

Chapter 3: Packwood-Randle, Washington

Photo: Julia Sizek

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Case study facts

Population (2020): 2,348

Location: Lewis County, Washington

Federal forest lands (80% of study area):
Gifford Pinchot National Forest, Cowlitz Valley Ranger District

Climate:

Average Annual High: 60.6 °F/Low: 40.8 °F
Annual Precipitation: 58 inches;
Snowfall: 31.5 inches (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2021)

Approach

We conducted social and economic monitoring of eight rural communities (<15,000 residents) within the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) area. We used a case study approach involving analysis of qualitative interviews (Figure 3.1), literature review, and descriptive summaries of selected secondary data. All interviewees worked in, resided in, or had social or economic ties to the Packwood-Randle study area. Quotes in these reports are from interviews conducted in 2024. Each case study can be read as a standalone report. Chapter 1 provides a full introduction and methods including case study selection, interviewee sampling rationale, and secondary data analyses.

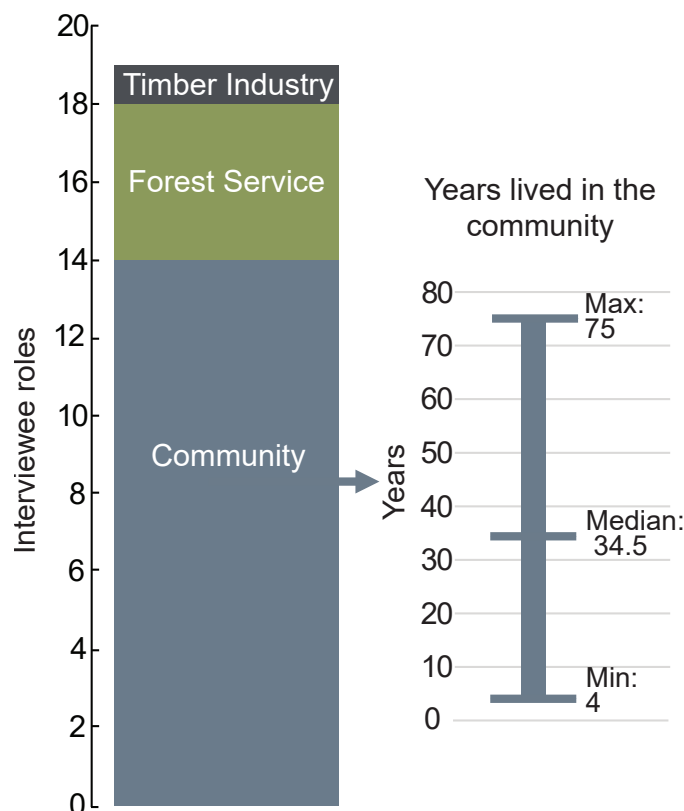


Figure 3.1. Graph of interviewees by role and number of years lived in the community. Our sample included fourteen community members, six Forest Service employees, and one timber industry representative. Community interviewees lived in the study area for a minimum of four years, a maximum of 75 years, and a median of 34.5 years.

Sizек, J., Coughlan, M., Huber-Stearns, H., & Serio, N. (2025). Chapter 3: Packwood-Randle, Washington. In M. Coughlan, H. Huber-Stearns, & S. Schneider (Eds.). *The Northwest Forest Plan: 30 years of social and economic change in rural forest-based communities (1994–2024)* (Working Paper No. 125). Ecosystem Workforce Program, Institute for Resilient Organizations, Communities, and Environments, University of Oregon. <https://hdl.handle.net/1794/31412>

Study area and geography

The Packwood-Randle community case study focused on the Cowlitz Valley Ranger District of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. We spatially defined the Packwood-Randle case study boundary as the Big Bottom Census County Division (CCD) (Figure 3.2). The Big Bottom CCD encompasses eastern portions of Lewis County, including the unincorporated communities of Packwood and Randle. Both towns are located along the large floodplain of the Cowlitz River and the US Route 12 (US 12) corridor that connects Napavine to Yakima over White Pass (Tompkins, 1933). The county seat is Chehalis, which is approximately 58 miles from Randle and 72 miles from Packwood. The Cowlitz Valley Ranger District covers the area of the former Packwood and Randle Ranger Districts. The ranger station is located in Randle. Forests in this region are dominated by Douglas-fir and Western hemlock. The Forest Service manages 80 percent of the study area and other public lands comprise nine percent.

