

Counties lining up to sue state over timber cutting

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ROSEBURG — Douglas County will join a Linn County lawsuit that demands the state manage timber on Forest Trust Lands for the benefit of the county governments that formerly owned the lands.

Linn County announced last month plans to file a class-action suit, accusing the state of breaching its contract with the counties to harvest timber on those lands and give the money to the counties.

Douglas is one of 15 rural counties that stands to benefit from the suit, which will seek \$1.4 billion in damages. The Douglas County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously Wednesday to join the suit.

The Forest Trust Lands are lands that counties transferred to the state in the 1930s, Douglas County Commissioner Susan Morgan explained.

“The Great Depression and the fires that took place at that time caused a lot of land that was timberland to end up back in the ownership of counties because people didn’t pay the taxes on it,” Morgan explained.

When the counties transferred those lands to the states, the states agreed to manage the timber on those lands and return the revenue to the counties, Morgan said.

Then its priorities changed, and the state began to define the highest use of the land differently. Counties that depended on that money lost revenue that was an important piece of how they fund county services, Morgan said.

“Losing that revenue stream has caused a lot of problems in a lot of different places,” Morgan said.

The Forest Trust Lands in Douglas County include tracts in the Elliott State Forest and a small piece of land near Glendale, north of Josephine County.

Commissioner Tim Freeman said Douglas County is already involved in the suit as a member of the class that would benefit from the suit; however, he said it’s important to formally join.

“I think it’s important we’re on the record supporting the work that Linn County’s doing about these lands,” Freeman said.

Coos County has also joined the lawsuit. Josephine County, which has far more federal holdings than state holdings, has declined to formally join so far.