

County commissioners join O&C lawsuit

By Eder Campuzano

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The Josephine County Board of Commissioners on Wednesday endorsed a lawsuit against the federal government that would raise local timber harvest yields.

The Association of O&C Counties, of which Commissioner Simon Hare is vice chairman, contends that none of the federal forest management plans enacted in recent years have been true to the spirit of a 1937 congressional act that sets those yields.

Hare said the county remains under the thumb of the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan, "which doesn't offer up a lot of revenue." The association's goal is to increase the harvest on O&C lands to 500 million board feet.

The timber industry has battled the Bureau of Land Management for two decades over reduced timber harvests on 2 million acres in 18 western Oregon counties hard hit economically by the Northwest Forest Plan.

A predicted annual harvest of 500 million board feet was identified in the 1937 O&C Act, which laid out plans for management by the BLM of lands once owned by the long-defunct Oregon & California Railroad.

Those figures haven't been met in over 20 years, as federal clean air and water regulations and other factors, including protections for the northern spotted owl, have led to a decline in harvests.

An analysis by the association concluded that 1.2 billion board feet is the maximum sustained yield, based on tree growth, calculated in 2008. The BLM prefers something closer to 235 million board feet.

The issue is crucial to rural Oregon counties previously reliant on timber receipts for public services. With harvests dwindling, Josephine and other counties have relied on congressional subsidies known as county payments.

Barring a last-minute extension by Congress, the last payment to Josephine County of \$4.3 million will go to the fiscal year beginning July 1.

In other business Wednesday, a bill for water testing and a contentious 2013 law by the state Legislature came up repeatedly during the board's public comment period.

A \$77,000 invoice from Grants Pass Water Laboratory for sediment testing near the former Fielder Dam site on Evans Creek was a major topic of discussion during several resident comments.

The commissioners nixed the water testing contract as unnecessary on Nov. 25, although they agreed to pay for work that had already been done on the project.

Several residents urged the commissioners to reconsider paying the full amount, if not decline to foot the \$77,000 bill altogether.

Meanwhile, at least three more public commenters urged the commissioners to abstain from invoking a law passed by the state Legislature in 2013 that would allow county officials to declare a state of fiscal emergency in Josephine County and hand jail operations over to the state.

An online post by Mark Kelsey, one of the administrators of the Original Josephine County Scanner Facebook group, claimed commissioners were planning on invoking the law regardless of how citizens vote on an advisory question in May.

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