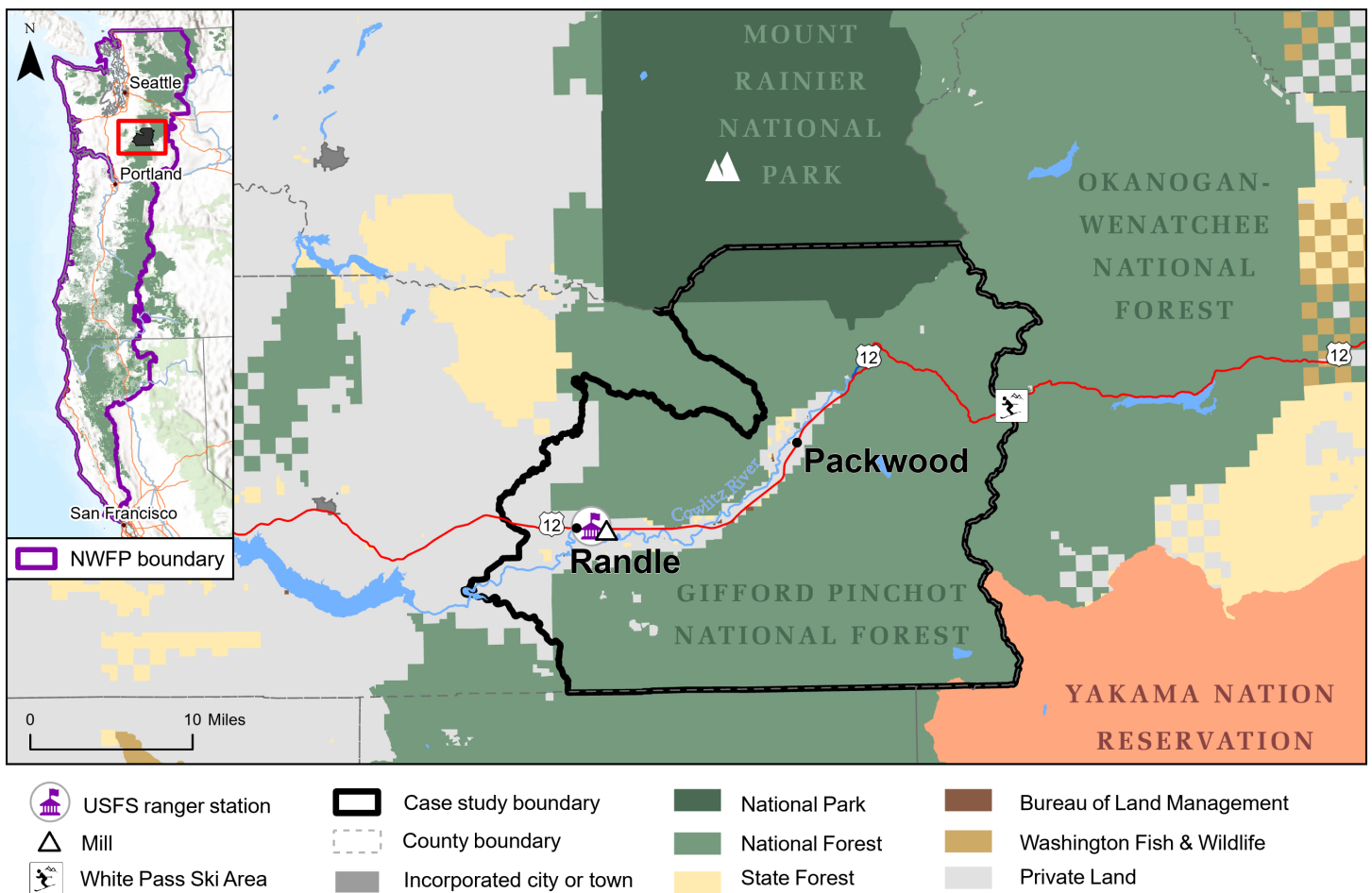


Figure 3.2. Packwood-Randle case study area.

Shared sense of place

Interviewees noted differences between Packwood and Randle. Packwood is situated directly south of Mount Rainier National Park, and interviewees suggested that Packwood's economy recently reoriented towards tourism. One interviewee commented that *“Packwood is pretty much a recreation town only.”* Along US 12 through Packwood, there is a downtown area with a grocery store, shops, hotels, and restaurants.

Residents foresaw future developments in the area, including a proposed development at the old millsite for apartment-style housing.

Interviewees indicated that in Randle, agriculture and timber are important to the local economy. For example, one interviewee stated that *“Randle, you know, is honestly organic farms and dairies.”* Hampton Lumber has been a major employer in the community for many years. The company operates a dimensions sawmill and a sister mill in Morton (approximately 20 miles away), known locally as the Cowlitz Stud Mills (“Randle, Washington,” n.d.). Randle is more dispersed, and, in contrast to Packwood, it lacks a downtown business district. Randle has been relatively insulated from the recent increases in recreation and tourism experienced by Packwood.

Points of interest

Mount Rainier National Park

Mount Rainier National Park, established in 1899, is known for its picturesque scenery and its prominent scenic drives. Visitors from the cities of Tacoma and Seattle influenced the park’s development due to their proximity (approximately a two-hour drive). The closest park entrance to the Packwood-Randle study area is the less-popular southeastern Stevens Canyon entrance, which is normally open from June through September (“Stevens Canyon Entrance,” 2024). The park’s most popular corridor, Paradise Valley Road, runs just 15 miles north of Packwood and links Packwood to Paradise Valley via Skate Creek Road (Forest Service Road 52). Skate Creek Road is popular for dispersed camping, but the route closes in winter (“Forest Road 52/Skate Creek Road,” n.d.). In 2024, the Park Service implemented a new timed entry system for the park. This change could encourage visitors to use less popular entrances to Mount Rainier, such as the route passing through Packwood (“Timed Entry Reservation FAQs,” 2025). From 1994 to 2023, Mount Rainier National Park received an average of about 1.9 million total visitors each year (National Park Service, n.d.).

Ohanapeosh, home to a former hot spring resort that operated from 1921 through 1960, is located near the Stevens Canyon entrance. Historically, the resort catered to individuals in poor health, as well as a small summer community of approximately 125 people who stayed in nearby national forest campgrounds and used the bathhouse (Catton, 1996). The Ohanapeosh area was first administered by the Forest Service, but in 1931 it was added to the National Park, and management was transferred to the Park Service. From 1938 through 1940, there were two Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps in the area—one at Ohanapeosh and one at Packwood; they made improvements in this area of the park, built portions of Stevens Canyon Road, and constructed flood control infrastructure on the Nisqually River (Catton, 1996). In 1957, the Stevens Canyon Road was completed, connecting the eastern and western portions of the park (“Stevens Canyon Entrance,” 2024). One interviewee noted that the Ohanapeosh area had always been a tourist destination, and that Mount Rainier had always been a big draw for recreationists.

White Pass Ski Area

The ski area is located on both the Gifford Pinchot and Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests and is approximately 20 miles east of Packwood on US 12. The Yakima Valley Ski Club opened the White Pass Ski Area in 1953, two years after the road over White Pass was completed (Lewis County, 2024; Meyers, 2018). White Pass Ski Area expanded in 2008, and the lease covers 1,402 downhill acres and 11.2 miles of cross-country ski trails. The mountain is known for being a smaller, independently owned mountain (Donofrio, 2022; Thompson, 2024).

The litigation era and the NWFP: a summary of local impacts

In the late 1980s, conservationists began to raise public awareness of the destruction of old-growth forest habitat by logging in the Pacific Northwest. Public protests and legal actions soon focused attention on the northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*), whose habitat was threatened. During the "litigation era", beginning in 1989 with a temporary legal injunction on federal timber sales in the Pacific Northwest and culminating with the implementation of the NWFP in 1994, timber harvest decreased significantly on federal forest in northern California, western Oregon, and western Washington. This section provides a summary of direct impacts of these events on the social and economic wellbeing of the Packwood-Randle study area. In the sections following this summary, we situate these impacts within the study area's pre-NWFP history (including settlement and post-World War II timber industry) and ongoing changes in the community's wellbeing following 30 years of the NWFP.

The Packwood Ranger District recorded its highest sale volumes in the late 1980s (Lewis County, 2024). Between 1988 and 1996,¹ timber harvest on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest (Figure 3.3) fell from 514.2 million board feet (mmbf) to a low of 11.3 mmbf, representing a nearly 98 percent decline (USDA Forest Service, 2025). From 1996 to 2023, harvests averaged 22.4 mmbf per year but varied between 1.7 mmbf (during the 2008 recession) and 41.6 mmbf, with a standard deviation of 11.9 mmbf.

