

The Oregonian

EDITORIALS

The state forests are not tree farms

Thursday, April 16, 2009

by Editorial Board, *The Oregonian*

Oregon lawmakers should resist calls to abandon centrist, sustainable management of the Tillamook and Clatsop forests

If Oregon learned anything from its destructive timber wars of the past, it is the futility and costs of the extremes, either treating public lands as industrial tree farms or locking out loggers and leaving forests to wildfire, disease and insects.

By now, it is clear the only way forward on public forests is with centrist, sustainable-forest policies that seek to balance commercial logging with all the other forest values: clean water, fish and wildlife, recreation.



Commercial logging in the Tillamook State Forest. THE OREGONIAN/2006

Yet the Legislature seems prepared to take the state back to the old, divisive and unproductive fights of the 1990s. Lawmakers are preparing to take public testimony on a bill to require the vast Tillamook and Clatsop state forests of Northwest Oregon to be managed primarily for timber production.

This is at least the third time that coastal counties, the wood products industry and lawmakers worried about high and persistent unemployment in rural Oregon have made a run at converting the Tillamook and Clatsop forests into industrial tree farms. It was wrong then, and even though times are hard, it is wrong now.

The Legislature's impulse to help the coastal counties is understandable. These counties are hurting, and they waited patiently nearly half a century for these forests to recover from the devastating fires of the 1960s. They were led to expect more -- more logging, more jobs, more revenues for counties and schools -- than the forests are producing under the state Department of Forestry's management plan.

Yes, the state plan promised much more than it could deliver, not just in sustainable commercial logging and revenues, but also in fish and wildlife habitat. And yes, over the years the state board has

been slow to act on the management plan, to fix its flawed assumptions and to give everyone, but especially the wood products industry and the coastal counties, the kind of certainty they are due.

Yet give the Board of Forestry credit for trying to feel its way to the middle ground in the state forests. It hasn't had much help, with interest groups and lawmakers pulling it this way and that way. But the board has properly recognized that the right answer lies in a carefully balanced plan for the state forests.

That can't be forgotten now in a mad rush to start cutting trees on state forests, even while logs have never fetched lower prices. The Board of Forestry is scheduled to hold a conference call on Monday, and we urge it to make a clear, unequivocal statement to the Legislature opposing this bill. It would also be nice to hear something from Gov. Ted Kulongoski on this issue. He has opposed nearly identical bills twice before. What about now?

Democrats are tempted to turn a vote on the state forests into a demonstration that they care about jobs in rural Oregon. Coastal lawmakers of both parties support more logging and more revenue for the counties they represent. These places are clearly struggling.

But the answer is not to ignore 20 years of hard, painful lessons over public forests in the Northwest. House Bill 3072 would order the Department of Forestry to "secure the greatest permanent value" from the state forests, and defines that term as ensuring that forests are managed for timber production in order to produce revenue for counties and schools.

That's a blast from the past, not a modern forest management plan that recognizes all that people value from public lands. Take a long look around: Is there any large and complex public forest anywhere in the Northwest, any place with clean rivers teeming with salmon and steelhead, where people still see its "greatest permanent value" as a tree farm?