

COMMUNITY FORESTS

Can a town save its nearby trees? BY EPHRAIM PAYNE

The idea of a community forest has been kicking around the Siskiyou Mountain hamlet of Williams, Ore., for a while. But it took an out-of-state landowner's plan to slash forests safeguarding the town's water supply to turn ideas into action.

This spring, loggers are razing diverse groves of second-growth trees on a 320-acre plot above Williams. Meanwhile locals are raising money to buy the land in hopes of establishing an economically productive, sustainably managed public forest.

In 2000 locals first pressured then-owner Boise Cascade to shelve logging plans for the groves, known as the W320, a wildlife corridor that is home to the red tree vole, Pacific fisher, mariposa lily and northern spotted owl, as well as the site of a well-used hiking and horse riding trail. In February 2011, Idaho timberman Michael Riggs bought the W320 for \$900,000, according to Williams Community Forest Project (WCFP) President Cheryl Bruner, whose group tried unsuccessfully to buy the land from Riggs before cutting started.

"It was well known that this property was of interest to the community," says Bruner. "Riggs knew about the protest when he bought it."

Almost half of 250 acres of planned clearcuts have been cut already, locals estimate. Aside from the transformation of a diverse forest into a monocrop tree plantation, locals say they worry most about the threat post-logging herbicide use poses to three streams providing salmon spawning habitat, community drinking water and irrigation for organic farms.

"The water here was so pristine that I gave birth to my son in it," says WCFP steering committee member Juliette Mountain, who lives next to the W320. "But we can't even drink the water now."

Community forests, rare on the West Coast, are more common in places like Montana, where tree regrowth is slow and timber companies sell cutover forestland. According to the nonprofit Communities Committee, which promotes community forestry, "3,000 communities in 43 states own and manage forests totaling 4.5 million acres." The concept calls for a community to control the destiny of its forests by developing management strategies balancing local economic and environmental needs.

Bruner says people started envisioning community forests in Williams around 2006. On learning of the new contract for W320, locals realized the forest was perfect for what they wanted: a demonstration project to show that community forests are a viable option in Oregon.

WCFP supporters are not anti-logging. Many community forest organizers selectively harvest and mill trees on their own land, producing logs for pole building, dimensional lumber and hardwood products for cabinetry. Local wildcrafters harvest multiple forest products, from matsutake and chan-



LOCAL KIDS JADE BUTTERFLY AND ASA MOUNTAIN PLAY IN A PATCH OF BLM TIMBERLAND WHILE WCFP VIDEOGRAPHER DOCUMENTS THE ONGOING CLEARCUTTING OF THE W320 ABOVE

PHOTO BY EPHRAIM PAYNE

terelle mushrooms to medicinal herbs. These activities, plus ecotourism, provide a sustainable economic foundation for community forestry here.

A WCFP sub-committee is developing concrete plans to establish a community forest, in hopes of restoring the W320. In addition to purchasing a different forest, the group is considering working with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to establish stewardship contracting, which utilizes community forestry principles to manage federally owned forestland, on BLM-administered acreage around Williams.

"I'd like to see community forests around here," says Johnny Sundstrom, who helped develop stewardship contracting on the Siuslaw National Forest's Mapleton Ranger District in the Coast Range outside Eugene. "The day when forestry was simply harvesting is past. Now that we've entered an era when productivity and restoration are of equal importance, communities that depend on federal and private timber land must be included in every aspect of their management," Sundstrom explains.

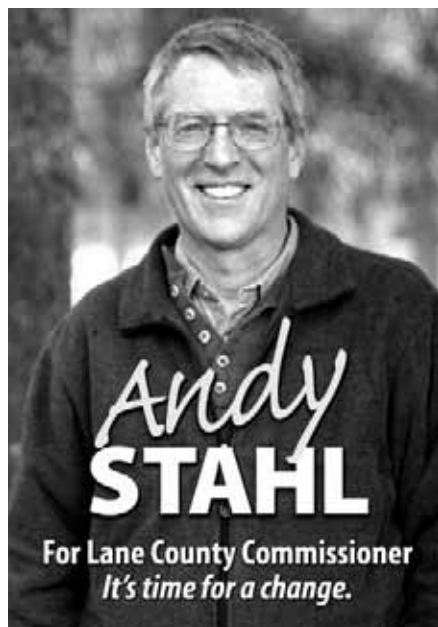
The W320 cut is part of a new logging boom in an area that for years drew new residents that were attracted to its mature forests and lack of logging. But the boom may not pay off for Williams. Residents say the W320 harvest has produced no jobs for locals, and the wood is earmarked for export.

"The community doesn't really have a voice in what goes on in its own back yard," says resident Leaf Nielson. "Yet an absentee landowner from Idaho can come in and control things. We could be creating local jobs and using local resources in this community."

So far, the WCFP has received \$130,000 in pledges, and has \$13,000 in working capital and \$12,000 specifically earmarked for land purchase. Bruner says the group hopes to attract a benefactor to purchase the land, which they hope to get for much less than the \$1.5 million price it commanded before trees started to fall, or finance a 10-year low interest loan. The WCFP shares information on the W320 and plans for its protection, including future fundraisers, at williamscommunityforestproject.org

Local youth have become very active in the campaign, attending meetings, using social media to spread word of the W320's imminent demise and raising \$10,000 online via fundraising website IndieGoGo. Sisters Imani, 16, and Nia Pratt, 14, created a video for the campaign featuring local children and community members talking about the importance of the forest.

"It's all about the fundraising at this point," says Imani Pratt, adding that the children are planning more fundraisers. "We should be able to decide as a community how to practice forest management, just because so many people are affected by what goes on." **EW**



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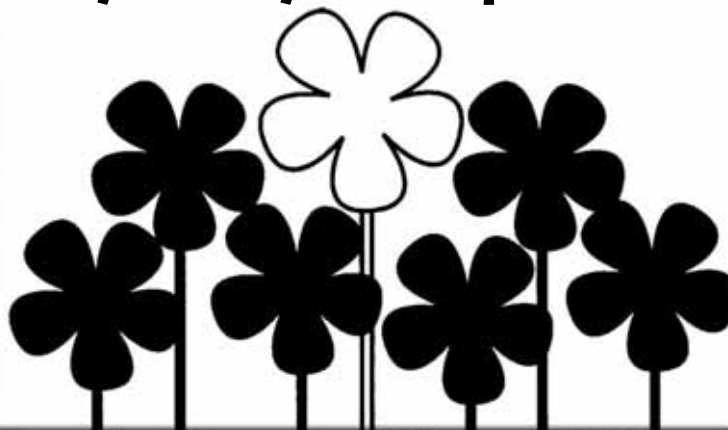
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