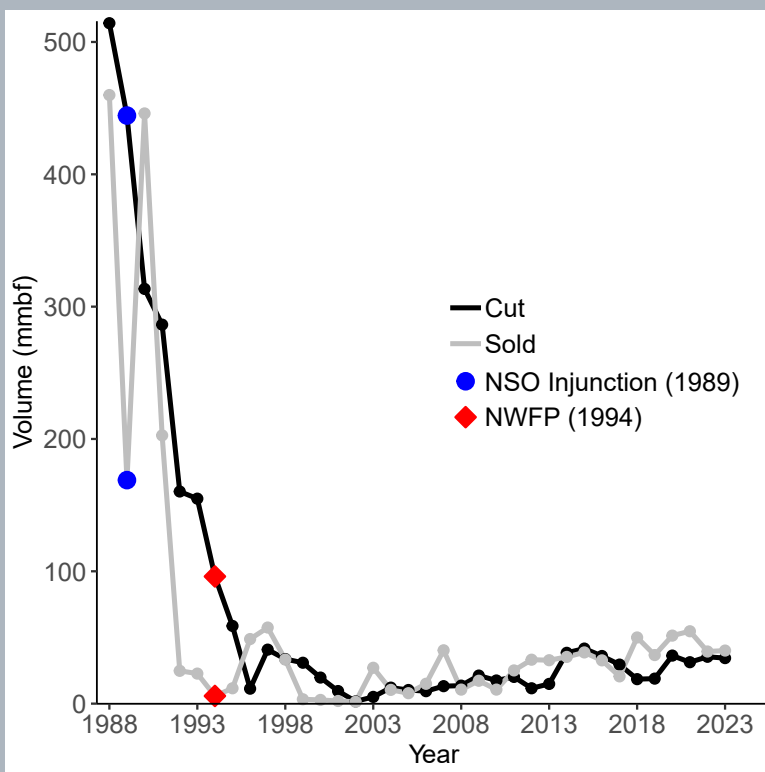


Figure 3.3. Line graph showing timber harvest and sales ("cut" and "sold" volume in million board feet) for the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, federal fiscal years 1988 through 2023. Landmark 1989 temporary injunction on timber sales in NSO (northern spotted owl) habitat in federal forests in the Pacific Northwest and 1994 implementation of the NWFP indicated by blue dots and red diamonds respectively (USDA Forest Service, 2025).

Between the end of World War II and the late 1980s, federal timber provided mills² in the study area with a relatively steady supply of large diameter timber. At that time, the timber industry (including the Forest Service and local mills) in Randle and Packwood employed 400 people full-time and 150 people part-time (Lenentine, 2009). Previous analysis of social and economic characteristics of Lewis County found that in 1990, the county had a high economic dependence on federal forest lands relative to other counties in the NWFP region (Adams, 2025).

Community members and Forest Service interviewees alike thought that the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) had significant, negative impacts on the Packwood-Randle study area. Packwood's sawmill closed in 1998, and two interviewees directly attributed the closure to decreases

1. USDA Forest Service cut and sold data reported in federal fiscal years.
 2. The term "mill(s)" is used throughout to indicate any wood processing facility, including, for example, dimensional sawmills, shake mills, plywood and particleboard facilities, and paper mills.

in federal timber harvests associated with the NWFP. Approximately 220 jobs were lost due to the mill closure (Lewis County, 2024). Interviewees described the aftermath as a period of economic depression. In addition to job losses in the private sector, the Gifford Pinchot National Forest also reduced its staffing. Nearly half of the community relocated elsewhere (Lewis County, 2024). The Packwood Ranger District closed and consolidated with the Randle Ranger District to form the Cowlitz Valley Ranger District in 2003 (Lewis County, 2024). In 2004, the elementary schools in Packwood and Randle consolidated to Randle because of declining enrollment (Graham, 2004).

Reflecting on the 2000s and the aftermath of the implementation of the NWFP, one interviewee described Packwood as “*a sad place.*” Another stated that, “*everything had closed—the school, the mill, the ranger station.*” One interviewee recalled that Packwood residents were nostalgic for the past and would describe “*how vibrant the place had been with logging.*” However, another interviewee suggested that the NWFP forced change to the study area that may have happened eventually: “*I feel like the Northwest Forest Plan was the catalyst for a lot of things... [timber] jobs left and then [Packwood’s economy] moved into tourism... [the NWFP] made that sort of happen. But, I mean, it [Packwood] sits in the context of Mount Rainier [and] has been a tourist destination since it formed as a [National] park.*”



34-inch Douglas Fir in Gifford Pinchot National Forest

Pre-NWFP history

Settlement

Indigenous inhabitants of the Cowlitz Valley Ranger District and Big Bottom CCD included the Táytnapam (also spelled Taidnapaum) people; present-day Randle and Packwood are within their traditional territories (Lewis County, 2024). Descendants of the Táytnapam are members of the present-day Cowlitz Indian Tribes and Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation. The Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation have ceded territory within the Gifford Pinchot National Forest (Healy, n.d.) and tribal members are active in working with the Forest Service on managing huckleberries and fish habitat (Woolington, 2025).

Although trappers, prospectors, and surveyors traversed the area in the mid-19th century, the earliest Euro-American settlers arrived in the valley in 1882 (Tompkins, 1933). President Grover Cleveland created the Mount Rainier Forest Reserve in 1897, which was later transferred to the Forest Service in 1905. The Forest Reserve Act limited new settlement in the areas around present-day Randle and Packwood until the valley areas were excluded from the national forest in 1914 (Jermann and Mason, 1976; “Gifford Pinchot National Forest,” n.d.). A lack of suitable agricultural lands and poor transportation infrastructure also hindered settlement during the first half of the 20th century (Lenentine, 2009; Jermann and Mason, 1976).

From the outset, Euro-American settlers in the Packwood-Randle area relied on a combination of timber, tourism, and agriculture (Clevinger, 1942) although sheep and cattle grazing were also important through the 1920s (Jermann and Mason, 1976). The earliest timber activities in the study area supported clearing for agriculture and local needs. A portable sawmill arrived in 1899. By 1910, two stationary mills were operating in the study area (Tompkins, 1933). These operations were not very large, and large-scale commercial logging was not viable until the 1930s, following the construction of a modern road (Lewis County, 2023, 2024; Lenentine, 2009). This development led to significant changes in the community. For example, the populations of Randle and Packwood doubled between 1900 and 1937, in part due to migrants from Appalachia who were attracted to opportunities in the timber industry (Clevinger, 1942; Jermann and Mason, 1976). In 1935, the Packwood Lumber Company built a sawmill and power plant and provided the first electricity to the community (Jermann and Mason, 1976).

Post-World War II timber industry

During World War II, the Forest Service increased forest road construction and timber harvests in the Packwood Ranger District to meet demand for resources. The Packwood Lumber Company modernized its mill to increase production. After World War II, the local timber industry increased its reliance on the national

forest (Winkler, 2023), as the Forest Service increased its timber sale volume dramatically in response to the post-war housing boom (Lenentine, 2009). The expansion of the timber industry and the development of plywood manufacturing, led to new growth in the study area. During the 1950s, for example, Packwood supported several shingle mills and sawmills, including the Puget Sound Plywood Company (Lewis County, 2023). A 1959 magazine, *The Lumberman* (1959, p.175), listed three plywood plants in operation in the study area: Pac Ply Veneer Company in Packwood (processing 100 mmbf/year), Randle Veneer Company in Randle (108 mmbf/year), and the Cowlitz Veneer Company (100 mmbf/year). The Mount Adams Plywood Mill in Randle was also built around this time and in operation by 1963 (Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 2010).

By the 1970s, the Packwood-Randle study area included at least four major wood processing facilities: the Packwood Lumber Company mill and the Cowlitz Stud Company (both owned by the Pacific Timber Company of Seattle), the Mount Adams Veneer Company, and R.D.W. Manufacturing in Randle (Haynes, 1983). Between December 1974 and September 1977, the Pacific Timber Company purchased 409 mmbf of timber (28 percent of total volume sold) from the Packwood and Randle Ranger Districts. In 1976, production at the Packwood and Randle mills consisted of 42 percent lumber and 54 percent plywood.



