

The Oregonian

INSIDE ENVIRONMENT

State forests face hard choice on logging

Tuesday, November 6, 2008

by Michael Milstein, The Oregonian

Plentiful timber, rich wildlife habitat, diverse recreation opportunities -- a new management plan adopted seven years ago for the Tillamook and Clatsop state forests promised it all.

But it hasn't worked. The latest evidence: Calculations by the state show it has been logging more trees than the state forests can sustain under the 2001 strategy that also set ambitious goals for improving fish and wildlife habitat.

The findings deal a serious blow to the 2001 blueprint, which was billed at the time as a revolutionary way to satisfy increasing demands on the state lands in the Coast Range.

State forest officials are now recommending that the Oregon Board of Forestry lower its expectations for providing large, older trees valuable to wildlife. They say that would allow a small increase in logging, but still not enough to provide as much revenue as cash-strapped coastal counties have hoped for.

The Board of Forestry will meet Thursday in Salem amid growing pressure from Gov. Ted Kulongoski and others to decide whether to keep or rework the troubled forest plan. The board has been weighing the issue for years as mounting evidence showed the plan wasn't delivering.

Kulongoski "firmly believes that the time has come to make a decision," the governor's top natural resources adviser, Michael Carrier, wrote in an e-mail to the Board of Forestry last month.

The governor and others worry that if the Board of Forestry doesn't set a clear direction for state forests, the Legislature may intervene and mandate logging targets.

The governor "expended significant capital" fending off such efforts last year, Carrier told the board in his October e-mail. "He has many critical priorities and challenges in 2009 and it will be an unnecessary distraction for him and the Legislature to debate this issue again."

However, the Board of Forestry is not known for decisiveness. It's unusual among state bodies in operating, by choice, through consensus, where all members must agree to each decision. That has given it a reputation for tedious meetings at which results are elusive.

The governor has not appointed a chairman to lead the board, leaving one of its seven seats vacant. Two other board members are serving in expired terms, which state law allows when the governor has not appointed anyone to replace them.

"It really makes it difficult to be functional," board member Peter Hayes said of the lack of a chairman. He acknowledged "a perception that this board can't make decisions."

Board members agreed earlier this year to send a letter to the governor expressing concern about the open seats, according to meeting minutes, although no letter was ultimately sent.

Jillian Schoene, a spokeswoman for Kulongoski, said the governor is working on new appointments to the board and, "we will move on an appointment when the opportunity presents itself." In the meantime, she said, "There is nothing keeping this board from functioning and making decisions," she said.

Carrier emphasized in his e-mail that the board must act "as expeditiously as possible," even if it has to drop its consensus system and vote.

Counties and the timber industry are pushing the state to raise logging to levels more closely resembling industrial timberlands. County leaders say they have counted on extra logging revenue since the forest plan was adopted in 2001.

Conservation groups originally criticized the plan for not doing enough to protect wildlife and watersheds. Now they are defending it for fear that its fish and wildlife standards will be dismantled at a crucial time for Northwest salmon and other species.

"The plan is at least better than the industrial model, which is where it's poised to go," said Bob Van Dyk of the Wild Salmon Center.

The more than 650,000 acres of state forests straddling the Coast Range in northwest Oregon include lands scorched by wildfires known as the Tillamook Burn several decades ago. Counties gave much of the land to the state, but still get a large share of revenue from logging of state forest timber.

The timber has taken on rising importance as logging levels on federal lands collapsed.

Counties backed the forest plan in 2001 based on estimates that logging would hit about 280 million board feet of timber a year, said Tillamook County Commissioner Tim Josi, who leads a panel of state forest counties.

The plan hinged on a concept called "structure-based management," which employs logging to sculpt a diverse stands of trees that serve wildlife. It aimed for about half the land to hold large, old stands.

But it soon became clear the system could not produce as much timber as expected, in part because trees were not growing as fast or were less accessible than first thought. That led to pressure from the Legislature and others trying to push logging levels up, which brought some short-term increases.

"We were led to believe this structure-based management was a win-win," Josi said. "It's not a win-win."

The state's average goal over the past five years was to cut about 183 million board feet -- much less than the counties wanted, according to the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Late last year the Board of Forestry told state foresters to boost cutting enough to produce 30 to 35 percent more revenue.

But new state estimates show that is impossible given the plan's standards for protecting habitat and promoting growth of large, older trees. If the state keeps those standards, it could cut only about 140 million board feet a year -- half of what counties originally expected.

State foresters are now recommending the Board of Forestry relax the habitat goals so that large, old trees would make up 20 percent of the landscape instead of the current goal of 50 percent. But, even then, they could raise logging only to about 200 million board feet a year, they say.

Dropping the habitat goals altogether and cutting the state forests like industrial timberlands would push logging only slightly higher, to about 230 million board feet.

"What we're finding is that the forest just can't provide the amount of wood they want from it," Van Dyk said.

He said conservation groups want to work with coastal counties to find some other way of resolving county funding struggles.

State officials suggest the state could bring in additional revenue for counties through newly emerging markets for storing carbon dioxide, which is blamed for global warming but is soaked up by growing trees. They also say some wind power developers have shown interest in leasing state lands, which might earn revenue.

But those are future prospects, and right now, "There is a stage here of kind of recalibrating expectations," said Mike Cafferata, deputy chief of the state forest division.

Coastal counties believe the state has a legal obligation to provide them with timber revenue and the new state recommendation falls too far short, Josi said. He said the state must reopen the state forest plan and adjust it.

But environmental groups say the state forests have untold value as strongholds for some of the healthiest remaining salmon runs in the region. More intense logging would leave slopes a patchwork of clear-cuts, they say.

"It's not timber versus environmentalists -- it's really, 'What do we want this place to look like in the future?'" said Guido Rahr, president of the Wild Salmon Center.

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