

*Finding balance in the forests remains elusive*

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Working together cooperatively is generally preferable to the confrontational approach of taking someone to court. But sometimes, that's what it takes.

The Association of O&C Counties is considering a suit against the federal Bureau of Land Management over the BLM's proposed management plan for O&C land in Oregon.

The original O&C act deals with land taken back by the federal government after the financial demise of the Oregon & California Railroad. The government had deeded land in 18 western Oregon counties to entice the railroad to include a rail line through the state.

The act in 1937 laid out how Congress expected the BLM to administer this windfall acreage — more than 2.4 million acres in all. The general use for the land was to deliver a "predictable" supply of timber to mills in western Oregon. Specifically, it set a harvest target of 500 million board feet a year, or "not less than the annual sustained yield capacity..."

For the past two decades, the timber supply from O&C land has been anything but predictable. Not only have harvests dwindled from historic levels, but court challenges from environmental groups have led to a situation in which even the lowered target levels are rarely achieved.

The economic effects, particularly in Southern Oregon, have been devastating. Although the impact on funding for county government services has gotten the most attention — counties get a cut of income generated by timber sales on O&C land — the decline in harvests has resulted in ongoing economic pain as the wood products industry has shriveled right along with harvest levels.

Combine the declines on O&C land with the cutbacks on U.S. Forest Service Land that resulted from the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan, and you have a recipe for a long-term economic recession, which is exactly what Southern Oregon has endured.

The 1994 plan reduced timber harvests by about 80 percent for environmental protection. OK, we can live with that. However, the federal government has never really met its obligation when it comes to the other 20 percent. Some years, it has delivered 5 percent or less of what was promised in the plan.

With all of this in mind, it is easy to see why rural O&C counties aren't particularly eager to cut a new deal. Too many of the past deals have not been honored.

No doubt the science has changed since 1937, when the original O&C Act was approved by Congress. Clearly, a new definition of "annual sustained yield capacity" needs to be developed. But the O&C counties no longer feel they can trust the BLM to honor any more compromises.

Although going to court should be a last resort, history indicates that maybe we have reached that point.

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