Photo: National Archives Catalog
Logging in Gifford Pinchot National Forest, 1956

The Mount Adams mill in Randle closed in the 1980s. In 1988, the Washington Mill Survey (Larsen, 1992) listed five wood processing facilities in the study area: Gardner Mill Company (Randle), Pacific Lumber and Shipping/Cowlitz Stud Company (Randle), Pacific Lumber and Shipping/Packwood Lumber Company (Packwood), White Pass Cedar Products (a shake/shingle mill in Packwood), and West Veneer (Randle). By 1990 the Gardner Mill Company and White Pass Cedar Products had closed (Larsen, 1994).



Photo: Julia Sizek

Former Mill Site, Packwood

Packwood-Randle after the NWFP

Employment and industry

Community members generally thought that employment opportunities decreased in Packwood and Randle over the last 30 years. Nine of 13 interviewees said that employment had decreased, two mentioned that it had both increased and decreased, and two stated an increase in employment. Nine interviewees mentioned an increase in the tourism and service industries, and 10 mentioned declines in the timber industry locally since the implementation of the NWFP. Interviewees indicated that young people saw job opportunities in Randle as being *“the mill, ... the school, and... the gas stations and the coffee shops and some tourist service industry.”*

When the NWFP reduced federal timber harvest in the 1990s, private and state forests supplemented timber supply. Nonetheless, Lewis County had a 50% decrease in overall timber harvest during this period (Lewis County, 2024). As timber supplies grew constrained in the early 1990s, the West Veneer mill in Randle closed (U.S. Congress 1993). Packwood Lumber Supply had primarily processed large-diameter old-growth logs from federal lands, and as federal timber harvest declined, the mill was unable to make up the enfolding deficit with other timber sources (Lenentine, 2009). The mill closed in 1998 and Packwood lost approximately 220 jobs. The mill’s owner, Hampton Lumber, placed a restrictive deed covenant on the mill’s property to prevent future use of the site for timber processing (Lenentine, 2009). As one interviewee pointed out, the closure of Packwood mill brought significant changes for Packwood: it changed *“not just who lives here, but what their life trajectory is going to be.”* In 2022, developers from Battleground, Washington bought the mill site and intend to develop it for mixed commercial and residential use (Vander Stoep, 2022).

As of 2024, Hampton continued to operate sawmills in Randle and nearby Morton. These mills are limited to producing dimensional lumber, representing an overall decline in wood product diversity. Formerly, the study area hosted a joiner plant, veneer plant, tie mill, and shake mill. The Randle Mill processes 260 mmbf of lumber each year, primarily two species: Hemlock (60%) and Douglas-fir (30%) (“About Hampton Lumber,” n.d.). In 2011, Hampton reported that 70% of their logs were sourced from private lands (Pearson, 2011). One interviewee mentioned that they thought that most of the mill’s supply came from Oregon rather than locally. Despite these changes, timber remained important to the local community; as one interviewee put it: *“That [timber] is the traditional work of the people of Randle.”*

While the mill in Randle continued to be an important source of local employment in 2024, interviewees thought that the role of timber was not as economically important as in the past. As one interviewee from Packwood said, *“Timber is very important—exactly how has shifted so much,”* indicating that timber has been particularly important culturally even as the economic importance declined. As another interviewee put it, *“there’s still that emotional memory”* of timber production as a successful industry.

Tourism significantly increased in Packwood in the 2010s, and community members mentioned that it accelerated further during the pandemic. Between 2019 and 2022, visits to Packwood Visitor Center increased over 400 percent from 1,903 to 8,113 (Lewis County, 2024). One interviewee linked the expansion of the ski area to the discovery of Packwood by tourists: *“When White Pass Ski Area expanded... that time’s when Packwood started to be noticed a little bit more.”* In the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 seasons, White Pass ski Area had its two busiest seasons, and season passes sold out each year (Thompson, 2024). Northbound traffic counts on US 123 to the Stevens Canyon Entrance of Mount Rainier National Park also increased from 98,037 in 2019 to 114,334 in 2021 (Lewis County, 2024).

Interviewees from Packwood described tourism as the *“lifeblood of the community.”* One interviewee described the relationship between locals and tourism as one of love and hate: *“[tourism] is the economy, but ...right at this moment, it has some really detrimental impacts to the locals.”* Some interviewees thought the problems were because Packwood *“is not set up to handle the amount of tourism that’s coming through it.”* For example, one interviewee suggested that, *“[In the] grocery store on a Friday night in the summer, you can’t get hamburger buns. ... To know that until Tuesday, when the next delivery gets to Blanton’s, there may not be eggs, milk, bread at the grocery store, because they’re just simply sold out. ... And while that might be a slight inconvenience for the tourists, it is crushing for the people who live there.”* Interviewees also suggested that second-home owners did not benefit the community: *“They’re more like a weekend warrior. They come build a cabin, they spend the weekend, you know, then they’re gone again.”* Overall, interviewees thought that Packwood was unprepared for the increase in tourism that had recently come to the town, and that tourism was not as beneficial to the community as they hoped.

Interviewees viewed tourism employment as inconsistent over the course of the year: *“There’s the snow people, and there’s the touring during summer. ...What are we gonna do for the other six months?”* However, others noticed that there was less of a shoulder season to tourism than there used to be, and that there were *“a lot more people...steadily through the year.”*

In contrast to Packwood, interviewees saw Randle as being less impacted by tourism: *“Randle is less affected [by tourism] ... [there are] more mill workers and other small industry type work available in Randle versus Packwood.”* However, interviewees did think that tourism could eventually have an economic impact on Randle.

Demographic and community changes

According to US Census data for the Big Bottom CCD, the total population in the Packwood-Randle study area declined by nearly one third between 2000 and 2020 (Table 3.1). Low-income populations in the CCD also declined by about 46 percent while retirement age populations increased from 18 percent to 39 percent of the population.

Table 3.1. US Census and American Community Survey demographic estimates for 2000, 2010, and 2020. See Appendix D for complete citations.

	2000	2010	2020	Trend
Total population	3,328	2,882	2,348	Decreased
Low-income population*	1,473	1,176	677	Decreased
% Low-income population	44%	41%	29%	
Population aged 25-44	754	430	499	Decreased overall, but recovering
% Population aged 25-44	23%	15%	21%	
Population aged 65 or older	603	744	908	Increased
% Population aged 65 or older	18%	26%	39%	

*For low-income population, 2010 is an ACS 5-year estimate for 2008-2012 and 2020 is an ACS 5-year estimate for 2018-2022.

Interviewees thought that the most significant demographic changes in the community were (1) an influx of outsiders purchasing new property and (2) the aging of the community. Eleven interviewees agreed that people from outside the area were relocating to Packwood and Randle. These interviewees collectively characterized new residents as retirees (n=7), teleworkers (n=4), and wealthy individuals (n=2). They also noted that many people who purchased property in the area did not live in Packwood or Randle full-time. Interviewees characterized these new property-owners as investors and vacation-home owners rather than full-time residents. As one community member estimated, *"I'd say at least 90% of people that come here are to invest [in] land, build Airbnbs and make money off it."* As another interviewee put it, *"They don't come here to live. The people who are buying second homes are hoping to retire here in the future."*

Interviewees agreed (n=8) that there are fewer families with children than there used to be in Packwood and Randle. Some saw this as linked to an aging population of retirees: *"if you look at the demographic, it just really shifted towards, you know, [people in their] 50, 60, 70[s]."* Interviewees thought that younger people typically left the area because of a lack of job opportunities, but that some returned home after trying to live elsewhere. Of those who stayed, they often did so to assist with aging family members or to work at the mill or schools.



