



Graphic Courtesy of O.W.C.

# Coalition works to save forests

By STEVE KNIGHT  
Of the Emerald

Mixing politics with backpacking may be one way to describe the workings of the Oregon Wilderness Coalition.

OWC is a statewide environmental organization dedicated to saving Oregon's remaining virgin forests from the ax. The group has more than 2,000 individual members and 75 member organizations, from Coast Creek Wilderness Committee in Yachats to Strawberry Mountain Forever, an environmental group based in John Day.

Andy Kerr, OWC's associate director for conservation, says only a fraction of Oregon's publicly owned national forests is set aside as wilderness. "Anti-wilderness propaganda" from the timber industry is one of the main reasons why Oregon has less land protected in its natural state than any other western state, he says.

"The (timber) industry would have us believe their very survival is dependent on logging every last acre," Kerr says.

Currently, 95 percent of Oregon's harvestable forests is open to logging operations, while only 2 percent is protected as wilderness. The remaining 2 percent lies at the heart of the battle between environmentalists and the timber industry, Kerr says.

"If the timber industry can't make it on 95 percent, it is highly doubtful they can make it on 98 percent," Kerr maintains.

Kerr also blames the Forest Service — the federal agency that administers the national forests — for the small percentage of Oregon land set aside as wilderness.

"80 to 85 percent of the Forest Service's budget goes to timber production," he says.

But the fight for wilderness is more than a struggle by OWC to save old-growth forests for the aesthetic benefit of backpackers, Kerr says.

"Wilderness recreation is but

one of the goals of our organization," he says. "We are equally concerned about the other multiple uses wilderness provides, such as clean water, wildlife habitat and anadromous fisheries."

Current logging practices are silting up streams and destroying the habitats of many endangered species, Kerr says. If more wilderness isn't preserved, he predicts "hundreds of miles of trails will be destroyed," and wildlife species such as elk, spotted owls and native runs of salmon and steelhead will "all be gone in the next 15 years."

The OWC currently is lobbying for an Oregon Wilderness bill that Kerr says he hopes will protect the "remnant" low-elevation, old-growth forests in the western Cascades and Coast Range. Much of the congressionally designated wildernesses in Oregon is located in steep mountainous terrain that "the timber companies never wanted anyway," Kerr says.

However, he says that a wilderness bill at this time would encounter stiff opposition from the "pro-business, anti-conservationist" climate in Washington, D.C.

Only a grassroots effort by the people of Oregon can save the remaining de facto wilderness areas in the state, he says. Students can receive credit for doing volunteer work with the OWC staff by arrangement through the Survival Center, Kerr says. For more information call 344-0675.

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