

# Timber counties struggle to provide services as aid dries up

**Gillian Flaccus**  
Associated Press

ROSEBURG, Ore. (AP) - So much timber money once flowed into this rural Oregon county that its leaders set up committees to find ways to spend it.

Today, Douglas County's library system is on life support, and its sheriff's department is on track to lose funding.

Nearly 30 years after environmental protections slashed logging in federal forests, Oregon counties like this one that thrived on timber revenues for decades are struggling to provide basic services. These so-called timber counties received hundreds of millions of dollars during logging's long heyday, and since then the federal government has continued to pour money in to make up for timber's downfall.

Now the money has dried up and people are reluctant to tax themselves, leaving leaders scrambling and public institutions in free fall.

Commissioners in Douglas County, which once received \$50 million in annual profits from logging on federal lands, have slashed health services, cut nearly 300 jobs and started charging for landfill use and parking at parks. The county's main library will close June 1 because voters rejected a tax, and voters in nearby Josephine County must decide May 16 whether to restore limited tax dollars to libraries and fund county response to 911 calls.

Democratic U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden recently joined other Western lawmakers in a last-ditch effort to restore federal assistance - but local officials aren't optimistic.

"Most of the citizens have become accustomed to receiving that outside money, and now that that money is gone, we have to be self-sufficient - or at least more self-sufficient," Josephine County Sheriff Dave Daniel said.

Yet anti-tax sentiment is strong here, where President Donald Trump dominated in November.

Voters in these counties have rejected tax levies for public services nearly a dozen times before, including for public safety and libraries. Many residents feel county leaders are quick to come to voters and must do more to bring back timber dollars, said Jim Rafferty, who opposes raising taxes in Josephine County.

"I'm not saying that we're opposed to public safety. That's not the message," he said. "The message is for the county commissioners to roll up their sleeves and fund the sheriff when they can, rather than give us this rhetoric."

The economic spiral playing out in western Oregon is interwoven with themes that have emerged across the American West: Anger over federal land policy, debate about the limits of environmental regulation and the question of who has the right to benefit from federal lands.

Communities across the American West have long received revenues from logging on federal land, but a quirk of history made the timber wealth of more than a dozen counties in Oregon even greater - and makes their current plight unique.

These 18 timber counties stretch from Portland to the California line. They contain

3,281 square miles (8,498 square kilometers) of densely forested territory that is the central character in a tale of rapid Western expansion and century-old corruption.

The Oregon & California Railroad got the lands in the 1860s for a rail line. The project spurred growth in Oregon but also inspired large-scale land fraud that led to the indictment of a U.S. senator and two congressmen.

In the scandal's wake, the federal government in 1916 took back the land, but locals argued that cheated them of a tax base on land ripe for logging.

Federal legislation tailored to compensate the counties created a cash cow: 75 percent of the logging receipts from those lands go to the counties, with no restrictions.

During the 1980s, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management was selling 1 billion board feet (2.4 million cubic meters) of timber a year, producing so much money that some of the counties did not assess property taxes. Most also get 25 percent of timber receipts from national forests within their borders under a separate program.

But in the early 1990s, conservation groups won lawsuits to protect spotted owl and salmon habitat, and logging on federal land dropped by 90 percent. Federal dollars to ease the counties' transition have been shrinking for years and were not renewed this year.

That funding problem has been compounded by a state law that removed the harvest tax on cut timber and by a voter-approved ballot measure in 1998 that changed the valuation of private forest land.

The adjustment has been whiplash in communities where unemployment rises to 8

and 9 percent.

Kate Lasky, executive director of Josephine Community Libraries Inc., runs a nonprofit foundation that has kept the libraries open with donations and volunteers.

The May 16 ballot measure would add 39 cents per \$1,000 in taxes for voters in a special district of the precincts around the library's branches. A previous countywide levy failed.

"I have to focus on those people who want to support their community," Lasky said. "We need to do that for generations, not just for next year."

A public safety levy on the same ballot asks for 93 cents per \$1,000. If that fails, residents who call 911 won't get any help from sheriff's deputies, said Daniel, the county sheriff, who handed out 17 layoff warnings last month.

The Oregon State Police, which has been providing limited patrol coverage, says it can't help more if the measure fails.

"We're just bracing ourselves for the impact," Daniel said.

In Douglas County, officials in the 1990s realized there would be a drop-off in funding and started building up reserves, but those funds are almost gone.

"Literally, and I'm not kidding, we had committees that just sat around and figured out how to spend the money. That's no joke. That was their job," Douglas County Commissioner Gary Leif said of timber's peak.

"What I fear - what I know - is going to happen, is that we will have to go to the people and say, 'We've cut everything down to the bones. There's nowhere else to cut.

## The Archive Zone: by Hillary Mohr from the *Illinois Valley News* archives

STOP in the name of the law! Calmly drop what you are doing, take a seat, and get ready for some lock and loaded action in this week's Police Blotter Archive Zone. The Date: May 29, 2002. Location: Cave Junction and the Illinois Valley.

Thursday, May 16  
\*Deputies in rural Grants Pass were told by a woman

that her son, in his tree house, was questioned about the accommodations by two scruffy looking men with lots of tattoos.

\*A resident of Selma reported verbal threats via telephone by a prisoner in county jail.

Friday, May 17  
\*At 12:05 a.m. a resident

in the 10000 block of Taklima Road reported hearing five gunshots.

\*At the north end of CJ a man with a chainsaw was checked.

\*In Selma a resident claimed that he was being followed by a man that he beat up in another state last year. He said that the man is a drug

dealer and a gang member.

\*In Downtown CJ at 8:16 p.m. a man with a guitar was warned about walking in traffic.

Saturday, May 18

\*In CJ a report was received from a person who said that an ex-spouse threatened to put a bullet in someone's head.

\*A Selma resident said

that he lost the sale of two properties because of tire tracks from four-wheelers. They were contacted and warned about trespassing.

\*Out Deer Creek Road, according to a complainant at 11:06 p.m., approximately 30 underage persons were drinking alcohol, staggering around and throwing gasoline on a fire.

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