

# Oil Rush

Oregon timber teaches us about international trade

Oregonians of my generation understand the social, environmental and economic impacts of a poorly managed natural resource industry. As our timber boom dwindled and the industry shrank, we saw rural towns fall into poverty, we saw schools close their doors and we saw our neighbors move in search of employment. Most startling of all, we saw our favorite costal mountains turn from lush green to a dry clear-cut brown. Due to what we witnessed, we are better positioned than most Americans to understand the impacts our nation's trade policy can have on natural resource-rich countries.

I recently returned from a journey into the jungle of one such country — Colombia. Colombia's jungle is not only rich in resources, it is also inhabited by numerous salt-of-the-earth homesteaders who have been eking out their livings on small farms there since the 1960s. In many ways, it is a region comparable to Oregon — a region whose natural resources represent a potential "boom" for a few but a "bust" for many.



Recently, the U.S. and Colombia have been hashing out a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) that would open Colombia's economy and environment to U.S. business interests. Colombia's agriculture sector and virgin jungle land are at the heart of this agreement. The FTA provides Colombia with few tools to protect its rural economy, the environment or the local cultures so intimately tied to the very lands that are ripe for foreign investment.

The region I visited in Colombia is highly contested. Most recently, private companies have entered the area, and with the help of military and paramilitary forces, have taken over lands legally titled to local communities. They have done this via massacres, selective assassinations and threats — all leading to the massive displacement of rural Colombians. Those farmers, who eventually return, have found their lands completely planted over with African palm.

African palm is the plant from which palm oil is derived. Found in most processed foods, the oil is in high demand by developed nations. More significantly, the oil can be used as biofuel — now touted as a promising natural energy resource. Currently, Colombia is the largest palm producer in the Americas with 35 percent of its product exported as fuel. The Colombian government and private companies plan to increase palm production from between 2.5 million and 16 million acres over the next 10 years, selling to U.S. and European markets.

Palm crops call for the clearing of virgin forests. In addition, they leech water from the land, destroy topsoil, provide no room for food production and require a constant application of pesticides via crop dusters. Within 15 years, the plant's production slows to a near halt, and the industry declines. Sadly, palm plantations provide no longterm development for Colombia's poorest rural communities.

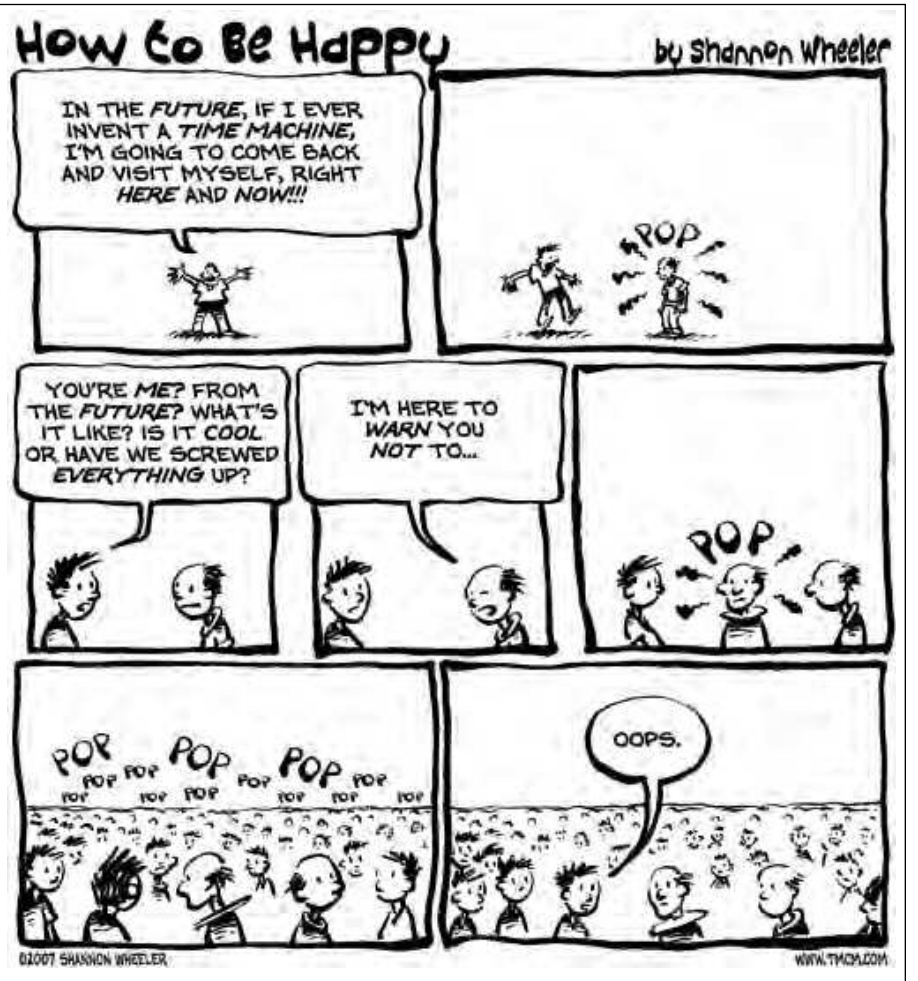
As vast territory is taken over for palm production, few mechanisms are in place to protect people's land rights. Presently, the Colombian government has a backlog of cases in which peasant farmers were violently pushed off their land by private palm companies with no compensation. In fact, the government entity responsible for processing these cases has been so ineffective it is slated to be dismantled this year.

