Year 2022, nationally the Good Neighbor Authority made up 9% of the Forest Service’s total timber volume, while stewardship contracts made up 24%.

In Region 6 during the same fiscal year, the Good Neighbor Authority made up 8% of the region’s timber volume, while stewardship contracts made up 36%, according to the document.

The Forest Service presented a similar report during the May 2023 [FTPC joint meeting](#), this time for the beginning of fiscal year 2023.

For both the October 2022 and May 2023 joint meetings, federal employees filled out industry-provided surveys that included questions about how each region was working to meet its timber targets.

During the May 2023 meeting, one question the industry wanted to know was: “How much of the volume you’ve sold in the first half of FY 2023 was sold under the Good Neighbor Program?”

In response to this question, Region 6 reported that, “As of April 1, 2023, the Region has sold approximately 27 MMBF [million board feet of timber] with the use of Good Neighbor Authority.” Earlier in the document, Region 6 credited GNA and stewardship contracts for helping it reach about 25% of its still incomplete total for fiscal year 2023.

The document goes on to explain Region 6’s plan to “streamline NEPA and regulatory compliance as well as make better use of emergency authorities.”

How this might be accomplished is spelled out in an internal Region 6 document dated to April 2023 titled “Draft FTPCR6 Breakout Discussion.”

The draft document notes Region 6 is “seeking efficiencies with NEPA documents and guide development. This includes streamlining authorities like CE’s and Emergency Authorizations -We are looking for feedback from industry!”

Next week: How the Forest Service is using of a legal exemption to address the

wildfire crisis to log trees in the Mount Hood National Forest, and why this could mean the removal of old-growth trees.



Columbia Insight's reporting on environmental issues in Oregon's Hood River Valley is supported by the Jubitz Family Foundation.