

Washington's Timber Resources: A Valuable Environmental and Economic Asset

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Much of Washington's early history revolves around the commercial development of public and private forestland. Trees blanket more than 21 million of the state's 42 million total acres. These trees are a unique shared resource for the state's residents. They provide environmental assets, by enhancing water and air quality, sheltering salmon-bearing streams and granting unmatched recreational opportunities. Our forests are also an economic resource, supporting thousands of jobs in private industry and providing hundreds of millions of dollars to fund public schools and local government through revenues from state timber harvests.

In the early days of settlement the state's forests were valued more for their economic productivity than for their environmental or recreational uses. Today, that view has changed. Washington residents, policymakers and businesses recognize the balance necessary for maintaining a healthy environment and a healthy timber economy. But more recent policy changes introduced an unhealthy reliance on restrictive, cookie-cutter regulations designed to protect the environment. Just as early logging practices exploited a valuable renewable asset, current environmental regulations place unnecessarily heavy restrictions on one of the state's most productive assets.

At the heart of the debate over logging restrictions is state-owned timberland managed by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The state owns over 2.1 million acres of timberland, 1.4 million acres west of the Cascade Divide and another 700,000 acres in Eastern Washington. The state acquired this resource through a combination

of land grants from the federal government, tax foreclosures during the Great Depression and purchase transactions over the past 100 years.

The Board of Natural Resources, an independent committee consisting of representatives from DNR, state schools and universities, county governments and the governor's office, oversee the management of state owned timberland. Revenue from timber harvest on DNR managed land provides vital support for state schools and local government services, totaling \$140 million in 2003. Nineteen counties, the state's K-12 education system and many higher education programs benefit from our state's most productive renewable resource.

Every ten years approximately, the DNR evaluates harvest levels on state managed timberlands in Western Washington and establishes a plan for balancing the environmental and economic uses of the resource. The evaluation, called the Sustainable Harvest Calculation, is conducted by the Board of Natural Resources (BNR) and will guide the management of state trust lands west of the Cascades for the next decade.

Restoring the Balance

This year the Board will adopt a new Sustainable Harvest Calculation. At a meeting in early March, the Board unveiled its preferred alternative. The new plan is a good step in the right direction, marking a return to the right balance between environmental protection and economic productivity. The preferred alternative uses key scientific advances in timber harvest planning and technology, allowing state land managers to

increase timber harvests while at the same time improving the health of Washington's forest environment.

Over the next 10 years harvest levels on west side forest trust land will be increased to 636 million board feet per year. The last sustainable harvest calculation, approved by previous Lands Commissioner Jennifer Belcher in 1997, set annual harvest levels at 575 million board feet. Environmental regulations adopted after the calculation further reduced harvests to the current level of about 470 million board feet. The approach proposed this year would boost west side trust revenue by almost \$40 million a year, from \$107 million last year to an estimated \$155 million when the plan is fully implemented.

The High Cost of Outdated Regulations

During the early 1980s timber harvest on state owned timberland reached a peak of over 900 million board feet per year. Then came the timber wars of the late 80s and early 1990s that pitted environmentalists wishing to protect old growth timber against loggers trying to protect their livelihood. The result was a massive reduction in timber harvest on state land, cutting production to fewer than 400 million board feet per year by 1995.

The environmental restrictions placed on state forests have produced mixed results. Perhaps most glaring about the new restrictions is the huge reduction in revenue for state schools and local governments. Logging restrictions, coupled with lower world timber prices and rising harvest costs, have reduced the value of state managed forests from between \$7 and \$8 billion in 1997 to just over \$3 billion today. Proposed changes to the state's timber harvest plan will provide a much-needed revenue boost estimated at \$750 million over 20 years, all while substantially increasing timber inventory in state forests.

Also raising concern are the practical results of the no-touch environmental restrictions imposed on many areas of state land. New research shows that an active management approach, similar to the one proposed by the Board of Natural Resources,

will dramatically improve habitat for the spotted owl, marbled murrelet and pacific salmon. Previous policy resulted in a largely monolithic forest environment, choked with tightly packed trees and excessive underbrush. A shift to more active management and informed use of thinning and selective clear cutting will improve ecological diversity and help restore endangered species habitat.

A New Approach

Environmentalists opposed to the new approach claim the state is returning to long eliminated practices of harvesting old growth, ruining endangered species habitat and threatening the health of salmon-bearing streams. These groups fail to recognize that the logging practices of today are much different from the logging of the past. New science and planning technology allow forest managers to predict growth patterns and manage ecological development with precise accuracy. New logging equipment and road-building techniques reduce the environmental impact of timber harvests even further. In today's world, well-managed timber harvest is no longer a threat, but a tool for improving environmental quality.

The debate over the proper management of state owned timberland is far from over, but the approach of the current Board deserves recognition. The current approach will improve the environment, provide more funding for schools and local governments and help revitalize rural communities dependent on timber production for jobs and economic stability. In the future, state managers should continue to look for ways to improve forest habitat and increase revenue from our renewable timber assets. New research from the University of Washington College of Forest Resources shows that the changes included in the preferred alternative are just the first step. With structural changes to the state's Habitat Conservation Plan forest managers can continue to increase harvest levels while improving overall forest health.