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My Turn: Wild and managed forests — two suggestions for new forest policy

By MICHAEL MAURI

Gov. Maura Healey recently kicked off an initiative to update statewide forest policy, accompanied by a six-month pause in logging on state lands. Her intention: “to ensure that Massachusetts’ forests are conserved and managed to optimize carbon sequestration and mitigate climate harms.” A special panel of experts and public participation will help shape the unfolding policy.

Here’s where a tug-of-war will likely occur — not about whether there should be wild forest, but, rather, how much, and where. Some will argue for less forest management; others will argue for more, or perhaps even for better, forest management. Yet there is more that unites these seemingly dissimilar thought-camps than initially meets the eye.

First, people in both camps actively cherish a very real experience with the forests all around us.

Second, all agree we need wild areas. And, remarkably, through history, terrain, luck and policy, we seem destined to have a lot of them, albeit in truncated form, lacking top predators or Indigenous fire. And while big blocks of administratively declared wildlands will play a unique role, elsewhere there is significant potential for active forestry to interweave untended wildness and attentive management.

Third, it is well known that the health and growth of individual forest trees, and their ability to accumulate and store carbon, can be optimized with the judicious use of thinning, a familiar forestry method that reduces crowding while also yielding useful wood.

Finally, most would agree the top priority is to keep existing forests as forests. Beyond that, it is pretty clear that any efforts to improve climate outcomes using our existing forest can only offset, at best, a minor fraction of the gargantuan carbon emissions which, we say, are causing climate change in the first place. Worse, there is a legitimate risk that those forests we do keep could actually become less effective carbon sinks over time.

In summary, the current policy impetus is to ensure that our forest provides us with any additional climate benefit we can get. For this, we need the best forest possible. Here are two roles for climate-oriented forest policy that could advance the governor's goals.

First, we need to do more to help our forests thrive. In many conversations I have with foresters, loggers and landowners, we dwell on statewide factors undermining both mature trees and young trees in our forests.

We don't need to wait for dire projections to be fulfilled: a decline is happening right now. We agonize over the flagging health we see in many of our mature trees. And we rail against impediments that prevent a full diversity of new trees from becoming established at all — the very trees we'll need one day for so many reasons.

Clearly, a passive approach to tree viability will only undermine the future forest, and so here is one big potential role for climate-oriented forest policy.

Meanwhile, though we can readily surmise the health of trees by their appearance, science is constantly helping us better appreciate things we can't see directly, including the integral role of soil-dwelling organisms such as mycorrhizal fungi, in promoting tree health and overall forest function — the very same health and function that grow carbon-storing wood above our heads and build carbon-rich soils beneath our feet.

In this light, we may need to re-calibrate some of our active-forestry tools which have gotten caught in an upward vortex of ever larger and more monumentally expensive machinery. Though capable of dispatching much work quickly and safely, such machines are often stressful to finance, repair, refuel and transport.

Further, such ever-heavier machinery is not designed with soil protection as a foremost concern. Faced with warmer winters and wetter summers that keep soils more vulnerable, our efforts to use time-tested mitigations to protect the soil during logging are becoming ever more nerve-wracking.

In my conversations with loggers, many express a wish to avoid ratcheting up the iron to greater extremes, or even wish they could dial down to smaller-scale equipment, while still making a necessary and acceptable living doing the work that we, as a society, need them to do. None of this will happen unless we disengage from economic frameworks — and here I simplify — that prioritize speed over protection in a mad-dash race to supply distant mills now filling voids left by our once-thriving local industries.

If we had flourishing, nearby markets for all types of logs, the innovative use of low-impact logging equipment could flourish as well, and so here is a second major role for climate-oriented forest policy.

Michael Mauri is a practicing forester based in South Deerfield.

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RECORDER FILE PHOTO

A road into Wendell State Forest, a scene of recent logging protests.

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