

Two track effort to boost timber harvests makes sense

By Kevin Widdison

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Josephine County commissioners were right to sign on to a lawsuit pressing for higher harvest levels on federally owned O&C lands in western Oregon.

O&C lands, named for the Oregon & California Railroad that received land from the federal government and then went bankrupt, were supposed to be used for long-term, sustainable timber production. The annual harvest target, outlined in the 1937 legislation, was at least 500 million board feet.

Obviously, 1937 was a long time ago. However, one of the four options in an updated Bureau of Land Management plan calls for harvests approaching this level — 486 million board feet. Other options call for considerably lower harvest levels. Consequently, the suit brought by the Association of O&C Counties needs to be pressed at the same time the association lobbies for the management option that would result in the highest harvest target.

There are more than 2.5 million acres of O&C land in 18 western Oregon counties. Admittedly, too much logging was allowed when annual harvests hit around 1.5 billion board feet in the mid-1980s. But since then the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction, with harvests dwindling to an annual average of less than 200 million board feet over the course of the past 15 years.

The latest management plan options from the BLM come at a time when legislation seems to have hit a dead-end in both chambers of Congress. In the House, a bill sponsored by Republican Greg Walden and Democrats Peter DeFazio and Kurt Schrader would boost harvests, while at the same time emphasizing management of public land. On the Senate side, a bill pushed by Oregon's senior senator, Ron Wyden, emphasizes the harvest of small-diameter trees in order to leave behind more of the fire-resistant large trees that can withstand wildfires.

Neither bill has gained the traction it needs to emerge as the alternative of choice. Therefore, it would seem that the new management plan under consideration by the BLM presents the best hope for increased harvests.

An outline for how revenue from timber sales would be shared is included in the original O&C legislation from 1937. Consequently, many discussions of this issue focus on the revenue that counties receive to fund public safety and other services.

There is a bigger issue at stake here, however.

A reliable harvest level on federal land is critical to the Southern Oregon economy. A few years back, when the economy was in the grip of the Great Recession, there wasn't much demand for building materials, so timber harvest levels didn't seem as important. Now, with the economy strong again, demand is up. Yet, the Rough and Ready Lumber Co. near Cave Junction has announced layoffs and is going through its second shutdown in the past three years because it can't get logs for its mill.

The BLM has offered a draft management plan that includes an option with a harvest level of 486 million board feet. The lawsuit by the Association of O&C Counties demands a level of 500 million board feet. That's not much of a difference. It's time to give the benefit of the doubt to the people who depend on the timber industry to feed their families.

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