

NEWS

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NOT OUT OF THE WOODS

The Elliott State Forest will stay public, but will it be protected?

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Driving through the Elliott State Forest, a 91,000-acre swath of state-owned forestland east of Coos Bay, is a jarring experience, and not just because of the rutted gravel and dirt roads. As the mountains of the Coast Range rise and fall, so does the forest. In some areas the canopy closes in on you as old tall trees shelter the road and forest from the sun, and lush ferns sprawl in the dank understory.

Just as sure as the forest pulls you in, it also spits you out. Throughout the forest, steep hillsides are laid bare by industrial clear-cutting, following the patchwork patterns replicated throughout private and state-owned timberlands in Oregon's Coast Range.

The contrasts in the landscape of the Elliott have also shaped the political battles over the fate of the forest. While timber companies, including Eugene-based Seneca Jones Timber Company and Roseburg's Lone Rock Timber, are vying for more lumber production, conservationists are suing and rallying to protect habitat for endangered coho salmon, spotted owls and marbled murrelets.

After years of conservationists packing State Land Board meetings and lobbying to keep the forest public, the board decided in May of 2017 to retain the forest in public ownership. A year and a half after opting to keep the Elliott public, the board announced in December that it will move forward with plans for Oregon State University to manage the Elliott as a research forest.

But lingering questions remain about how the forest will be managed and paid for.

OSU's History of Timber Industry Ties

OSU's forestry program is world renowned. A Center for World University Rankings 2017 analysis ranked it second best worldwide. And its endeavors are far-ranging. In the same school you can find researchers studying more efficient methods for industrial timber harvesting and innovations in wood products like skyscraper building cross-laminated timber, as well as researchers who quantify the climate-change impacts of the timber industry and ecological importance of preserving old-growth forests.

In the past, the range of interests within the College of Forestry has clashed — with ugly results. After the half-million acre Biscuit Fire torched the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest in 2002, OSU researchers were brought in to study the fire's effects and the impact of salvage logging — removing burned trees to be milled as timber. Graduate student Dan Donato's research, co-authored by professors Beverly Law and Boone Kaufmann, found that salvage logging killed 71 percent of seedlings and left more fire-prone underbrush two years after the fire.

This research, which cast a poor light on industry practices, was challenged by OSU professors and then-dean of the College of Forestry, Hal Salwasser. A 2006 *Eugene Weekly* investigation by Kera Abraham described the immediate fallout: "In the days immediately following the Donato report's publication, the dean exchanged a flurry of intense emails with regional and national timber industry leaders, Republican congressional staff, Forest Service employees and OSU faculty, devising strategies to play down Donato's findings."

These days, conservationists worry that continued logging industry ties within OSU could shape the management of the Elliott. "OSU has serious historic logging industry baggage, which gives us pause about their ownership," says Josh Laughlin, the executive director of Cascadia Wildlands, a Eugene-based conservation nonprofit.

"If they are out there answering the pressing questions of our time, like what to do about runaway climate change, how to protect endangered species, and how to protect clean water, OSU's ownership could be great," Laughlin says. "Let's not kid ourselves and go research the question of what a clearcut does to the environment in the Elliott — there's plenty of other places in the Coast Range to see that."

Geoff Huntington, the director of strategic initiatives for the College of Forestry, invites those skeptical of the school's intentions or industry connections to learn more about the program. "We would be happy to engage anybody on understanding the kind of faculty we have, the research they are doing, and the kind of work they are taking on," Huntington says.

As the college prepares plans for taking ownership of the forest, OSU will be conducting public events around the state to engage with local communities, he says.

Does the Fate of Another OSU Forest Presage the Elliott's?

In the Coast Range, about 200 miles north of the Elliott, OSU owns the Blodgett Tract, a 2,432-acre patch of forest that was gifted to the college in 1923. Like the Elliott, the forest is in varying states of growth with younger and older stands of trees.

The Blodgett Tract has long been a testing ground for logging projects, at times with unfortunate consequences. The Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries implicated logging on the tract as the cause of a landslide that inundated Highway 30 and several homes in 2007. The university disputed the connection between the landslide and logging.

Recently, the College of Forestry has moved forward with accelerated harvests on portions of the Blodgett Tract in order to generate revenue and put the forest more in sync with harvesting cycles.

"The Blodgett is an asset of the college that helps support research, but it's not a place that we look to as a primary research forest," Huntington says. "We're not looking at the Elliott to purchase as a source of revenue, but as a world class research forest for the state of Oregon."

Arran Robertson, the communications manager for Oregon Wild, says the devil is in the details when it comes to OSU taking over management of the Elliott. "One of our fears is that people will look at OSU as a silver bullet for public ownership and have a less critical public eye," Robertson says. He says that the conservation community needs specific assurances that the Elliott's habitat and watersheds will be protected and that the forest won't "just be a piggy bank for OSU."

An Ongoing Public Process

The path to keeping the Elliott State Forest public was a long and uncertain journey that inspired hundreds of people from throughout Oregon to rally for the cause. Now that the Elliott will remain public, the nitty-gritty work of paying for the remaining \$121 million owed to the Common School Fund from the forest and drawing out management plans is underway.

Over the next year OSU will be working with the Department of State Lands and State Land Board to figure out terms for the transfer of 82,500 acres of Common School Fund property. Part of this process, the development of a Habitat Conservation Plan to comply with protections for threatened and endangered species, will go a long way toward dictating which parts of the forest can and cannot be logged.

Beyond legally imposed restrictions, the offices of both Treasurer Tobias Read and Gov. Kate Brown, two of the three members of the State Land Board, emphasized the importance of the Elliott State Forest as a laboratory for climate change research in statements to *EW*. That could be a big deal for management on the Elliott, as OSU professor Law's research has found that changes to forest industry practices, including longer periods between harvests, could help Oregon's forests store more carbon and mitigate climate change.

For now, conservationists will keep a close eye on the process. "OSU could be incredible with concrete and enforceable guidelines," Laughlin says. "We haven't seen that yet." ■