

Santiam Forest logging plan debated

Zach Urness

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

As state officials finalize plans to log around 3,000 acres of state forest burned in the Santiam Canyon fires, both conservation and timber groups have expressed frustration with the number of trees on the chopping block.

A post-wildfire plan for Santiam State Forest looks to remove hazard trees along roadways and recover some economic value through 11 timber sales of burned trees totaling 56.2 million board feet in 2021.

The chance to comment on the plan ends Tuesday. The easiest way to comment is emailing: ODF.sfccomments@oregon.gov. A map of proposed timber sales, located primarily east of Salem, can be found here: <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/71b6681f422946a2968eac350522ab7>

Post-fire logging the new hot-button issue

More than six months from the Labor Day fires, post-fire logging and hazard tree removal is emerging as the latest hot-button issue. With more than 1.2 million acres burned statewide — and 400,000 acres in the Santiam Canyon — forest officials are attempting to navigate where to cut for safety and timber and where to let the forest regenerate naturally.

In addition to the Santiam State Forest plan, the Willamette National Forest recently released a plan to remove hazard trees along 390 miles of roadway, impacting thousands of acres.

As ever, environmental and timber groups are at odds over the best course of action.

Timber groups have urged logging burned trees and replanting, and to move with speed, since trees killed by wildfires only remain viable for wood products for a limited time before they're too rotten.

Environmental groups have urged taking a light touch and allowing the forest to regenerate naturally whenever possible.



Aerial footage of Santiam State Forest in the Monument Peak area shows plenty of green trees. PHOTO COURTESY OF RALPH BLOEMERS

The Santiam plan

Jason Cox, spokesman for the Oregon Department of Forestry, said the Santiam State Forest plan attempts to thread the needle between making the forest safe to reopen, generating revenue from dead trees while also staying environmentally sound.

He noted that the plan only proposes timber sales for 3,000 of the 16,000 acres burned and prioritizes leaving green (alive) trees uncut while maintaining waterway buffers.

The 56.2 million board feet proposed is well above the normal harvest on the Santiam State Forest of 19 million.

“Overall, I think this is a pretty balanced plan,” Cox said. “We heard a lot of concern about being careful to leave green trees standing and that’s reflected in this plan.”

In the 3,000 acres, there are two different types of logging proposed. Around 1,100 acres is proposed for “partial cut harvest,” meaning foresters would focus on cutting dead trees and leaving alive ones intact. The other 1,900 acres is “regeneration harvest,” which is essentially clear-cutting standing dead trees and then replating. “Even in areas that are clearcut, our

focus is still to leave green trees intact wherever possible,” Cox said. “These aren’t green tree timber sales. We picked the areas that burned most severely.”

The timber sales will pay for reopening and restoration expenses in the Santiam State Forest, Cox said.

The timber sales are located in a scattering of places, most notably the Monument Peak area, which is a popular spot for recreation.

Water quality concerns, skepticism from enviro groups

Conservation groups say clear-cutting burned forest can lead to sediment runoff that fouls drinking water. They’re also skeptical ODF will avoid cutting trees that might still be alive, impacting well-loved recreation areas such as Monument Peak they say could recover more naturally given a few years.

“Some of the timber sales have plenty of green trees and no reason to cut them, but they’ve refused to drop those sales,” said Samantha Krop, with the Forest Waters Coalition, a conservation group focused on healthy watersheds and fish habitat. “It’s great if ODF is really committed to leaving those healthy trees in

the ground, but they have a track record of being very aggressive and they’re already closing off roads for these timber sales.”

In addition, 7 of the 11 timber sales have already been sold, leading some to charge ODF with asking for public comments but not really taking those concerns into account before moving forward.

“Right now there’s just too many green trees on the chopping block,” Krop said.

More timber could be produced to rebuild communities

Timber groups, by contrast, say the plan is too conservative. Of 16,000 acres of forest that burned, at least 9,000 acres contains merchantable timber that burned at a moderate or high severity, said Seth Barnes, director of forest policy for the Oregon Forest & Industries Council.