Downtown Packwood, 2024

Housing and development

When the Packwood mill closed in 1998, many working-age families and individuals left the area, and many homes were converted to vacation homes or seasonal rentals. By 2000, approximately half of the homes in Packwood were seasonal rentals or vacation homes (Lewis County, 2024). Demand for vacation homes and short-term rentals has increased the cost of housing. Housing prices in Packwood increased 300% between 2012-2022 (Lewis County, 2024). Of 12 interviewees who commented on local housing, eight mentioned the increased costs of housing, and one characterized these changes as gentrification.

Housing issues related to vacation rentals were specifically mentioned by eleven interviewees. Four interviewees pointed out that demand for vacation homes and short-term rentals has also created a shortage of available housing for year-round residents. A common sentiment was that increased tourism has hurt housing availability: *“The availability of housing, I think, has declined because of the tourist industry. I mean, I have a neighbor that has a perfectly good house that gets rented out two or three times a month for a weekend and that pays their mortgage... instead of having a family that could, you know, rent...for a month for the same amount of money.”* An online search revealed 312 short-term rental homes in the study area as of October, 2024.

These housing issues have also impacted local employers and their employees. Both the White Pass Ski Area and the Cowlitz Valley Ranger District in Randle have reported that the area lacks sufficient housing for year-round and seasonal employees (Lewis County, 2024). In 2024, five interviewees noted a lack of housing for employees, and one mentioned that employers purchased housing for employees because employees would otherwise be unable to afford local rental prices. Interviewees saw these changes in the rental market as contributing negatively to community well-being in both Packwood and Randle.

In response to these challenges, Lewis County initiated the Packwood Subarea Plan process (Vander Stoep, 2023a; Lewis County, 2024). As part of this planning process, the Lewis County government collected data about housing in Packwood. The study found that in 2024, only eight percent of the single-dwelling residential parcels in Packwood were owner-occupied, 14 percent were short term rentals, and 33 percent were vacation homes. While uses for the remainder of the parcels (45 percent) were not specified within the data, the county housing report suggested they were not primary, owner-occupied residences. Nearly half of the vacation rentals registered in Lewis County are in Packwood (Lewis County, 2024).

County planners expected Packwood’s growth to remain high through 2030. The county estimated that approximately 1,200 people will live in Packwood and its surrounding neighborhoods by 2045, in comparison to the 1,073 documented in the 2020 census (Lewis County, 2024). The community well system in place in 2024 could accommodate approximately 229 more single-family connections without needing further improvements (Lewis County, 2024). As of 2024, there were 444 parcels of undivided vacant land that could be developed assuming adequate water supply and construction of new sewer (Lewis County, 2024; Vander Stoep, 2023a). Developers have also proposed to redevelop the mill site in Packwood as housing, which would require that a sewer system be constructed in downtown Packwood (Vander Stoep, 2022). Another potential barrier to housing development is US 12. The highway passes directly through Packwood’s downtown corridor, but there are no current traffic calming measures, designed parking, or designated walking areas (Lewis County, 2024).

Community services

During peak timber harvesting in the 1980s, Packwood had a doctor, dentist, pharmacy, volunteer fire department, golf course, community hall, library, elementary school, four churches, several gas stations, laundromat, air strip, and 30 other local businesses (Lenentine, 2009). Between the late 1980s and early 2000s, some local businesses consolidated, and Packwood lost a grocery store, several gas stations, and business-centered services.

Following a tourism boom that began around 2010, the number of services began to recover. The number of restaurants increased and two new breweries were established in Packwood. Four interviewees mentioned that services (including restaurants, health care, gas stations, grocery stores, and personal or business services) were now more oriented toward tourists and were no longer meant for locals. As one interviewee put it, *“Things have come back now, big time, but it's not... [the] same kind of thing coming back like we had before. The things that are coming back now... [are for] rich people, you know, people with lots of money.”* For example, in 2024, a new initiative was underway to create eight electric vehicle charging stations along the White Pass Scenic Byway (US 12), including one in Packwood and at White Pass Ski Resort (White Pass Scenic Byway, n.d.).

However, some new services *are* locally oriented. For example, the two new breweries often host social events for locals. A newly established health clinic offers another example of a locally oriented service. This clinic opened in 2024, after years without medical services in Packwood.

During the Lewis County Packwood Subarea Plan process, community members identified a need to attract and support a range of locally owned businesses, including pharmacy, dental, veterinarian, and other services. Community members also identified a need for more indoor, family-friendly facilities such as a gym, movie theater, and arcade (Lewis County, 2024). Community amenities in the Packwood-Randle study area are summarized in Figure 3.4 on the following page.



Downtown Packwood, 2024

Photo: Julia Sizak



Figure 3.4. Community amenities in the Packwood-Randle study area. Includes: one full-service supermarket (other locations that accept SNAP benefits, such as gas stations or convenience stores, not included), two community health clinics, two post offices, two libraries, one forest service ranger station, and one timber processing facility.

Community governance

Unincorporated communities lack local governments. This poses challenges for the Packwood-Randle study area as the community is geographically distant and culturally distinct from the county seat, yet it depends on the county for services. Interviewees felt disconnected from the county government, and some described the relationship between the community and the county as contentious. One interviewee noted that many new residents were drawn to the community because it is rural and isolated. However, those same residents were often frustrated by the lack of services.

Although Packwood is not incorporated, one interviewee suggested that *“people always think that Packwood is incorporated because it behaves like a town.”* Residents mentioned that Packwood could use more community cohesiveness and organization. As one interviewee put it: *“Packwood is a zoo, or a circus; we need a ringmaster.”* For example, two interviewees mentioned that having an organized group or government could bring to fruition long-held plans to install a wastewater system in Packwood’s downtown area.

Packwood does have many community organizations, including the Packwood Improvement Club, Livable Packwood, the Senior Center, the Gifford Pinchot Trash Force, Packwood Trail Project, the White Pass Country Historical Museum, and Friends of the Library. In contrast, interviewees did not think that Randle had as many community organizations aside from the local school.

Community relationship with the Forest Service

The relationship between the Forest Service and the community has been contentious since the Forest Reserve was established in 1897. Community members resented the new rules on grazing, logging, and access to the public domain (Jermann and Mason, 1976). Some interviewees repeated that this sentiment was still common; as one Forest Service employee put it: *“I've kind of gotten that sense that, you know, they [generational community members] feel like, it's their forest, ... and we're just here for a while, and then we'll leave and ...and, you know, they don't like all the rules.”*

Of the 17 interviewees who commented on the relationship between the Forest Service and the community, three said it was positive, eight said negative, five said that the relationship depended on the district ranger, and five mentioned that they thought their local office was understaffed (results not additive). Community members frequently remembered particular district rangers who they thought did a good job by attending community meetings, being responsive to individual concerns of adjacent landowners, and dealing with concerns like illegal refuse dumping.

