

The battle over a state-owned forest

By SAPHARA HARRELL
The World

the Elliott.

Logging superintendent Mike Huffman said he just recently found out that the forest was being sold because it was losing money for the Common School Fund. "My gut response is it's sad because there's so much money that could've gone to the schools," he said.

Huffman said the state is thinking short-term, but it will lose out in the long run.

Oregon State University Timber Harvesting Specialist Steve Bowers expressed the same belief. He said timber is more environmentally responsible than any other nonrenewable energy, because it will grow back.

"In 50, 60, 100 years it's a forest again," he said.

Huffman and Wright have been in the business long enough to see that happen. Areas they planted fifty years ago have regrown and are ready to be logged again. According to Huffman, the Elliott grows by about 80 million board feet a year.

Although clearcutting swaths of trees has been one of the more contentious logging practices, Huffman said that's how new trees are planted.

"If there's no clearcut, there's nowhere to plant trees," he said.

Money versus aesthetics

Right now, the forest is logging 11.2 million board feet that were approved last year, generating \$3.5 million.

That number is relatively low. In the past, the forest was producing more than 25 million board feet a year. But in recent years the state has been rocked with lawsuits, causing them to sell off three parcels to recoup their losses to the Common School fund.

A lawsuit surfaced over the \$4.2 million sale in 2014, citing a 1957 law that prohibits the sale of lands in the forest that were formerly national forestland. According to the case, the land in question was transferred from the U.S. Forest Service to the state in 1913.

Before that, the state was sued for allegedly violating the Endangered Species Act by clearcutting old growth forest that houses the endangered seabird the marbled murrelet. The suit was settled out of court and the state dropped 900 acres worth of timber sales.

When asked how he feels about the endangered bird affecting the timber industry, Huffman's partner, Operations Manager Butch Wright said loggers aren't out there to destroy the land.

"Nobody wants to see a species die completely out, we're not out here for that," Wright said, "But to completely dev-

astate what has been one of the biggest industries in the state. Yeah, I have a hard time with that."

Bowers, who used to be a logger himself, said the fight over the forest is so intense because it's so valuable.

"For one side it's the dollar sign and the other side it's aesthetics," he said.



Joe Metzler walks across a fallen log over a creek in the Silver Grove in the Elliott State Forest. The trees in the grove are over 220 years old in places.



Mike Huffman, left, logging superintendent, and Howard "Butch" Wright, vice president of operations, at Huffman-Wright Timber and Construction Operations, stand on the edge of a recent clearcut by the company in the Elliott State Forest near Coos Bay. The operation is able to cut approximately 1 acre per day. "It gets in your blood," Wright said of logging. The family company has been in business for 61 years and encompasses four generations of family.

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Taking the case to Salem

The fight was brought to the state capitol in October, when conservationists rallied outside the state land board's meeting before an hour of public comment on the forest. Local protesters from the South Coast gathered on a bus at 5:30 a.m. for the 3 1/2-hour drive to attend the Salem meeting.

Megan Crawford was one of the people who woke up at the crack of dawn to make the trip and voice her thoughts.

The Coos bay resident takes her kids to the Elliott to go swimming and hiking. She said she wants the forest to remain in public hands so that future generations will know what a big tree looks like.

"I fear that some children someday may look at a picture in a book and not be able to go

and see what an actual big forest looks like," Crawford said. "When you go up there it's overwhelming. When you go up there you're like 'wow that is why we're doing this.'"

Robin Meacher, wildlands campaign director at the environmental group Cascadia Wildlands, said the rally helped the movement gain some traction.

"Before it was just people in Coos Bay who knew about the Elliott," Meacher said, "After the rally it's almost national now."

During public comment, people raised concerns about this decision's impact on the future and on the potential for future land sales.

Julie Curtis of the Department of State Lands said that it's not uncommon for the state to sell land. She said the potential Elliott sale, which accounts for almost 65 percent of DSL-owned forestland, wouldn't set a precedent for other state lands.

"It's important to look at the reasons why the forest is being sold," Curtis said. "We have a land asset that's losing money for the Common School Fund."

According to the state lands website, \$66 million was ear-

marked for K-12 public schools across the state this year. Since 1955, the Elliott has contributed more than \$300 million to the school fund.

OSU's Bowers said he doesn't think selling is the right solution. "Selling is not going to solve the problem," he said. "If they're selling for money, down the road it's going to exacerbate the problem."

He said the state will lose on both ends of the deal if it sells the Elliott, because eventually the money will run out and they won't have the forest as a revenue source. "The money will be gone and they won't retain the Elliott State Forest," Bowers said.

He said the best way forward is for the forest to pick a sustainable harvest level and prevent people from litigating once they fulfill the requirements set during the timber comments. That, or put it on a ballot and allow Oregonians to vote on this issue.

There is just one bid on the land, from the Roseburg-based Lone Rock Timber Management Co., which is partnering with several Oregon tribes. In a statement this past week, the company said it and its partners are "committed to sustainably managing the forest for its environmental, recreational and economic benefits."

Several conservation groups have written the state in opposition, arguing the bid process was set up to favor a sale to a timber company and preclude public ownership of the land.

Potential buyers were asked to provide four public benefits which include keeping 25 percent of the old-growth forest, allowing 120 feet for riparian area along fish-bearing streams,

keeping half the forest to be open to the public and creating 40 jobs.

The current land board is comprised of Gov. Kate Brown, State Treasurer Ted Wheeler and Secretary of State Jeanne Atkins. Brown was the only member seeking re-election, which means at least two of the members will be on their way out within a month of making the decision. This has caused some activists to ask the board to wait until a new cabinet settles in.

Public losing out

Metzler said he's mad at both groups involved in the conflict.

"They're at fault for some of this. I know what they're trying to do, but it shut them down and now they're going to sell it off."

He said no one knew that the lawsuits would result in the sale of the entire forest.

"It was them saying 'fine, we can't log it, we'll sell it,'" Metzler said.

He admits he doesn't know what other solutions the state has. "I'm just a retired rescue swimmer from the Coast Guard who likes to hunt and fish and bird watch." Things he doesn't want to lose access to if the land is privatized.

Despite mounting pressure on the state not to sell, Metzler said it's going to come down to money.

"The state is going broke.

They have a lot of trouble with their retirement for state employees that is in the red big-time, and on top of that you've got the Elliott State Forest is making them go into the red even more. You've got the entire state of Oregon saying we don't want sales tax or any new taxes and we've got all these things that need to be supported," Metzler said. "Something's got to break somewhere. I would rather see cuts elsewhere rather than the loss of my public lands."

The Escape stops at an area called the Silver Grove, a stand of trees well over 200 years old. Douglas Firs and Western Hemlock tower overhead, creating an ideal environment for bright green moss and the couple's favorite mushrooms.

Metzler squats down to pick up a chanterelle. His Xtra Tuff boots sink into the damp forest floor.

"Thirty years ago I never thought I'd have to defend my public lands," he said. "In 30 years, what's it going to be like?"

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