Palm production in Colombia would skyrocket even further under an FTA with the U.S. and is already heavily supported by the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank and the U.S. Agency for Alternative Development. Yet in the face of this rapid rural shift, there is no plan in place to protect people, the environment, local economies or food supplies. Already experiencing the ills of palm production, numerous Colombian communities have rejected this crop. Risking death by massacre, they refuse to leave their land, instead taking a stand for the environment and a position against the poverty that palm expansion implies.

Traveling in Colombia, I often thought of home and the important lessons Oregonians have learned from our own rise and fall in the world of natural resources. The story I heard in Colombia is not new, it is the story told on the edge of each frontier, and it is the story of Oregon timber. As Colombians face continued violence, displacement, perhaps a short economic boom — and a definite industry demise accompanied by brutal poverty — I call on Oregonians to stand with them in their defense of land and people.

In the year ahead, when the FTA with Colombia again comes to the floor of Congress, ask your representatives to vote no. Ask that they take a stand against an agreement that provides no protection and no planning for the security of Colombia's environment, its rural economy or its poorest people.

*Annalise Romoser is a native of Eugene and a 2001 graduate of the UO. She has worked as a policy analyst and educator in Colombia, and is now senior associate at the Washington, D.C.-based U.S. Office on Colombia.*



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### DON'T DERAILED THIS PROJECT

It's not every day in Eugene that the mayor and six city councilors are on the same page. It should be a cause for celebration: our elected representatives working together to get things done for Eugene!

On Monday night (8/13), the City Council voted 6-2 to raise the debt ceiling for Eugene's downtown urban renewal district (URD). This effort was supported by Mayor Kitty Piercy, who also deserves a great deal of credit for reaching out across a broad spectrum of community interests to advance efforts and encourage public input on the redevelopment of West Broadway in downtown Eugene.

As a member of the West Broadway Advisory Committee (WBAC), I would like to join the mayor in asking fellow citizens to resist efforts to derail this redevelopment effort. People constantly tell me they are frustrated by the gridlock and split decisions coming from our city council. On this occasion we actually have the mayor and a super majority who favor moving forward with efforts to revitalize downtown Eugene.

Many people consider this a positive improvement in civic discourse. People are tired of negativity. It's time to have some faith in our elected representatives and give them credit for making an honest effort to serve the public interest. In this case, they do deserve our support.

The decision to raise the URD debt limit does *not* obligate the city to spend a single dime on West Broadway. It does *not* raise taxes. It does *not* limit public debate or public input. In fact, the public is encouraged to participate in the process. Check the city website for details on meetings.

The early West Broadway conceptual proposals submitted by developers Beam and KWG are extremely preliminary concepts — they are nowhere close to certain. There are no final agreements, no concrete proposals. Nothing is written in stone, con-

trary to what you may hear or read about the project. The public input process is still ongoing. Many diverse voices *are* being heard. This is the time to engage the discussion, not cut short the process.

The WBAC won't make its final recommendations to the council until September, and the mayor and council have pledged to seek on-going public input every step of the way. The city has made no commitment to any amount of public investment dollars (from federal grants and loans) which may or may not be used to help finance utility upgrades, parking, affordable housing subsidies, open spaces or other elements of the redevelopment effort that would serve the public interest. These investments should not be considered subsidies to big, rich developers. Public investment in infrastructure and affordable housing subsidies have been an essential component in attracting and implementing successful urban redevelopment in cities across the county. Why should Eugene be the only exception?

The developers are proposing to invest more than \$200 million in Eugene to provide a rich diversity of new housing and retail that will help breath new vitality into West Broadway. They have committed to hiring local workers and creating jobs in Eugene. Let's not short-circuit the public discussion before we've even had a chance to see what the developers ultimately propose.

*Eric A. Stillwell  
West Broadway Advisory Committee*

### BETTER THAN BULLETS

The EW's continued opposition to any form of effective law enforcement disturbs me. I've been a prosecutor and defense attorney for nine years, trained military and law enforcement personnel in the use of force and have reviewed innumerable incidents involving the use of force by law enforcement. Tasers fill a critical gap in the use of force spectrum.

In my experience, cops don't overuse