

Clear-cutting now No. 1 in state for emissions

Center for Sustainable Economy renews calls for climate-change legislation to include timber regulations

BY JOANNE ZUHL
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Industrial clear-cutting of Oregon's forest is now the state's single largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, according to a new analysis released Monday Dec. 11., by the Center for Sustainable Economy.

That's a move up from second place in the center's 2015 initial report, compiled in conjunction with the Geos Institute and Oregon Wild.

Regardless of its impact, however, the industry remains virtually unaffected by the state's proposed climate change legislation. Senate Bill 1070, which would create a carbon marketplace with incentives for reducing emissions, doesn't include the timber industry's impact on climate at all, which is topping out at an average of 33 million metric tons of greenhouse gases each year. By comparison, the previous No. 1 – transportation – emits between 20 and 24 million metric tons each year.

As with the 2015 report, John Talberth, president and chief economist for the center, is renewing calls for Gov. Kate Brown and the Oregon Legislature to amend SB 1070 and include the timber industry in new regulations proposed to curb greenhouse gas emissions. The appeal is going out directly in letters to the governor; Rep. Ken Helm (D-Beaverton), chair of the workgroup on Agriculture, Forests, Fisheries, Rural Communities and Tribes; and Sen. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland), chair of the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee.

"Gov. Brown and the Legislature remain asleep at the switch as the climate crisis deepens," Talberth said. "And the opportunity to make this globally significant contribution slips by, clear-cut after clear-cut after clear-cut."

Talberth said the underlying facts in the report are neither new nor speculative.

"The science and economics are unambiguous. The world needs to phase out industrial forestry as rapidly as possible and dramatically scale up climate smart alternatives if we have any hope of leveling off and reducing the atmospheric concentration of CO2 back to the 350 parts per million safe zone. We've known this for quite a long time, and yet we have zero action by Gov. Brown and the legislature. They're completely asleep at the switch, and this has to change."

The timber exemption stems from a policy developed by the timber industry that allows it to deduct from its emission levels the amount of carbon dioxide absorbed by forests and other green spaces, including private properties. However, the offset is a false measurement of the timber industry's actual emissions and its impact on climate change or the health of our forests, Talberth said.

The report offers three legislative options to rein in timber emissions: The first would be to include the timber industry in the proposed cap-and-invest climate bill, SB 1070. The second option would have the legislature tax emissions from clear-cutting



Forests are clear-cut near Eugene. According to a new report by the Center for Sustainable Economy, industrial clear-cutting is the leading source of greenhouse gas emissions in Oregon.

PHOTO BY CALIBAS/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS (CC BY-SA 3.0)

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Oregon Global Warming Commission Forest Carbon Task Force meeting

WHEN: 9 a.m.-noon Tuesday, Dec. 19

WHERE: Conference Room Meitner, Oregon Department of Energy, 550 Capitol St. NE, Salem

AGENDA: The commission plans to discuss, among other things, findings from the OGWC Forest Carbon Task Force and content for the 2018 Report to the Legislature

CALL IN: A listen-only call-in line will be available for those who cannot attend the meeting. Call 877-336-1831, then use access code 872206. Mute your telephone line during the meeting, and do not place the line on hold, as it will cause hold music to play for all participants.

and short-rotation timber plantations, and also reward sustainable foresters. The third proposal is to require "Big Timber" to develop and adhere to long-term climate resiliency plans that set targets for accumulating and restoring lost carbon to the land and reverting plantations to natural forests.

In February, Oregon's Global Warming Commission released its biennial report to the state legislature, emphasizing an increased urgency to action around climate change and calling for more attention on

how the state tracks forest carbon. But the commission stops short of recommending specific changes to address timber regulations until its own Forest Carbon Accounting Project is completed. On Dec. 19, the commission will hold a public meeting in Salem to discuss, among other things, findings from the Forest Carbon Task Force and content for the 2018 Report to the Legislature.

Poor forestry practices are not just damaging on issues related to climate, Talberth said; they also contribute to other environmental decline, including raising temperatures, decreasing water flow, accelerating species extinction and increasing the severity of wildfires, insect outbreaks, disease and landslides, according to the report. The lack of forestry standards has resulted in more short-rotation timber plantations, which are less productive in absorbing and storing carbon dioxide than natural forests.

In contrast to the high rates of carbon emissions from poorly managed forests, the alternative with the "climate smart" practices can be extreme with global benefits.

"The good news is that flipping these practices into climate-smart alternatives can help these landscapes capture and permanently store more carbon than any other forest type on the planet, and better withstand floods, droughts or wildfires," Talberth said.

The lack of regulation on timber practices has created what the report labels "dead zones," clear-cut lands that emit more

carbon than they absorb. Clear-cutting in Oregon, the report notes, has contributed to a net loss of 1.7 million acres of forest cover statewide since 2000.

Talberth said any argument from the timber industry that climate-smart practices would jeopardize their viability is not valid. Small-scale sustainable forests are already implementing climate-smart practices, he said, and are making money and facing increased demands for their products because consumers of wood products are becoming more and more ecologically conscientious and climate conscientious.

"The demand for the climate-smart product is going nowhere but up," Talberth said. "So the timber industry doesn't really have a leg to stand on because there's already the proof of concept out there. They just need to switch from having this very short-term focus of maximizing profits to short term investors to a longer term commitment to practices that are good for humanity and good for Oregonians in the long run."

"Inaction is inexcusable given humanity's urgent need to draw down atmospheric carbon as fast and as efficiently as possible," Talberth said. "And passing legislation to flip industrial forest practices in Oregon to climate-smart alternatives, it's the one thing Gov. Brown and the legislators can do that can have global significance because of the inherent advantage that Pacific Northwest forests have in storing more carbon than any other place on Earth."