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Directorate of Public Works The forests grow strong on JBLM

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Joint Base Lewis-McChord is an island of green among a sea of homes, businesses, strip malls and traffic. In particular, there are 61,000 acres of forest, woodland, and savanna, unusual in the Puget Sound lowlands, where most forests are fragmented into relatively small patches.

More information
Two-day permits are required for cutting firewood for personal use only, and the firewood cannot be resold. Only one cord per day can be cut. For more information, call 253-964-2100 or 253-964-2101. Or, to keep up to date, visit Sustainable JBLM/Facebook.

Good stewardship of the forested training lands by an on-site forestry department ensures the continued existence of a healthy forest that supports military training, sustains native plants and animals and benefits local communities.

JBLM practices partial harvesting techniques rather than the common practice in western Washington of removing all trees in clear-cuts. Instead, active forest management utilizes mostly variable density thinnings.

In thinnings, 10 to 20 percent of the trees are removed, across all sizes of the dominant tree species, Douglas fir. Minor species are left in the forest. Variable density thinnings creates more structurally diverse forests over time.

The timber sales program designates areas for commercial wood harvest, determines how much wood is available and the harvest method to be used, and marks the trees to be cut. The trees are harvested by local logging companies or mills, providing an economic benefit.

Annual harvest in recent years has been about one-third of estimated annual forest growth. Due to judicious management, current forest inventory is nearly 2 billion board feet.

Forty percent of net revenues are sent to Pierce and Thurston counties to support schools and roads, while the balance supports Army forestry programs at other installations.

Aaron Fox, Directorate of Public Works environmental's forestry program manager, stresses Army foresters practice active management that considers current training mission and future training needs in a realistic training landscape. They maintain and improve forest roads and maneuver areas and reduce risk of lost raining days due to wildfire.

Using modern forestry methods enhance forest biodiversity to reduce disease and pest outbreaks contribute to carbon sequestration and water purification.

In 2002, Joint Base Lewis-McChord became the first federal ownership in the U.S. to be certified as a sustainable forestry operation by Forest Stewardship Council. It has been recertified multiple times since.

Being certified, JBLM's forestry program must meet specific criteria that cover a broad spectrum of biological, economic, and social considerations. All of this while maintaining forests that benefit military training.

"I think you can safely say that the forests on JBLM are a carbon sink", Foster said, referring to the fact that the trees take in more carbon than they emit.

Wildfires can destroy forest habitat and shut down training.

“As a result of fire exclusion since the mid-19th century, Douglas fir has been invading the grasslands of the southern Puget Lowland,” Jeff Foster said, a DPW ecologist. “Higher tree densities in (these) colonization forests compared to the presettlement forests of (JBLM) mean an increased risk of crown fires during droughts.”

Variable density thinnings, brush control and controlled burning help reduce wildfire risk.

JBLM forests are important habitat for a variety of plants and animals. For example, JBLM is legally required to develop mature and old-growth forests as northern spotted owl habitat on part of the installation, even though no owls (federally listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act) live on the base.

This will occur quickest in areas that have always had forest cover. This is a long-term process.

“Even with active management, colonization forests will require many decades to provide ... habitat because they lack shade-tolerant conifers and large live trees, snags and logs,” Foster said.

The western gray squirrel is listed as threatened by the state of Washington. Habitat loss and forest fragmentation caused the disappearance of the squirrel from all of the western Washington except JBLM. Here, its habitat needs affect the design of many timber sales and ecological restoration projects.

Protection of water and soil resources is also an important part of JBLM’s forest practices. The forestry program maintains buffer zones around lakes, streams and wetlands within which little or no timber harvest occurs.

Timber harvest does not occur on excessively steep slopes and is prohibited during the rainy winter months in areas where logging equipment could cause erosion.

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