

BLM disagrees with O&C's timber harvest goals

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JIM WHITTINGTON

The Bureau of Land Management says it isn't mandated to offer up timber harvest of 500 million board feet identified in the 1937 O&C Act, because its analysis shows that isn't sustainable.

The Association of O&C Counties is threatening to sue the BLM once the current management plan for 250 million acres in 18 western Oregon counties is released this year, because it's unlikely to come close to offering 500 million board feet.

That management plan proposes a range of 120-486 million board feet, depending on which alternative is chosen. The preferred alternative lists 235 million board feet.

"The BLM does not accept that offering 500 million board feet a year is required," BLM spokesperson Jim Whittington said in an email. "The BLM is adhering to the O&C Act, and several of the plan's purposes are necessary for the BLM to deliver a predictable supply of timber."

It's a long-standing battle over timber harvests, which dropped off in the early 1990s from increased protection for the northern spotted owl, clean air and clean water. The issue is crucial to rural Oregon counties that were previously reliant on timber receipts to fund public services and have never recovered economically from the cutbacks.

With harvests dwindling for 20 years, the counties have relied on federal subsidies approved by Congress as compensation for the lost revenue and inability to work or develop vast chunks of forest lands controlled by the federal government.

Rocky McVay, executive director of the Association of O&C Counties, said earlier this week that the 1937 O&C Act does indeed mandate a half-billion board feet.

McVay said the BLM ignores the 1937 O&C Act, which set aside as a source of timber former Oregon and California Railroad lands that reverted to the federal government after construction of a rail line on land deeded by Congress never materialized.

"They are plugging in a multiple-use management philosophy into dominant use legislation, and the dominant use is sustained timber," McVay said. "Everything else is a residual. Everything is derived from a sustained harvest of timber."

Josephine County Commissioner Simon Hare, vice president of the association's board of directors, agreed.

"Not a single one of the alternatives the BLM scoped satisfies the minimum requirement of the O&C Act," he said.

An analysis by the association in 2008 concluded that 1.2 billion board feet is the maximum sustained yield, based on tree growth.

But Whittington says the 1937 legislation requires the 500 million board feet only if it's less than the sustainable level.

From the Act: "The O&C Act requires that the BLM offer for sale annually ... not less than one-half billion feet board measure, OR not less than the annual sustained yield capacity when the same has been determined and declared."

Whittington said sustained yield capacity "is what we think we can sustainably produce every year, not necessarily what grows every year."

George Sexton, with Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center and a long-time forest activist, said focusing on timber volume leads to cutting larger, fire-resilient trees.

"Mr. Hare and Mr. McVay have a direct economic interest in maximizing timber volume over all other public land forest values," Sexton said in an email. "That doesn't mean that increasing BLM logging and clearcutting is good for the economy or for local mills.

"Rather than suing the BLM to cut more trees for the sake of cutting trees, I'd propose a focus on thinning stands that need treatment in a way that brings communities together, creates jobs, and gets small-diameter trees to local mills."