

It's Certified!

by Robin Stanton



Ellsworth Creek reaches forest management milestone

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When you visit a Nature Conservancy preserve you don't expect to meet trucks hauling out logs, but that's just what you might find at Ellsworth Creek Preserve near Willapa Bay. It's part of a long-term plan to restore the diversity and complexity of this 8,000-acre coastal old-growth rainforest, of which all but 300 acres have been logged over the past 100 years.

To restore a healthy and diverse ecosystem rather than a monoculture managed for timber production, the Conservancy plans to thin the forest to an average density

of 70 to 80 trees per acre. Forest restoration must be done carefully over the next century. Done well, these techniques are expected to promote the diverse mix of tree species, sizes and spacing so critical to forest health and function.

The thinning will be done by commercial loggers under contract to the Conservancy. The logs will be sold to help fund ongoing restoration work on the preserve. This project can provide a model for ecological restoration that can be replicated in forest communities around the world, said Tom Kollasch, Willapa program director for the Conservancy.

The Ellsworth Creek program has just passed a major milestone: the forest management operations at the preserve have been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, an independent nonprofit established to promote responsible management of the world's forests. This is the first Conservancy-owned forest west of the Mississippi to achieve this certification. With the certification, logs from the preserve can be sold as certified wood to FSC-certified mills and ultimately made into FSC-certified products that can be purchased by consumers.

"At Ellsworth, the goal is to restore the forest," Kollasch said.

SCIENCE

Plans for managing the Ellsworth Creek Preserve forest come from extensive baseline studies.

RESTORATION

The long-term plan for Ellsworth Creek Preserve is to restore the 8,000-acre forest and re-establish the diversity and complexity of this coastal old-growth rainforest.

ADVOCACY

The Conservancy's participation helps build the FSC program, leading to better forest management practices in the United States and around the world.

“Extracting timber is a by-product, but also a means to that end. By entering into the certification process, we not only meet our own restoration goals, but we also help support a system that can improve forest practices around the world. Think of the influence the organic produce certification system now has. We want to do that for working forests.”

Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations, a system that aligns with the Conservancy’s values.

As with all Conservancy forest management programs, any commercial harvest must be certified to meet standards set by the World Bank and World Wildlife Fund. Currently, FSC is the only certifying organization that meets those standards.

“FSC certification doesn’t allow genetically modified trees, harvest from areas of social strife and civil rights



violations, conversion of forest to other land uses, or the liquidation of high-conservation-value forests,” said Ian Hanna of the Northwest Natural Resources Group.

Hanna led the effort to certify the Ellsworth program earlier this year. He is also involved with Conservancy programs in the Tieton region and the Swauk Valley, both on the eastern slopes of the Cascades.

The Swauk Valley and Tieton programs are likely to be certified later this year, said Reese Lolley, the Conservancy’s staff member working on certification in the eastside forests.

Participating in the certification program accomplishes two important goals for us, Kollasch said. First, it demonstrates commitment to our values by having an independent third party review our practices. And secondly, our participation helps build the FSC program so that ultimately it leads to better forest management practices in the United States and around the world.



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That’s how Bill Lecture plans to restore the forest of the Ellsworth Creek watershed.

“I’m confident what we’re doing will work,” the forester said. “Because I’ve seen what works and doesn’t work in other places.”

Lecture came to work for the Conservancy after he retired from 32 years with the Oregon Department of Forestry. “I came out of retirement to take this job, because the idea was so exciting to me,” he said. “Doing this is my gift to the Earth.”

The Ellsworth Creek Preserve still holds remnants

of the spruce and cedar coastal old-growth forest that once covered Washington’s coastlines, but much of it has been logged and replanted with Douglas-fir for commercial harvest. Restoring diversity and complexity is a long, slow process that can’t be rushed, Lecture says.

An old-growth forest has perhaps 75 to 80 trees of varying species and ages on each acre of ground. Commercial timber growers plant Douglas-firs at a density of 600 trees per acre. After 20 years or so, they thin them to 300 trees per acre. At 45 to 60 years, they clear-cut.

At Ellsworth Creek Preserve we will be thinning to perhaps 200 trees per acre and introducing variations in density by clearing spaces to allow other species to grow and flourish. In another 20 years or so, we’ll thin again, to perhaps 150 trees per acre. And then in another 20 or 30 years, we’ll thin again.

“You can’t do it all at once,” Lecture said. “If you take too many trees out, the stand is vulnerable to strong winds and is in danger of falling apart and blowing down. We have to go through and guide the forest development, to get species like red cedar and spruce back into the forest. If we do this right, in 100 years or so, you’ll have a forest that is healthy and diverse and that will no longer need active management. I can envision what these forests will become. I won’t see that with my own eyes. But I trust that my grandkids and future generations will have that opportunity because of what we do now.”

Learn more about The Nature Conservancy’s forest work around the world, including video about marbled murrelets at Ellsworth Creek, at nature.org/forests09