Others thought that the relationship between the community and the Forest Service changed positively since the Northwest Forest Plan, in part because the community changed. As one interviewee explained, *“if you shut down the sawmills, shut down the logging, say a third of the people moved out.... Those houses are still going to be occupied. And who are those going to be occupied by? Well, maybe retired people, maybe the preservationists who work in an area... So, it changes [the] structure of the community. So, the relationship between the community and the Forest Service may be changed, but it's because the community has changed.”* In other words, the composition of the community changed over time more than the attitudes of individuals.



Mount Rainier viewpoint, 2010

We asked community interviewees about their views on Forest Service management priorities (Figure 3.5). Interviewees thought that the socioeconomic well-being of local communities was either a low priority for the Forest Service (67 percent), or that the Forest Service was neutral about it (33 percent). About half of the interviewees thought that incorporating public opinions into the planning process was also a low priority for the Forest Service, while only seventeen percent thought it was a high priority. Although interviewees thought that the Forest Service was either neutral or placing a high priority on climate change, only 33 percent thought that the Forest Service was prioritizing wildfire resilience.

The Pinchot Partners, a local forest collaborative, was considered among interviewees to be effective at working with the Forest Service. The group’s mission is to “promote watershed health, create quality local jobs, and encourage sustainable recreation” (Pinchot Partners, n.d.). Interviewees described the Pinchot Partners as helping the Forest Service plan projects and integrate input from across different user groups with a focus on local jobs and forest health. The group historically worked on planning for projects related to restoring fish passage, huckleberry habitat, mitigating wildfire risks, and maintaining roads.

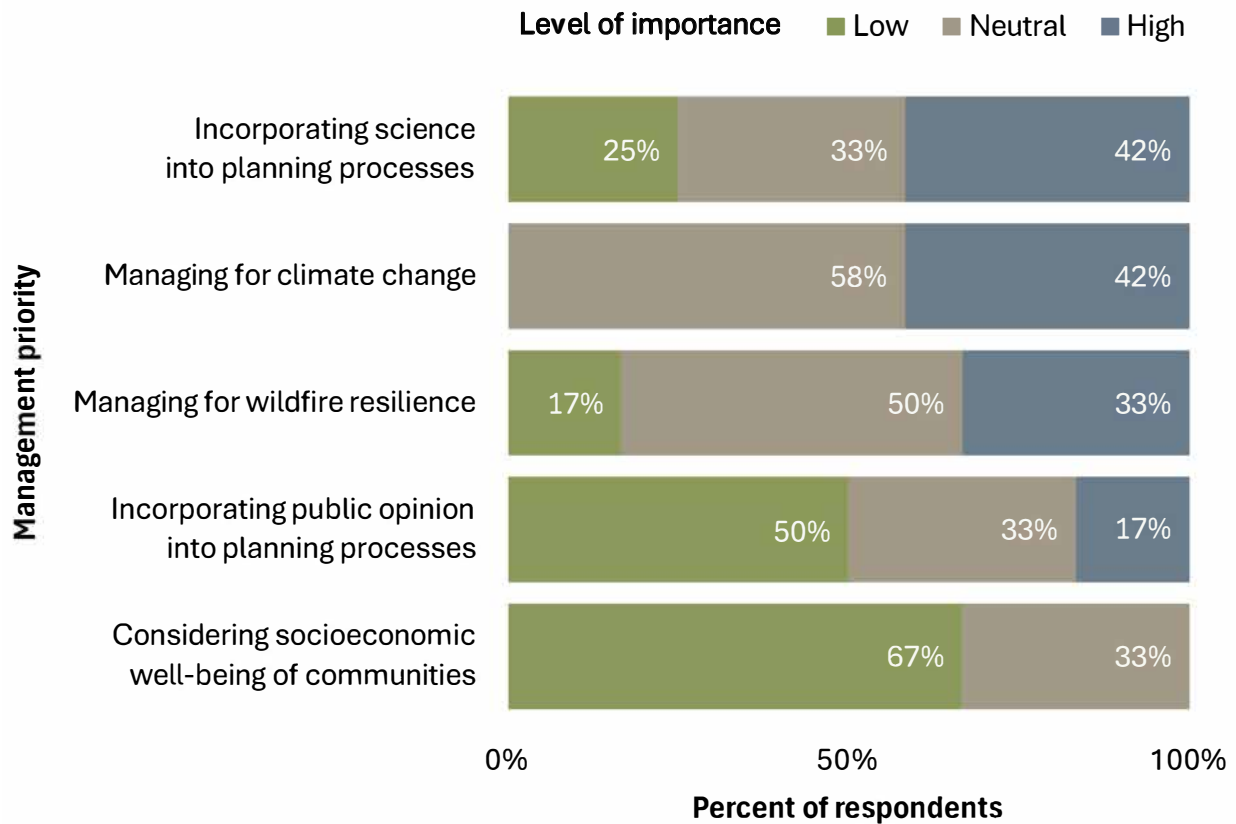


Figure 3.5. Community perception of Forest Service management priorities (n=12). Bar graph segments represent the percentage of interviewees indicating level of importance (Low, Medium, High) of each management priority.

Community relationship with national forest lands

Interviewees agreed that the national forest—primarily its beauty and recreation opportunities—attracted both new residents and tourists alike. Interviewees ranked non-timber forest products, hunting and fishing, and timber as the most important aspects of their use of national forest lands (Figure 3.6). While the Cowlitz Ranger District timber program is briefly described above (see “Summary of local impacts of the NWFP”), below we discuss non-forest timber products and aspects of recreation, tourism, hunting and fishing (including forest access issues) described by interviewees.

