

A lot of federal land, but little common ground

Editor's Opinion

By Kevin Widdison of the Daily Courier

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In Joseph Heller's seminal book "Catch-22," the protagonist Yossarian is asked by his fellow soldiers why he wants out of the Army and out of World War II. "They're trying to kill me," he says. "But they're trying to kill all of us," his comrades respond. Yossarian's retort: "What difference does that make?"

Yossarian's plight comes to mind as Josephine County continues what seems like its never-ending effort to find a way out of its budget morass. Last week, the Oregon State Sheriff's Association issued a statement critical of the BLM's Resource Management Plan for Southwest Oregon stating that the plan would leave many counties unable to pay for law enforcement, among other things.

For two decades now, the federal government has stepped in with cash payments to cover the decline in revenue in counties that had traditionally depended on timber revenue to pay for government services. In Josephine County, payments that once topped \$12 million a year have dwindled to less than \$5 million a year. And, following the fiscal year that begins on July 1, they may disappear altogether.

Some of Oregon's elected officials, such as Sen. Ron Wyden, have vowed to work toward an extension of the "county payments" program. Problem is, there is little enthusiasm in Congress for this program, especially among representatives and senators who represent states without large federal land holdings.

The other school of thought is to look for sustainable ways to boost timber harvests, an approach emphasized by U.S. Rep. Greg Walden during a "town hall" meeting last week in Grants Pass. Walden said that stronger efforts to manage federal forests would result in increased funding for timber counties, and at the same time provide logs (and jobs) for mills in the region. The congressman hinted that adequately addressing the forestry issue could yield long-term results, while renewing the county payments program is little more than a short-term fix.

"Now, we punch the ATM machine. We never get the forestry legislation done," Walden said. "I want to put the pressure on to get forestry changed."

Unfortunately, it would appear there's little chance that either of these options will come to pass anytime soon. It is equally unlikely that the third option — a voter-approved increase in property taxes — will take place, either.

Until this logjam is broken, several western Oregon counties will continue to suffer. And knowing that other counties are also struggling right along with us offers little solace. As Yossarian said, "What difference does that make?"

Kevin Widdison

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