

The Register-Guard

GUEST VIEWPOINT

Don't weaken a successful NW Forest Plan

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For The Register-Guard

JULY 9, 2015

Throughout the Pacific Northwest, trees grow in a dazzling display. From redwoods on the coast to hemlocks on the flanks of snow-capped peaks, it's a forest of spellbinding wonder, growing taller and living longer than others. It bursts with life in stunning varieties that still have biologists discovering the unknown.

While a third of Oregon's forest is owned by the timber industry, most of the rest is under stewardship of the U.S. Forest Service, with some acreage under the wing of the Bureau of Land Management. This forest is owned by all Americans, and the way our agencies care for our greenest landscape is a credit — or a debt — to us all.

Under protocols of the past, 90 percent of the old forests had been clear-cut by the time the engagement of young, Earth-Day-inspired activists intersected with biologists' findings of significant values in what remained. Those two forces propelled questions about the destiny of Oregon's priceless forests into the national consciousness. The conflict raged, but a welcome peace was forged when the federal government adopted the Northwest Forest Plan in 1994.

The science-based plan set aside much of the scarce old growth that remained. It prescribed better treatment of streamside forests — vital to the health of the region's legendary salmon fisheries. It allowed timber cutting in areas where conflict with the more fundamental goals of stewardship was lacking.

Some begrudged the new limits and blamed job layoffs on the reduction of federal timber sales, yet automation cut jobs by one-third in just 10 years. Industry exported logs from private forests to Asia, and more jobs went with them. County budgets in Oregon's timber country were crippled by a reduced share of revenue from the agencies and by rock-bottom taxation of private timberlands.

Those counties' budget crises are likely to continue as long as voters cling to some of the nation's lowest property tax rates.

Adjustments were required along this bumpy road. But far from the catastrophe predicted by some, the greater region's economy bustled. While jobs in timber hover at 30,000, or only 2 percent of Oregon's workforce, employment in recreation has grown to 140,000. Expansion in other sectors can also be credited to our scenic vistas, clean air and water, and a quality of life that has become elusive elsewhere.

Managers of our national forests also made a transition. Once ground zero in the timber wars of the 1980s, the Siuslaw National Forest emerged as a restoration model in progress. Thinning of second growth thickets replaced the clear-cuts of old. Thousands of miles of logging roads had cost taxpayers millions and triggered dangerous landslides, but under the new plan, many of those troublesome roads were closed. The landscape has begun to heal. In cleaner streams, salmon and trout have begun to recover, though their survival hangs in the balance of what will happen next.

Perhaps most important, Northwest forests offer the best opportunities on Earth to sequester carbon. This would help to address climate change,

which many regard as the greatest problem facing humanity in the 21st century. A live tree, in this calculus, is worth far more than a log. And a single tree in the Northwest is worth many trees elsewhere.

The Northwest Forest Plan has guided a necessary transition, and a grudging peace has returned to the woods. But now, that elegant compromise is under attack by forces that would take us back to the strife we left behind with enactment of the Northwest Forest Plan.

New plans of the Forest Service and BLM are leaning toward increased cutting and reduced buffers next to streams — a linchpin in the formula of restraint that has proven effective in safeguarding water, fisheries and wildlife.

People here and elsewhere need the natural forests of the Northwest along with the life-support systems they offer to fish and wildlife, to a new economy, and to the very atmosphere we breathe.

Like the sky-piercing forest itself, provisions of the Northwest Forest Plan should endure to protect a heritage that defines Oregon and benefits the entire nation. This is not the time to weaken the plan, but to strengthen it with a new vision that recognizes the perils of global warming and the essential role that our greatest forest can play in the unfolding fate of the Earth.

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