



Our mission is to connect people to the natural world and cultivate a community of environmental stewards working together to build a greener and healthier planet through advocacy, action, and education.

Don't Blame the Whistleblower

The big mature Ponderosas near Pine Drops trail may have been cut, but the saga continues.

Could the trees have been spared? Commissioner Chang and Mayor Russell have argued that they would have been able to negotiate a buy-out of the big trees from the logging company if Oregon Wild hadn't blown the whistle on the project. That action, they say, directly led to vandalism of the contractor's equipment and removed that option.

The vandalism, they contend, spurred the rattled contractor to abort the negotiations and crank up the chainsaws, purportedly out of fear that more vandalism was imminent.

It's good to know that our elected leaders have agreed that cutting down the big, mature fire-resistant ponderosas during a climate emergency under the guise of forest restoration or fire risk suppression was flat out wrong. It's reassuring that our stewards had at least attempted to use their power to spare the big trees.

But does it make any sense to blame the whistleblower? Had Oregon Wild not exposed the plan to cut down at least 30 big trees (there were likely more), the forest managers would not have even attempted to pursue an alternative.

The vandalism was reported on March 6th, which the sheriff's department reported as "superficial" (viz, an "unidentified liquid inside and outside the cab of a bulldozer). The trees were cut on or about March 25th.

They had plenty of time to close the deal. Moreover, the terms of the deal were shockingly favorable for the contractor. The logging company estimated the lost profit from the trees collectively at around \$4,000, and the offer to spare them was \$5,000.

Why would the stewards of our public forest cede their authority to protect our forests to the whims of a disgruntled logging company? Under the project analysis and other legal documents, the USFS had a duty to protect these trees. They had an obligation to hit the pause button during the performance of the contract if they uncovered changed conditions, discrepancies or mistakes.

Instead of blaming a conservation watchdog for blowing the whistle, the USFS, Commissioner Chang and Mayor Russell should be evaluating their own conduct. Were they good and trustworthy stewards? Did they invite collaboration with the public when it mattered most? There's not a shred of evidence connecting the alleged vandalism to any perpetrator. What message does it send when our elected leaders attempt to disparage a non-profit for speaking truth to power?

And the saga continues. The USFS (in cooperation with the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project) is currently in the final stages of planning the Green Ridge Forest Restoration project, and a new project, the Cabin Butte Vegetation Management Project south of Bend, has just been released for public comment (comments are due by June 12). These projects have the similar objectives and scope as the West Bend Project with an emphasis on developing fire-resistant landscapes. Large diameter trees are more resistant to fire than small diameter trees ("black-bark pine"). We all need to keep an eye on these and future

projects to make sure the projects are considering recent research on forest health, climate change, fire behavior, and carbon storage. We need to make sure the managers and decision makers are saving the big trees, and that the death of the big ponderosa in the West Bend Project will not have been in vain.

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