“The reality is that 3,000 acres is less than half of what needs to be done to get these forests cleared, replanted and back into healthy working order,” Barnes said.

Instead of leaving standing dead trees to rot in the forest — where they could become fuel for future wildfires — OFIC said harvest and reforestation is the better choice.

“Overwhelmingly, Oregonians want their forests lush, green and growing again,” said Sara Duncan, spokeswoman for OFIC. “They don’t want a sea of standing dead timber in their backyards.”

In general, said Barnes, “the timely harvest of standing dead trees followed promptly by reforestation maximizes the value of our forest resource to create wood products needed to rebuild communities, reduces the risk of future wildfires and create a safer and more vibrant forest.”

Zach Urness has been an outdoors reporter, photographer and videographer in Oregon for 13 years. To support his work, subscribe to the Statesman Journal. Urness can be reached at zurness@statesmanjournal.com or (503) 399-6801. Find him on Twitter at @ZachsORoutdoors.

Voting

Continued from Page 1A

These two paths under consideration are ranked-choice voting and STAR (Score then Automatic Runoff) voting.

Proponents of the former say it is the only alternative voting system to our current one that has a track record of success in governmental elections around the world.

Advocates for STAR say it is ranked-choice voting 2.0 and benefits from years of election research and modeling, which allows it to achieve the promises of ranked-choice voting.

Those on both sides of the issue acknowledge it is unlikely that the seven bills in the Legislature advance this year because of the session’s unusual virtual nature and the partisan politicking that has slowed much of the work in the House of Representatives.

However, they say that discussing these ideas in the open now allows for more serious conversations later, especially as they eye changes before the 2024 election.

How they work

In ranked-choice voting, voters rank candidates based on preference.

If any candidate is the first preference of more than 50% of voters, they win outright. If not, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes is eliminated. Those ballots that put the eliminated candidate first are redistributed based on their second preference and tallied. This process continues until a winner is decided.

In STAR voting, voters also rank candidates based on preference.

Each candidate rank has a corresponding point (for example 0-5). Ballots are scored and each candidate receives their points. Then there is a runoff between the top two point-getters where the ballots are reassigned based on how voters ranked those two candidates. The winner is the candidate with the most ballots post-reassignment.

Ranked-choice wins support

According to reform advocates, our current “choose one” system does not work because it intensifies polarization, disincentivizes third-party candidates, promotes mudslinging and requires voters to think tactically about their vote instead of simply picking their favorite candidate (associated with the so-called “spoiler effect.”)

These concerns were highlighted particularly during the presidential campaigns of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders in 2016, and in 2020 during the Democratic presidential primaries.

As the better known of the alternative systems, ranked-choice voting has seen a spike in interest in recent years.

Alaska voters approved a ballot measure in November to adopt ranked-choice voting, and voters in Benton County used ranked-choice voting to select candidates during November’s general election, a first for the Beaver State.

Blair Bobier, secretary of Oregon Ranked Choice Voting Advocates, said ranked-choice voting gives residents a way to display their preferences with respect to third-party candidates, which helps elected officials understand their districts better.

“It gives people more choices. It gives people more voice,” Bobier said.

It’s been used for more than 100 years, in localities across the United States and around the world, including in Australia and Ireland. Maine in November became the first to use it statewide

STAR voting, meanwhile, was created by “amateurs” and overemphasizes unrealistic scenarios to poke holes in ranked-choice voting, Bobier said.

“The STAR proponents are very heavy on theory and very short on real-life examples,” he said.

Switching support to STAR

Sara Wolk, executive director of the Equal Vote Coalition, said most people who now support STAR voting were once advocates of ranked-choice voting.

However, she and some other Oregon ranked-choice voting advocates were introduced to STAR voting in 2016 and, after several months of research and debate, switched their support.

They believe STAR more consistently achieves their goals for an electoral system.

