

## Guest Opinions “Related” To Primary PSS Tax Measures

### November 15, 2013. Simon Hare. *Restore balance to timber approach* (Guest Opinion)

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#### SIMON HARE

In his recent Guest Opinion, Jack Shipley accurately describes the mandate of the O&C Act and the consequences of the federal government's failure to honor this law ("O&C counties need to pay own share," Oct. 30, 2013). It's true that as timber sales on federally managed lands have dropped dramatically — by more than 90 percent — our communities have suffered and county governments have struggled to fund services. While he accurately framed the situation, the rest of his comments deserve a response.

The O&C Act requires federal agencies to manage 2.4 million acres of forestland to provide a permanent, sustainable source of timber for local mills while providing vital revenue to western Oregon counties. As part of an effort to block active management of O&C lands, Shipley and others criticize decisions made by county commissioners decades ago. He and his cohorts find it easy to blame voters for refusing to vote for increased county taxes, but attacking the citizens of Josephine County will not solve the problems plaguing federal forests nor will it help create jobs and more economic activity for small businesses. Shipley's policy prescriptions certainly won't assure adequate funding for services we all expect local government to provide.

Our forests' abundance has been part of our economic and cultural heritage since statehood. Through modern forest management, this renewable resource can provide an essential cornerstone for our rural communities' prosperity and self-sufficiency. The federal government owns some 67 percent of the land in Josephine County. This was not our decision to make, but, for generations, under the O&C Act, the arrangement worked and citizens benefitted from these resources. It also wasn't our decision when the federal government opted to renege on its promises to O&C counties and choke the economic lifeline of our communities, the situation we find ourselves in today.

Citing bank deposit statistics as "proof" that Southern Oregonians are awash in cash, Shipley argues that our citizens are wealthy and thus capable of paying property taxes at levels similar to our urban counterparts. The majority of the hard-working people I talk to don't feel rich enough to blithely pay more in taxes when year after year a renewable revenue resource is burning up in our backyard.

If Shipley cared to dig a little deeper, he would find that Oregon's low per-capita personal income is due largely to the decline of our forestry sector. Josephine County has one of the lowest median household incomes in the state. Many young professionals and working families are

leaving the area and more citizens are living on fixed incomes — in fact, more than half of personal income within the county is from non-wage sources. It's ironic that Shipley denigrates our county's "dependence" on federal timber receipts when the decline of federal harvests has actually contributed to growing dependence on social services. His suggestion that timber receipts should be connected to a "minimum base level" of higher property taxes would only put a further strain on vulnerable citizens and the services they need. We need Congress to fix the mess that it created and allow more of our people to find jobs and benefit from the resulting economic activity.

Shipley proudly claims success in limiting timber harvests, and his preferred policy recommendations would perpetuate the thinning-only approach of recent years. How has that approach worked for us during the past two decades? Has it made our federal forests any healthier and less vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire? Has it prevented the closure of our last remaining sawmill, and has it replaced the family-wage jobs we've lost? Has it reduced litigation or resolved the "analysis paralysis" that drives federal management today? We all know it has not. Under the auspices of the Northwest Forest Plan, the objectives of the conservation community have been met — at 300 percent of their goal. Conversely, just 8 percent of timber-industry goals under the plan have been achieved. The situation is out of balance.

Fortunately, we have congressmen in Washington, D.C., who understand the issues and are committed to securing a legislative solution. Reps. Peter DeFazio, Kurt Schrader and Greg Walden have moved balanced legislation forward that would place much of the O&C land back into active management for the benefit of our rural communities. Although imperfect, their bipartisan solution offers a high level of financial certainty to our communities while protecting vital services such as public safety.

Unfortunately, Sen. Ron Wyden doesn't favor this approach and is guilty of foot-dragging with respect to providing his own plan. His prescription for federal payments is not an adequate solution to providing public safety services or a robust rural economy. The current approach will only bankrupt counties and doom our citizens to continued poverty.

Please join me and encourage Oregon Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden to pass an O&C solution that allows Oregonians to once again make use of our greatest renewable resource.

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Simon Hare is chairman of the Josephine County Board of Commissioners.