

# Three timber compromise bills gather bipartisan approval in Oregon Legislature

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI

Capital Press

SALEM — A trio of bills that seek to end Oregon's "timber wars" have won bipartisan support from state lawmakers, who confirmed the previously negotiated compromises by wide margins.

Senate Bill 1501, which enshrines into law new logging standards agreed upon by timber and environmental groups, passed the Senate 22-5 and the House 43-15 in the waning days of this year's legislative session, which ended March 4.

A companion bill that provides tax credits to small forestland owners who abide by stricter logging regulations, Senate Bill 1502, was approved unanimously in both chambers.

The Legislature also voted overwhelmingly in favor of Senate Bill 1546, which would implement a new management strategy for the Elliott State Forest. The 90,000-acre property would remain under state ownership while managed by Oregon State University for forest research and timber harvest.

The three bills must now be signed by Gov. Kate Brown to become law.

Over the past four decades, Oregon's legislative, executive and judicial branches haven't been able to resolve the festering dispute between the timber industry and environmental groups over forest management, said Rep. Ken Helm, D-Beaverton.

"Our institutions were not well-suited to doing that," Helm said.

The recent timber bills are "different animals" because they were brokered by stakeholders ahead of the legislative session,



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press, File

Felled trees are moved in preparation for being cut into log lengths and loaded onto a truck. Three bills that affirm compromises between the timber industry and environmental groups were approved by Oregon lawmakers in the final days of the legislative session that ended Friday, March 4, 2022.

which may serve as a model for resolving other longstanding problems, he said.

"Senate Bill 1501 embodies a monumental, if not historic, agreement for protections for our environment and for certainty for our timber economy," Helm said.

Representatives of timber and environmental groups struck the Private Forest Accord deal in 2021 after a year of talks mediated by the governor's office, which convened the panel to avoid the prospect of competing ballot measures on forestry regulations.

The history behind SB 1501 didn't sit well for lawmakers such as Rep. Christine Goodwin, R-Roseburg, who said she'd vote against the bill to protest the

"blackmail" of the timber industry.

"I am opposed to the pressures imposed on our timber industry to accept these compromises," she said. "I'm opposed to the intimidation to accept this accord or else it could be much worse for the timber industry."

The 44-page bill expands no-harvest buffers around streams, implements stricter requirements for road-building, prioritizes non-lethal control of beavers and creates a new modeling system to avoid and mitigate the effects of landslides.

The legislation is expected to set the stage for a federal Habitat Conservation Plan for the state's private forests, which would shield landowners from liability

under the Endangered Species Act when harvesting trees.

Several forest product companies and the Oregon Small Woodlands Association signed onto the Private Forest Accord with the understanding that it would provide more regulatory certainty and reduce the likelihood of disruptive lawsuits and ballot initiatives.

The agreement is costly for the timber industry, not only financially but also in terms of its unity, since some companies remain opposed to the new regulations, said Chris Edwards, president of the Oregon Forest & Industries Council.

However, there is too much at stake for the timber industry to

roll the dice and move forward without the deal, he said during a legislative hearing on SB 1501.

"At its core, the Private Forest Accord is about protecting a future for forestry in Oregon," Edwards said. "It's also about turning the page on the timber wars of the past."

Critics argue it complicates forest management, excludes excessive amounts of land from logging and was developed without sufficient transparency and public input.

Many members of the Oregon Farm Bureau who own forestlands believe the agreement is unworkable, said Lauren Smith, the organization's director of government affairs.

"With the new harvest buffers in place, some of our members risk losing up to 50% of their harvestable timber and have stated they're likely to sell their woodlands to larger owners or sell the minimum parcel sizes for home sites," she said.

Under the agreement, small forestland owners are subject to less rigorous logging restrictions in recognition of their tendency to grow trees on a longer rotation cycle.

Small woodlands owners who choose to manage their properties under the stricter standards for larger landowners would be eligible for tax credits under SB 1502, which passed the Senate and House without an opposing vote.