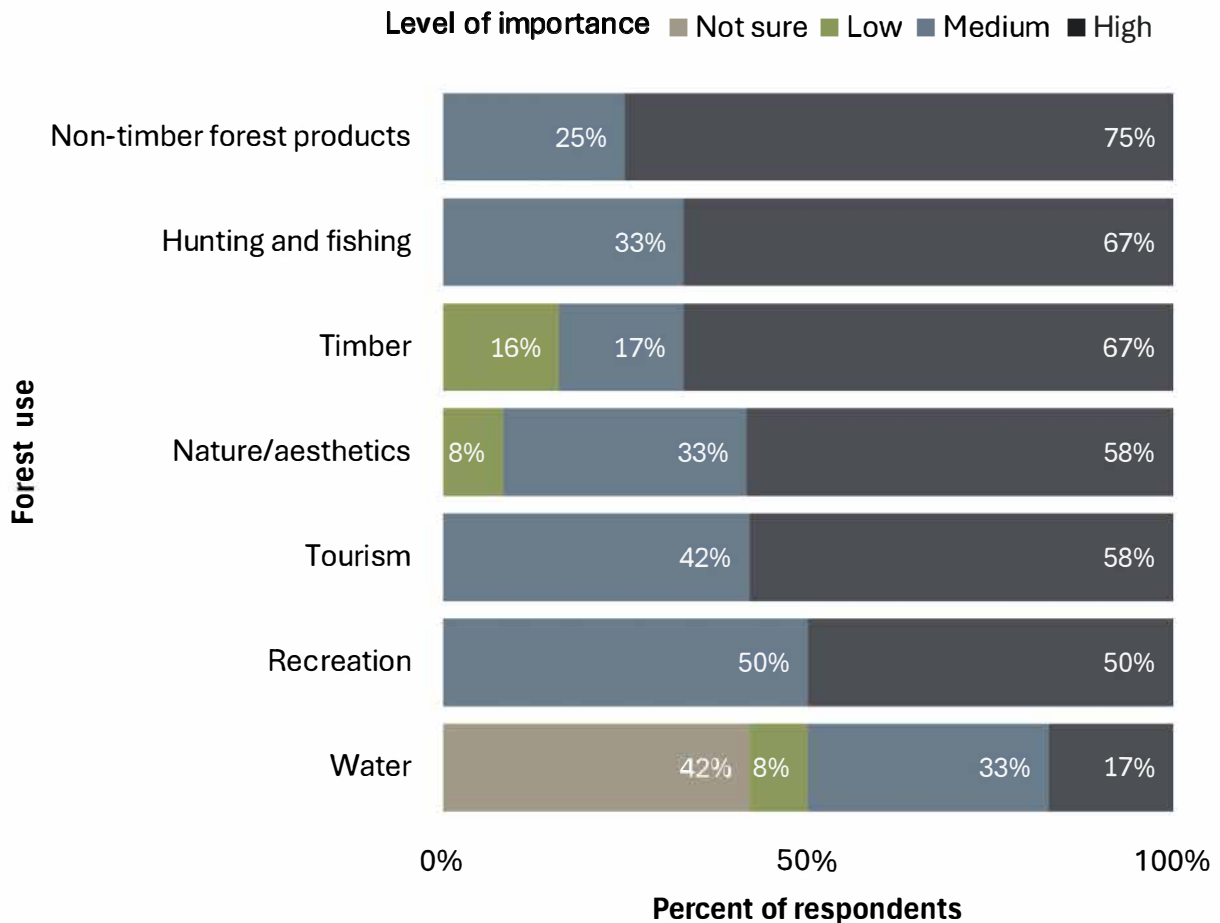


Figure 3.6. Importance of national forest uses to community (n=12). Bar graph segments represent the percentage of interviewees indicating level of importance (Not sure, Low, Medium, High) of each forest use to the community.

Non-timber forest products

Although interviewees mostly agreed that non-timber forest products were important to the community, only three interviewees discussed them at length. In 2024, the Gifford Pinchot National Forest had one of the largest special forest products programs in the nation, and, of the three ranger districts, Cowlitz Valley has the largest program. Forest products managed under the program include berries, beargrass,

salal, firewood, cascara, boughs (primarily Noble fir), and Christmas trees. In terms of commercial harvests, the highest value non-timber forest product on the district were Noble fir boughs. For example, between 2013 and 2023, the Cowlitz Valley Ranger District sold 5,394 tons of boughs for nearly \$1.1 million with approximately \$10,000 worth of boughs purchased by buyers from the study area (USDA Forest Service, 2023).

As of 2024, the Gifford Pinchot National Forest was the only national forest in the country with a “large-scale” commercial huckleberry permitting program (Woolington, 2025). In the 2023 season, there were 63,225 gallons of huckleberries sold for a total value of \$94,837 (USDA Forest Service, 2025). One interviewee suggested that of all the non-timber forest products, huckleberries “*have the biggest buzz in political implications.*” Huckleberries are contentious because of the broad range of interested parties, which include commercial, recreation, and Tribal interests in the species. As early as 1932, the National Forest formally set aside approximately 2800 acres of huckleberry fields for Native American use (Woolington, 2025). However, commercial pickers often encroach on huckleberry fields nominally protected for Tribes (Woolington, 2025). In 2024, the NWFP Federal Advisory Committee recommended a review of the program to ensure the protection of Tribal treaty resources, including limiting the commercial permitting program (NWFP Federal Advisory Committee, 2024).

According to interviewees, there was a sense among some locals that non-timber forest product collection has become more commercial over time, and that “*it's not left for the locals like it used to be.*” As demand for non-timber forest products increased in recent years, the Forest Service began issuing permits. This annoyed some locals who felt like they should not have to pay for picking: “*Now, everything you do, the Forest Service wants to make you pay for it, right? But they don't give you nothing back.*” One interviewee suggested that mushroom and berry picking also attracted commercial buyers to the study area. In 2023, the Gifford Pinchot National Forest issued permits for 20,545 gallons of mushrooms worth over \$41,000 (USDA Forest Service, 2025). Over 484,000 pounds of bear grass worth over \$48,000 was also commercially harvested that year.

Two interviewees mentioned that firewood collecting was also important for home heating in the study area. Although individuals can cut firewood for their own use, the district also issues contracts for commercial firewood sales. Over the past decade (2013-2023), the ranger district issued \$53,210 of commercial firewood contracts for a total of 915 cords from 40 different sales (USDA Forest Service, 2023). Thirty of those sales were purchased by individuals or businesses local to the study area.

Forest management has shaped habitat for non-timber forest products. According to one interviewee, some forest products are less prevalent than before due to a decline in timber harvest following the NWFP. They cited a decline in the availability of noble fir boughs (cut from small trees in younger plantations) related to the lack of clearcutting and replanting. They also suggested that beargrass (dependent on larger canopy openings), and huckleberries (dependent on light availability) were less prevalent. Although the Forest Service has undertaken habitat enhancement projects for huckleberry, these actions have not successfully addressed the overall decline in huckleberry habitat resulting from larger forest-level changes (Woolington, 2025).

Recreation, tourism, and roads

Recreation in the national forest increased, in part due to spillover effects from Mount Rainier National Park. For example, interviewees suggested that the increasing popularity of Mount Rainier and the National Park Service’s new reservation system have resulted in more hiking and recreation in the nearby Gifford

Pinchot National Forest. Community initiatives, such as the Packwood Trail Project, have also aimed to increase local recreational opportunities.

While hunting is an important activity locally, interviewees mentioned a decline in habitat for deer and elk: *“A lot of tourists come here to hunt, and as the Gifford Pinchot [National Forest] fills up with tourists, the locals go elsewhere to hunt.”* For many locals, that elsewhere is just across White Pass on the Naches Ranger District in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

Interviewees mentioned the following kinds of recreation were most popular: hiking (n=7), off-road vehicles (n=4), hunting (n=1), camping (n=1), fishing (n=1), high mountain lakes (n=1), and skiing (n=1). Scenic attractions in the area beyond Mount Rainier and the White Pass Ski Area include Packwood Lake and the Goat Rocks wilderness, caves and waterfalls near Randle, and High Rock.

