



Guest column: County forest strategy is shortsighted

*By Bob Van Dyk
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On Wednesday, the Oregon Board of Forestry will meet in Enterprise to discuss the future of Oregon's state forests, including the Clatsop State Forest that covers more than 100,000 acres of Clatsop County.

County leaders are pushing to make timber production the primary purpose of the state forests, and county residents who want a balanced approach to the management of state forests need to make their voices heard.

The state forests originally came into public ownership after unsustainable harvests and logging-caused fires. A magnificent rainforest of spruce, fir, and cedar was cut over by private owners and then abandoned to avoid paying taxes. Rich salmon habitat was left degraded.

Ownership fell to the county, who then gave the land to the state to be managed for the people of Oregon under a visionary mandate for "greatest permanent value."

The original 1931 law empowering acquisition of the land by the state called for watershed protection, water conservation, and recreation -- as well as growing forest crops. By emphasizing multiple uses and permanent benefits, the state sought a long-term balance for forest health.

Unfortunately, political pressure for timber harvest to be promoted above all other values threatens to repeat the mistakes of the last century.

Clatsop County Commissioners have endorsed just such a shortsighted approach.

Salmon a priority

The current law that governs the state forests provides for timber production for government revenues as part of the wide range of benefits of the forest. But the law also includes essential sideboards to protect long-term forest values. For example, current law says that any plan must restore habitat for salmon, as well as protect soil, water, and wildlife.

The Clatsop County Commission has joined with other county governments to propose removing the conservation protections. The county proposal deletes language that requires restoration of salmon habitat, and removes language that requires protection of soil, water, and wildlife.

The county has a friendly audience on the current Board of Forestry, which is dominated by timber and labor interests. The board recently voted 5 to 2 to weaken conservation protections, increase clear cuts, and decrease goals for older forest. Now, fully 70 percent of the harvestable stands will be open to clear cutting, and only 30 percent will be designated for older forest.

The Board of Forestry decision will make the state forests look more like the surrounding industrial forests of Clatsop County - where clear cutting and short rotations dominate the landscape.

Not even a single, small watershed gets permanent conservation protection under the current state forest plan, and clear cutting would be even more extensive under the county proposal.

Citizens who want strong protections for valuable salmon runs, refuges for threatened wildlife, or just a protected watershed for hiking and camping for generations to come have to go elsewhere.

A growing group of 20 fishing, conservation, and recreation organizations has joined together in a common statement against this county push for timber over all other values on our state forests. The common statement proposes a mixed approach that includes some of the forest as permanently protected for conservation values.

The timber wars of the last decade have left scars on the economic and political landscape. The historic focus on timber production spawned a swing toward environmental protection. The county proposal would swing the pendulum back to the timber production extreme.

It all takes time

It is time to find a new way forward on Oregon's state forests, one that mixes permanent protected areas with productive timber management.

The county proposal for timber dominance would repeat the mistakes of the last century and shortchange future generations. Clatsop residents who want permanent protections for some of their state forest watersheds need to let their commissioners know.

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