



Guest column: Climate change forecasts greater need for forests

By Watt Childress, for the Daily Astorian

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Coming to the coast along U.S. Highway 26, travelers are welcomed to our region by scalped hills that were once covered with verdant forests.

It's a sad sight for many visitors who remember those lush canopies that framed earlier trips to the ocean.

For area foresters, clearcuts come with the territory. Converting acres of trees into logs, stumps and slash is all in a day's work; just one phase of business on the plantation. Given time and care, the trees will grow back, payload for future logging trucks.

Wallace Stegner called the West the "native home of hope." He said cooperation offers the best chance to act on that hope and create "a society to match the scenery."

Are there more scenic and earth-friendly ways in which society can benefit from our forest resources? Absolutely. Can public and private owners of those forests make money without cutting them down? Let's hope so.

Western citizens are like most people in that our willingness to cooperate corresponds with the level of crisis. The forested hillsides visible from my bookstore window could generate revenues while helping to rescue the earth's climate.

One of the first lessons of science is that forests collect and store carbon dioxide. When we cut them too much or too often, however, they release this stored greenhouse gas and become carbon polluters. A well-cultivated forest does the reverse.

"Forest systems can be managed in a wide range of manners to sustain and perhaps even increase their ability to remove carbon from the atmosphere," said Mark Harmon, professor of forest science at Oregon State University, in his recent testimony to Congress.

Like many in his field, Harmon recommends the creation of a carbon offset market in which large polluters pay to remove carbon from the air. This provides an additional revenue

opportunity for foresters. While emphasizing the need for stronger monitoring and verification, Harmon asserts that protocols developed for this new market in California are sufficient to begin the process now. He says Congress should set up guidelines and accounting systems that selectively credit projects that have a big positive impact.

Support for a carbon offset market is echoed by the American Forest Foundation, a nonprofit group with a broad-based board of trustees that includes representatives from Cornell University, Weyerhaeuser and the National Audubon Society. The group's Vice President for Communications Jim Wyerman says, "forests have the potential to be one of the most cost-effective and immediately available tools to address the nation's climate change threats."

That's important news for the North Coast of Oregon. It means our region is positioned to be a flagship in the global campaign to curb climate change.

"The North Coast has some of the fastest growing forests on earth in terms of carbon sequestration," says Bob Van Dyk, a forest policy adviser for the Wild Salmon Center. "The weather here is great for growing trees, and the risk of fire is low compared to other areas."

Van Dyk testified recently before the Cannon Beach City Council in support of the city's efforts to acquire and protect 800 acres of forest in the Ecola Creek watershed. Cannon Beach voters are now considering this acquisition in a local bond measure on the May 19 ballot. He noted the importance of such efforts given the perpetual push to cut as much of our region's forests as possible. This push continues even as timber markets tank, salmon runs struggle and overcutting worsens climate problems.

Cannon Beach could help shape a greener future. It may come as a surprise, but the little resort community has hosted some of the Northwest's smartest and most influential foresters. Many years ago local leaders and timber interests developed a progressive management plan to protect the city's surrounding views and minimize use of herbicides. City officials have worked to preserve the most resilient parcels of older self-seeded forest close to Ecola Creek. The strength of these efforts will be magnified if Cannon Beach voters approve the bond measure now on the ballot.

Plantation-style forestry continues to dominate large tracts of the West, just as cotton is still king in parts of the South. Citizens can put resources to critical use if we explore other management options that cultivate the greatest permanent value of our forests.

What better place to create a society to match the scenery than the Oregon Coast?