Nine interviewees mentioned that forest roads and their maintenance were of great importance to the community. Some interviewees expressed annoyance over road closures, noting that many people use roads for recreation in the forest. They also mentioned that roads provide access for fire suppression during wildfires. One interviewee felt nostalgia for the pre-NWFP forest road system: *“[Its] brutally painful to drive around up there [after] growing up in it and seeing how nice they were... Roads with nothing wrong with them, but now they’re so brushed in.”* Interviewees noted that this lack of maintenance was particularly hard for older people who otherwise may lack forest access. In 2024, interviewees expressed recent concern around roads in relation to firefighting and fire mitigation needs: *“People will be like, ‘Why don't they just maintain all the Forest Service roads as fire blocks?’ ...Those aren't maintained anymore.”*

Five interviewees noted other maintenance issues. For example, they disliked the mess caused by dispersed camping and dumping in the forest, especially along Skate Creek road: *“it's really disgusting, like poop and toilet paper all over the place, and it's right on the water, and we have community groups that pick up trash, like, on a weekly basis out there, just because it's our community.”* This challenge was especially visible to locals because of the increase in tourism during the pandemic.

Timber

Over the last decade (2013-2023), federal timber has supported very little local economic activity. For example, only two of 21 timber sales (excluding firewood, boughs, and pinecone sales) on the Cowlitz Ranger District were sold to businesses based in Packwood (USDA Forest Service, 2023), representing approximately four percent of the total timber sale volume. Another four sales were sold to a logging business in nearby Silver Creek (20 percent of sold volume), while the remainder (approximately 75 percent of sold volume) went to businesses along the I-5 corridor and beyond, between 85 and 185 miles away from the study area.



Yacolt Fire burn, 1902

Wildfire and other forest disturbances

Historically, large fires impacted the area around Randle and Packwood. In 1902, the Yacolt fire burned approximately 130,000 acres of heavily timbered lands across what was then the Columbia National Forest (Mack, n.d.; Fenby, 1914). As early as 1914, foresters commented that the area “is sure to be set afire sooner or later either by lightning or by the carelessness of one of the many fishermen, berry pickers, or other campers” (Fenby, 1914). In 1918, over 30% of the Randle District burned in what was known as the Cispus Burn, and there were other significant fires in 1929 and 1939 (USDA Forest Service, n.d.; Mack, n.d.).

Nevertheless, with a lack of large wildfires during the mid-20th century the Gifford Pinchot National Forest earned a reputation for being resistant to fire (Mack, n.d.).

In 2022, the Goat Rock fire came within two miles of Packwood and authorities closed US 12 from Packwood to the White Pass summit (Olympian Staff, 2022). The Packwood neighborhoods of Timberline, Goat Rocks, and High Valley were evacuated (Vander Stoep, 2023b), and many worried that they could lose their homes. Fortunately, no homes were lost; many interviewees credited a change in wind direction with saving the neighborhoods (Vander Stoep, 2023b). In total, the fire burned around 6,196 acres and resulted in forest closures through the following winter (Fairbanks, 2023).

According to interviewees, fire only became a concern in Packwood following the Goat Rocks fire. Only four interviewees thought wildfire management on the national forest was of high importance to the community. Six interviewees mentioned that community members thought that the fire was not suppressed sufficiently. There was debate among participants about whether fires should be fought in wilderness areas, such as where the Goat Rocks fire originated. Another community perception was that a lack of suppression allowed the fire to burn, and then when winds changed, the fire threatened Packwood: *“They let it burn for a month, and then conditions got right, and then they realized, oh, there's like nothing between here and Packwood, except for timber.”* After the fire, more residents became involved in a local Firewise program (Vander Stoep, 2023b). In 2024, Lewis County adopted a county-level Community Wildfire Protection Plan, something they previously lacked (Brown, 2023; “Lewis County Hazard Mitigation Plan,” 2024).

Five interviewees said that they were not aware of any Forest Service wildfire mitigation efforts in the area. Of the remaining four interviewees, only one mentioned an active wildfire mitigation project they were aware of; all others mentioned projects that they thought were in planning stages or assumed were happening. Some thought that it was possible that the Forest Service was conducting more work, and that the office was not as good at communication: *“Transparency is probably another one that ... [we] do have a problem with, because the people that come in to work the Cowlitz Valley Ranger District, a lot of the higher ups, are not from our area and [they] do not communicate very well with the local community.”* Community members seemed to want more communication from the ranger district to understand what wildfire mitigation efforts the agency was undertaking.

Other forest disturbances mentioned by interviewees included landslides (n=5), flooding (n=2), drought (n=1), and tree mortality due to insect infestations (n=1). Because of their location along the Cowlitz River floodplain, Randle and Packwood flood with relative regularity. Since the 1990s, the river gauge at Randle has reported a major flood event (over 22 feet) approximately once every four years, most recently in 2011, 2015, and 2021 (“Cowlitz River at Randle,” 2025). However, none of our interviewees suggested these floods were related to forest management.

Community futures

When asked about the next 10 years, four interviewees mentioned wildfire and climate change as issues they saw getting worse in the future. Additionally, there were concerns that increased recreation would amplify wildfire risk, as many of the area's wildfires are started by people.

Nine of 13 interviewees mentioned recreation and tourism as important issues in the community and thought that current trends would likely continue. These include increasing recreation and impacts on Forest Service lands, as well as increased needs for services catering to tourists. Some interviewees thought that a proposed new wastewater system might be constructed, allowing for increased development in downtown Packwood. This development might bring greater density, more services, and public bathrooms in the downtown area. Some people in Packwood saw the town as a *"pre-Leavenworth"* [a tourist town in north-central Washington] or see a potential future as a *"northern Aspen"* [Colorado]. One interviewee thought that places like Randle would become *"a suburb of the I-5 corridor"* because of the draw to recreation and nice amenities: *"It's too, too nice out here, people are gonna keep coming."*



Photo: Julia Sizek

Packwood Lake, 2024

Conclusions and case study highlights

The Packwood-Randle community experienced significant decline in social and economic well-being following the implementation of the NWFP. However, the community remains tied to the national forest through the various ecosystem goods and services it provides. Since the implementation of the NWFP, recreational opportunities and tourism-related amenities on the national forest have gained in local economic importance but their development faces significant constraints.

Packwood-Randle key forest management takeaways

- Timber remains culturally important for many long-time residents and the post-NWFP decline in community wellbeing plays a significant role in the community's social memory.
- Some residents suggested that since the implementation of the NWFP, the Forest Service has neglected to maintain its access roads. This lack of maintenance was disappointing as it limited forest access for older and differently-abled individuals.
- Although negative attitudes toward the Forest Service are retained by some residents, demographic changes within the community have softened this hostility.
- Although the local economy has re-orientated toward providing recreation, tourism, and vacation home (i.e. amenity migrant) related- services, the community faces significant infrastructural constraints to further development:
 - A shortage of low-income housing for year-round and seasonal employees hinders local businesses.
 - Limitations on existing waste-water infrastructure constrains development of worker-housing, additional vacation homes, and tourist lodging.
- Given the recent uptick in wildfire activities, community members were interested in learning about Forest Service plans for wildfire mitigation activities in the study area.

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Photo: Julia Sizek

Rainbow in Randle

For full report, visit:
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