

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

I Pledged \$1 Million to Plant New Trees. I Wish I Could Invest the Money in Saving Old Ones.

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Credit...Clayton Cotterell for The New York Times

By Roger Worthington

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A few years ago, feeling the need to do my part to slow global warming, I pledged [\\$1 million](#) to plant a [million native conifer trees](#), many of them in areas burned by wildfires in Oregon's Cascade Mountains, to remove and store carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Most of that money went to reforestation projects on national forest land carried out by a nonprofit I began. The work was overseen by the U.S. Forest Service.

At the time, my friends in the conservation world warned me against it. The agency manages its lands for multiple uses, including timber harvesting, and has allowed the cutting of carbon-rich, old-growth forests whose destruction contributes to global warming. They also suggested that [replanting burn](#) zones was often misguided because in many places, forests historically tend to return on their own.

I asked the Forest Service to guarantee that the saplings planted using my money would not grow up only to be logged later by the timber companies. The agency declined. But overcome, I suppose, by pie-in-the-sky do-gooderism, I pledged the money anyway.

Over the next few years, over 650,000 trees were planted. Today, with a balance of over \$250,000 remaining, we're on track to exceed the target of one million trees.

I should be happy, right? I wish I was. A subsequent event made me reconsider my decision.

Last year the Forest Service went forward with the logging of dozens of [mature](#) ponderosa pines along a popular bike trail running past my backyard. The stated reason was to reduce the risk of fire, though ponderosa pines are among the most fire resistant in the forest. When a citizen offered to [buy out](#) the big trees from the logging contract, the [agency declined](#), citing the fact that a contract was already in place.

A changing climate, a changing world

The cutting of those big pine trees troubled me, especially here in Oregon, where the state's temperate forests have among the highest carbon densities in the world.

A [recent assessment](#) of Oregon's forest reserves in the journal *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change* concluded that the "most important action Oregon can take to mitigate climate change" is to preserve existing forests. Because it takes decades for young trees and their surroundings to absorb more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than what's released, the study said that "planting young trees will not result in much additional" carbon storage within the time left to meet urgent targets to slow global warming.

And with that warming escalating, along with droughts, blast furnace winds, larger wildfires, soil desiccation and wildlife habitat loss, what are the chances that the saplings we helped plant will actually reach the point when they can begin to make a dent in carbon pollution?

When I first made the pledge, many scientists were saying that the next 10 to 30 years was a [critical period](#) for action to prevent dangerous overheating of the planet. In March, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that the nations of the world needed to shift immediately from fossil fuels. At the same time, we're allowing more carbon to escape into the atmosphere from industrial logging (which includes road building, hauling, burning logging debris, soil disruption, spraying and milling).

More than [10 percent](#) of the nation's carbon emissions are captured each year by its public and private forests. Of those, "many old-growth and mature forests have a combination of higher carbon density and biodiversity that contribute to both carbon storage and climate resilience," [according](#) to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who oversees the Forest Service.

A recent [inventory](#) by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management found that more than 32 million acres of old-growth and some 80 million acres of mature forest are on lands managed by the two agencies. Now the question for the Biden administration is, how much of those forests will be preserved?

Forests on federal land are held in trust for the public. We own them. The federal government has a duty to protect these crucial assets. Shouldn't our elected officials, as prudent trustees, be erring on the side of leaving strategic forest carbon reserves intact for present and future generations?

In Washington and Oregon, where I live, logging in the entirety of those two states between 2003 and 2012 accounted for the destruction of far more tree biomass — a measure of the weight of the trees — than did wildfires and beetle infestations, according to study in the [journal](#) *Environmental Research Letters*. (A total of 53

percent of Oregon's land, and more than 30 percent of Washington's, are [managed](#) by the federal government.)

The assessment of Oregon's forest reserves I mentioned earlier tells me that my money would be best invested in safeguarding mature trees and old forests. I would gladly invest that remaining \$250,000, and even more, if the Forest Service would allow conservation investors like me to bid in Forest Service timber sales — not to cut down the trees, but to preserve them. But the agency requires buyers to remove the timber on the land; if they fail to do so, they can be held in breach of contract.

Our elected officials can show us that they are serious about doing their part to slow climate change by protecting our beloved shade-giving, carbon-sequestering, wildfire resistant, watershed-stabilizing and wildlife-enhancing mature and older trees.

Time and again, we've heard that time is of the essence in slowing climate change by cutting emissions and removing them from the atmosphere. We should continue to plant new trees, of course, targeting fallowed farmlands and urban areas. But for my money, and for the sake of future generations, we need regulatory action from the Biden administration to leave nature's best carbon absorbers standing tall.

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