Landowners with fewer than 5,000 acres who log less than 2 million board-feet a year would commit to leaving riparian trees unharvested for 50 years in exchange for tax credits, said Rep. Pam Marsh, D-Ashland.

"Senate Bill 1502 will provide financial support for smaller forestland owners affected by the agreement," she said.

## Climatologists: Drought to worsen in Oregon, Idaho this year

Drought covers 74% of the Pacific Northwest

By GILLIAN FLACCUS

The Associated Press

PORTLAND — Climate scientists in the U.S. Pacific Northwest warned Thursday, March 3, that much of Oregon and parts of Idaho can expect even tougher drought conditions this summer than in the previous two years, which already featured dwindling reservoirs, explosive wildfires and deep cuts to agricultural irrigation.

At a news conference hosted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, water and climate experts from Oregon, Washington and Idaho said parts of the region should prepare now for severe drought, wildfires and record-low stream flows that

will hurt salmon and other fragile species.

Drought covers 74% of the Pacific Northwest and nearly 20% is in extreme or exceptional drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. An unusual ridge of high pressure off the U.S. West Coast scuttled storms in January and February that the region normally counts on to replenish water levels and build up a snowpack that feeds streams and rivers in later months, the experts said.

"This year we're doing quite a bit worse than we were last year at this time, so one of the points is to make everyone aware that we're going into some tough times in Oregon this summer," said Larry O'Neill, Oregon's state climatologist. "Right now, we're very worried about this region, about the adversity of impacts we're going to experience this year."

The predictions are in line

with dire warnings about climate change-induced drought and extreme heat across the American West.

A 22-year megadrought deepened so much last year that the broader region is now in the driest spell in at least 1,200 years — a worst-case climate change scenario playing out in real time, a study found last month. The study calculated that 42% of this megadrought can be attributed to human-caused climate change.

In the Pacific Northwest, the worst impacts from the drought this summer will be felt in Oregon, which missed out on critical winter storms would normally moisten central and southern Oregon and southern Idaho. Scientists are debating the cause of the shift in the weather pattern and some believe a warming northern Pacific Ocean could be part of the cause, said O'Neill.

"Climate change may be changing this storm track,

but there is yet no consensus on how it is affecting the Pacific Northwest," he said.

The National Interagency Fire Center recently designated all of central Oregon as "above normal" for fire danger starting in May — one of the earliest starts of fire season in the state ever. Most of central and eastern Oregon is in exceptional or extreme drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor, and parts of eastern Washington and western and southern Idaho are in severe drought.

Seven counties in central Oregon are experiencing the driest two-year period since the start of record-keeping 127 years ago. Overall, Oregon is experiencing its third-driest two-year period since 1895, the experts said.

Most reservoirs in Oregon are 10% to 30% lower than where they were at this time last year and some are at historic lows, signaling serious problems for irrigators who

rely on them to water their crops.

Southern Idaho is also experiencing severe drought and a major reservoir in the Boise Basin has below average water supply, said David Hoekema of the Idaho Department of Water Resources.

"It takes more than just an average year to recover and it doesn't appear that we're going to have an average year," he said. "At this point, we expect southern Idaho to continue in drought ... and we could also see drought intensify."

Some of Oregon's driest areas are already running into trouble.

After a water crisis last summer that left dozens of homes with no water, more domestic wells in southern Oregon's Klamath Basin are running dry. State water monitors have measured a troubling drop in the underground aquifer that wasn't replenished by winter precip-

itation, said Ivan Gall, field services division administrator for the Oregon Water Resources Department.

His agency has received complaints of 16 domestic wells that have run dry since Jan. 1 and is scrambling to figure out how many more wells might go dry this summer in a cascading crisis, he said. Farming season in the agricultural powerhouse began Tuesday.

Last summer, farmers and ranchers in the basin didn't receive any water from a massive federally owned irrigation project because of drought conditions and irrigators instead pumped much more water than usual from the underground aquifer to stay afloat, Gall said.

The tension over water gained national attention when, for a brief period, anti-government activists camped out at the irrigation canal and threatened to open the water valves in violation of federal law.

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