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**F**or more than four decades, 82-year-old Howard Purkerson carefully managed his timberland in Crow, Oregon, choosing to selectively thin the 90-acre forest instead of toppling it in a more profitable clearcut. But now almost all of the trees are gone. And Purkerson is furious.

"I didn't want some logging company coming in and raping this beautiful parcel," he told InvestigateWest. "If there was any way I could balance the scales, I would do it."

Purkerson refused to sell to Lane County land developers Greg Demers, Norman McDougal and Melvin McDougal because he had heard of their well-publicized clearcutting and mining at Parvin Butte, their burning Pilot Rock landfill (which earned Demers a \$792,062 state environmental fine) and their efforts to obtain McKenzie River water rights that an administrative law judge denied as water speculation.

According to Purkerson and several other forest landowners, Demers and the McDougals use a variety of means to get what they want, sometimes pushing the envelope, when it comes to buying and harvesting timberland in Oregon. But state forestry officials are nearly powerless to stop them, InvestigateWest has learned — even when the developers run afoul of the law.

Purkerson says that when Demers in 2013 asked about buying the timberland, "I told [Demers] I wouldn't sell it to him for any price," he said.

But somehow the McDougals got Purkerson's land anyway. Shortly after rebuffing Demers, Purkerson says he received an offer on the property from Daniel Bell, the co-owner of a hair salon in Coburg. Bell, who indicated that he wanted to live on the property, promised to keep the forest standing, Purkerson says.

But that didn't happen. According to county property records, Bell sold the land only two months later for \$10,000 more than the purchase price. The buyer: McDougal Bros. Inc., the investment firm owned by Norman and Melvin McDougal. Within months, the forest was gone. Purkerson claims he was tricked, believing Bell was just an operative of Demers and McDougal.

"He came here with a six-pack of beer and some jerky and was just all nicey-nicey, you know?" Purkerson said.

"At my age I should have known better. It was dumb, but I sold it."

In a phone interview, Bell declined to comment on the circumstances surrounding his purchase. Asked whether he was employed by McDougal Bros., Bell said: "I do not presently have any relationship with Greg Demers or the McDougal brothers." He declined to elaborate for this story.

Demers and the McDougals did not respond to repeated requests for an interview. But amid their silence, other forest landowners in Oregon shared similar regrets about their encounters with the trio.

One such landowner is Delbert Erb of Albany, who signed a timber contract with Demers and Oregon Land Company, or OLC, in July 2014.

According to Erb and his neighbor Mike Stipp, a self-trained forester who helped Erb monitor the logging operation on Erb's land, the loggers flouted the Forest Practices Act from the very start. And documents from the Oregon Department of Forestry back them up.

On Oct. 29, 2014, after Erb filed a complaint about an inadequate culvert that created a heightened flood risk, ODF issued two identical citations to a pair of subcontractors: ATR Services Inc., which is run by Demers and his brother Jeff Demers, and Rose Logging Inc., which has family ties to McDougal Bros.

Two months later, ODF officials returned for another inspection of the logging site, and once again they found damage caused by the same loggers. On Jan. 5, officials from ODF documented evidence of soil disruption and inadequate stream protection on Erb's property, but they decided that the issues didn't warrant formal citations. Instead, ODF issued a notice of "unsatisfactory conditions" and allowed the logging contractors to fix the problems without penalty. Such notices often precede a formal citation, an ODF official said, and the contractors fixed the problems before a violation occurred.

Stipp contends that ODF should have come down harder on the loggers. In December, Stipp took video footage of what he says appear to be oil slicks, tire ruts and other signs of damage to Erb's property that would violate the Forest Practices Act. None of those alleged violations resulted in citations or fines.

"They just try to take advantage of you until you make them stop," Stipp said, referring to Demers and the McDougals. "Not all loggers do what these guys did. Not all of them are bad."

Demers and his companies have been cited by ODF at least seven times in the last three years alone, with additional violations dating as far back as 1987.

Melvin and Norman McDougal were not named in the state's database of forestry citations, a state public-records request showed. However, sometimes they hire

subcontractors to do their logging work. For example, although inspection reports indicate that McDougal Bros. owned the timber on Erb's property, it was the subcontractors Rose Logging and ATR Services that received the citations.

## RULES WITHOUT TEETH

In Oregon, ODF generally requires logging companies that break the forestry rules to repair damages and pay a fine. But those fines rarely amount to more than a slap on the wrist. Under state law, ODF cannot issue a penalty larger than \$5,000 per violation, even to repeat offenders.

"When we do enforce the law, our goal is to educate folks," said Angie Lane, ODF's civil penalties administrator. "The Forest Practices Act puts a lot of responsibility on the landowner and the logging operator to do a good job."

But when loggers don't do a good job, Oregon's \$5,000 cap on fines gives ODF less leverage than other state agencies to crack down on offenders like Demers. The Department of Environmental Quality, for example, slapped Demers with a \$792,062 penalty for failing to clean up an abandoned lumber dump in eastern Oregon, where fires regularly break out during the summer and blanket the town of Pilot Rock in smoke. (That fine remains under appeal, but in the most recent decision, issued in November 2015, the Environmental Quality Commission ruled that Demers must pay.)

Oregon also has fewer safeguards than its southern neighbor, California, to prevent logging violations before they happen. In California, logging contractors must be licensed by a state agency, and they must also file detailed timber harvesting plans, which are subject to public review and comment for more than a month before a cut is approved. Washington employs a public review process similar to California's.

In Oregon, loggers are similarly required to notify the state forester before logging trees. But complete harvesting plans are only required in certain circumstances, and there is no public review process. Also unlike California, logging companies in Oregon don't need a state license.

That leaves forest landowners with little protection when unscrupulous loggers purchase timberland or logging rights.

Forest landowners should ask for and check references of logging companies with which they do business, Lane said. Talking with other forest landowners will help protect those doing business with a logging contractor.

"It's really a 'buyer-beware' situation here in Oregon," Lane said. "Before you hire a logging contractor under some sort of contract, you should do some reference checking."

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