

Goings On

Annals of a Warming Planet

On Climate, Biden's Administration Needs to Combat Zombie Trumpism Quickly



By **Bill McKibben**

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The Biden Administration's next few weeks may decide the fate of the remote Yaak Valley, on Montana's Canadian border. Photograph by John Lambing / Alamy

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The blizzard of federal climate initiatives last week (a blizzard that might help allow actual blizzards to persist into the future) is without precedent. For the first time in the thirty-plus years of our awareness of the climate crisis, Washington roused itself to urgent action; veterans of the cautious Obama Administration—the domestic climate adviser Gina McCarthy and the global climate czar John Kerry chief among them—were suddenly going for broke. In fact, only one branch of the Cabinet seemed conspicuous by its muted presence: the Department of Agriculture, which has responsibility for the nation's farms and for many of its forests—that is, for the natural features that will either speed or slow the flow of carbon into the atmosphere.

The new (and returning) Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, has been regarded among activists as one of Joe Biden's less inspiring Cabinet choices: a confrère of Big Ag. But who knows—the spirit of possibility in D.C. might be contagious in the best sense of the word. We may see how far it's spreading in the next few weeks, by watching the fate of the remote Yaak Valley, on Montana's Canadian border. The Forest Service—an arm, somewhat anomalously, of the Agriculture Department—is about to decide on a timber sale in the Yaak area of the Kootenai National Forest. The Black Ram Project, if approved, would consign a vast swath of old-growth forest and grizzly-bear habitat in the Yaak to clear-cutting, and would run roads through one of the wildest places remaining in the lower forty-eight states. As it happens, I've had the chance to hike that wilderness: the writer Rick Bass, who lives in the area and has made it his life's work to try to keep this region ecologically intact, took me over hill and dale years ago, and I can still remember the squelching, buzzing beauty of the place.

By all accounts, the Forest Service is on the brink of approving the Black Ram Project. It's a holdover from the Trump years, when the ex-President (for whom a forest is the place your golf ball goes when you slice it) mandated huge increases in timber cuts in national forests. He explained them as necessary to reduce the risk of forest fires. But, as many biologists pointed out, if there's any worth to such plans, it comes from thinning the smallest trees, not chopping down the old-growth ones that timber companies prize—and which are on the block in the Yaak. Indeed, if you're interested in averting catastrophic global warming (and the fires that it sparks), one of the easiest, cheapest ways to do it is to leave large old trees standing. That's why Bass has been calling for a “climate refuge” in the Yaak. He says that we need to “protect the great lungs of our country, the northern tier of inland rainforests, which still offer some hope for sequestering carbon in the old spruce and subalpine fir forests, which can hold 80 percent more carbon in the soil than the drier pine forests.”

In a statement, Randi Spivak, the Public Lands Program director at the Center for Biological Diversity, which is helping fight the proposed clear-cut, described the project as “the last gasp of Trump's horrifying mismanagement of our national forests and protected wildlife habitat,” adding that “what little old-growth forests remain after decades of clearcutting must be protected. We'll fight to stop this destruction, and we hope the Biden administration will reverse it.” Like the Line 3 and Dakota Access pipelines, the plan to gut the Yaak would almost certainly not be proposed in today's political climate. But tomorrow's actual climate depends on stopping these examples of zombie Trumpism; we're so close to the climate cataract that we can't afford to let inertia and interest carry us any farther down the river.

It's clear that John Kerry has one of the harder jobs on the Biden team, restoring world confidence in America's willingness to take on the planet's most difficult challenge—one that we did more than almost any other country to cause. As he labors to get other nations working in harmony, he'll need as pristine a record as possible back home to

underscore his credibility. Cancelling the Black Ram timber sale would make it that much easier to persuade other countries to do the right thing. It would send a deeper message, too. The most important statement that Kerry ever made in his public career came very early. When he was still in his twenties, and a leader of the group Vietnam Veterans Against the War, he said this to a congressional committee: “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?” That’s where we are circa 2021 in the climate fight: we’re acknowledging the stupidity of standard ways of doing business. So we should just stop. Right now, before any more damage is done.