

Time to test timber plan in court

Editor's Opinion

By Kevin Widdison of the Daily Courier

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The reaction to the latest management plan from the Bureau of Land Management for federal O&C land in western Oregon was predictable.

Those in the timber industry, as well as public officials whose counties depend on revenue from federal timber sales, castigated the plan for setting harvest levels too low. Environmentalists were similarly critical of the plan, saying that it would allow too much logging, which would hurt watersheds, fish and wildlife.

The BLM plan calls for a harvest level of 278 million board feet a year, a 37 percent increase over the target for this year. Those who believe the level should be higher point to the original 1937 O&C legislation that cites 500 mbf a year as a sustainable level of harvest on the 2.4 million acres of land in 18 Oregon counties.

In the BLM's Medford District, which includes Josephine County, the harvest target would be 51 million board feet annually. This may be slightly less than the target of 57 mbf that was included in the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan, but since that target was rarely achieved, the new target looks pretty good. Actual harvests in the district were only 8.4 million board feet in 2011, 12.3 mbf in 2012, and 22 mbf in 2013. Harvest figures for 2014 were higher only because of salvage logging done in areas burned by the Douglas Complex of fires.

Although much of the discussion about timber sales on federal land is centered on revenue for counties, the more important issue is the effect on mills like Rough and Ready in Cave Junction and Swanson Group in Glendale. Wages the workers at these mills earn have a ripple effect through the entire Southern Oregon economy. And, don't forget, these workers pay taxes, too.

So if the BLM were to actually meet the target of 51 million board feet, it would likely have a positive impact on the regional economy. Past experience, however, indicates actual harvests will fall short of the target.

Once again (this all has a certain feeling of *deja vu*), local officials are calling for a class action lawsuit against the BLM to force it to raise harvest levels.

"We have diligently sought a legislative solution, but our congressional delegation has not been able to agree on a solution," Josephine County Commissioner Simon Hare said in a written statement issued in reaction to the BLM proposal. "Now, it will be up to the courts to decide." Any number of officials, as well as many seeking public office, have said Josephine and other counties should sue the federal government for not meeting its obligations under the O&C Act of 1937. This time, the Association of O&C Counties, of which Hare is vice president, needs to make good on the threat. Either it will prevail in court and harvests will rise, or it will lose and we will be able to take this oft-cited option off the table.

Either way, we can then move forward.

Kevin Widdison