“Pretty much everyone who supports star voting ... started out as ranked-choice voting advocates,” Wolk said. “We really owe it to the voters to make sure we do our homework on this issue.”

STAR was created in 2014 in Oregon and has seen growth in use in the state since then. The Multnomah County Democratic Party uses it for internal races, and last year the Independent Party used the system for its primary election.

Eugene City Council voted down a proposal in July to put a switch to STAR voting on the November ballot and Lane County voters rejected a proposal in 2018.

One of the biggest issues with ranked-choice voting, Wolk said, is that it doesn’t completely solve the problem of tactical voting, where voters feel they are forced to pick the “least bad” of, for example, two options to keep a terrible third candidate from winning.

Wolk said computer modeling shows that in as many as 15 percent of elections that use ranked-choice voting, a voter could vote their true preference and still help their least-favored candidate win.

“If the third candidate is viable, voting your conscience can actually backfire,” she said.

Rep. Zach Hudson, D-Troutdale, is another convert from ranked-choice voting to STAR voting.

He introduced House Bill 3250, which would make STAR voting the system for selecting officials for state seats, as well as allow localities to adopt the system for their elections.

“When people think electoral reform, they think ranked-choice voting,” Hudson said. “I really saw that (STAR voting) had a better system that did everything that ranked-choice wanted to do and avoided some of the pitfalls.”

HB 3250 has not yet been scheduled for a public hearing. Senate Bill 791, which would establish ranked-choice voting for local, state and federal races, had public hearings in mid-March.

Trying it out with local voters

Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, is the sponsor of SB 791 and said he is agnostic on the choice between STAR voting and ranked-choice voting.

He has another bill — SB 343 — that would allow counties to adopt ranked-choice voting or a “similar system” as determined by Oregon’s secretary of state. This would likely include STAR voting as well as other alternative voting systems.

Appeal Tribune

Address: P.O. Box 13009, Salem, OR 97309

Phone: 503-399-6773

Fax: 503-399-6706

Email: sanews@salem.gannett.com

Web site: www.SilvertonAppeal.com

Staff

News Director
Don Currie
503-399-6655
dcurrie@statesmanjournal.com

Advertising
Westsmb@gannett.com

Deadlines

News: 4 p.m. Thursday
Letters: 4 p.m. Thursday
Obituaries: 11 a.m. Friday
Display Advertising: 4 p.m. Wednesday
Legals: 3 p.m. Wednesday
Classifieds: 4 p.m. Friday

News Tips

The Appeal Tribune encourages suggestions for local stories. Email the newsroom, submit letters to the editor and send announcements to sanews@salem.gannett.com or call 503-399-6773.

To Place an Ad

Classifieds: call 503-399-6789
Retail: call 503-399-6602
Legal: call 503-399-6789

Missed Delivery?

Call: 800-452-2511
Hours: until 7 p.m. Wednesdays;
until 3 p.m. other weekdays

To Subscribe

Call: 800-452-2511
\$21 per year for home delivery
\$22 per year for motor delivery
\$30.10 per year mail delivery in Oregon
\$38.13 per year mail delivery outside Oregon

Main Statesman Journal publication

Suggested monthly rates:
Monday-Sunday: \$22, \$20 with EZ Pay
Monday-Saturday: \$17.50, \$16 with EZ Pay
Wednesday-Sunday: \$18, \$16 with EZ Pay
Monday-Friday: \$17.50, \$16 with EZ Pay
Sunday and Wednesday: \$14, \$12 with EZ Pay
Sunday only: \$14, \$12 with EZ Pay

To report delivery problems or subscribe, call 800-452-2511

Published every Wednesday by the Statesman Journal, P.O. Box 13009, Salem, OR 97309.

USPS 469-860, Postmaster: Send address changes to Appeal Tribune, P.O. Box 13009, Salem, OR 97309. PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID: Salem, OR and additional offices.

Send letters to the editor and news releases to sanews@salem.gannett.com.