

How the state almost clearcut a scenic river

Timber sale canceled near Nehalem River

By **ROB DAVIS**
The Oregonian

Protections were coming to the Nehalem River.

In late February, the state parks commission agreed the river that ambles through the heavily logged Coast Range should be designated as a scenic waterway. State water officials concurred.

Environmental groups had been pushing the cause for years. Calling the Nehalem scenic would require landowners and loggers to consult with parks officials on ways to reduce visual impacts of future clearcuts or other projects along the river.

All the designation needed was Gov. Kate Brown's signature. The only time Brown designated scenic rivers, just four months lapsed between the formal recommendation and the governor's order.

Yet when the Nehalem landed on the governor's desk earlier this year, advocates with the environmental group Oregon Wild said the governor's staff told them it wouldn't be signed until after the Legislature adjourned, delaying its implementation until 2020.

Things were "very delicate" in the state Senate, Oregon Wild conservation director Steve Pedery said his group was told.

Translation: Brown needed state Sen. Betsy Johnson's support on more important things. And the Nehalem is in the Scappoose Democrat's district. Although Johnson wouldn't respond when asked her position on the scenic designation, she routinely sides with timber interests on legislative matters. She's taken more than \$100,000 in cam-



Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

The state backed away from a clearcut near the Nehalem River.

paign money from timber.

The delay meant the Oregon Department of Forestry had more time to work on clearcutting a section of the Nehalem that parks staff cited as particularly scenic. Discussions about selling the state-owned timber began a year before the state started trying to protect the Nehalem.

While the scenic designation sat unsigned by the governor, the Department of Forestry pushed forward to cut 70 acres of hemlock, alder and fir, some as old as 80 years.

The state agency's planned clearcut sat entirely in what would become the scenic corridor.

Legal definition

One sunny day in May 2017, staff from the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department donned life jackets, piled into rafts and slid into the Nehalem's inviting waters.

The undammed river starts in the highlands of the Tillamook State Forest, coiling back on itself like an uroboros as it zags almost 119 miles through the Coast Range, ending where Nehalem Bay empties into the Pacific.

The bureaucrats' mission: Decide whether the views along a 17.5-mile stretch of river met the state's legal definition of scenic.

Was the scene pleasing,

"as viewed from the river and related adjacent land"?

If it was, the Nehalem could be designated as the latest scenic waterway, a program created by a large majority of Oregon voters in 1970. A scenic designation requires landowners to notify state parks staff about development plans within a quarter-mile of the river and try to find ways to avoid things that look bad. If they disagree, a landowner just needs to wait a year before doing what they want anyway.

It's not the strictest requirement. But most of the time, state officials say, it works.

Though rivers can be

continually added, the effort has languished since its creation. Before Brown recognized scenic stretches of the Molalla and Chetco rivers in 2016, none had been named since 1988, when voters added to the list of rivers originally designated in 1970. On their 2017 float trip, the state employees undertook a rudimentary analysis: They looked at the scenery, river mile by river mile.

The views they found were undeniably pleasing. Along the Nehalem, mossy alders sigh over glassy pools. Kingfishers rattle as they alight. Endless flows whisper their never-ending story, an emerald susurrus of

water over boulders.

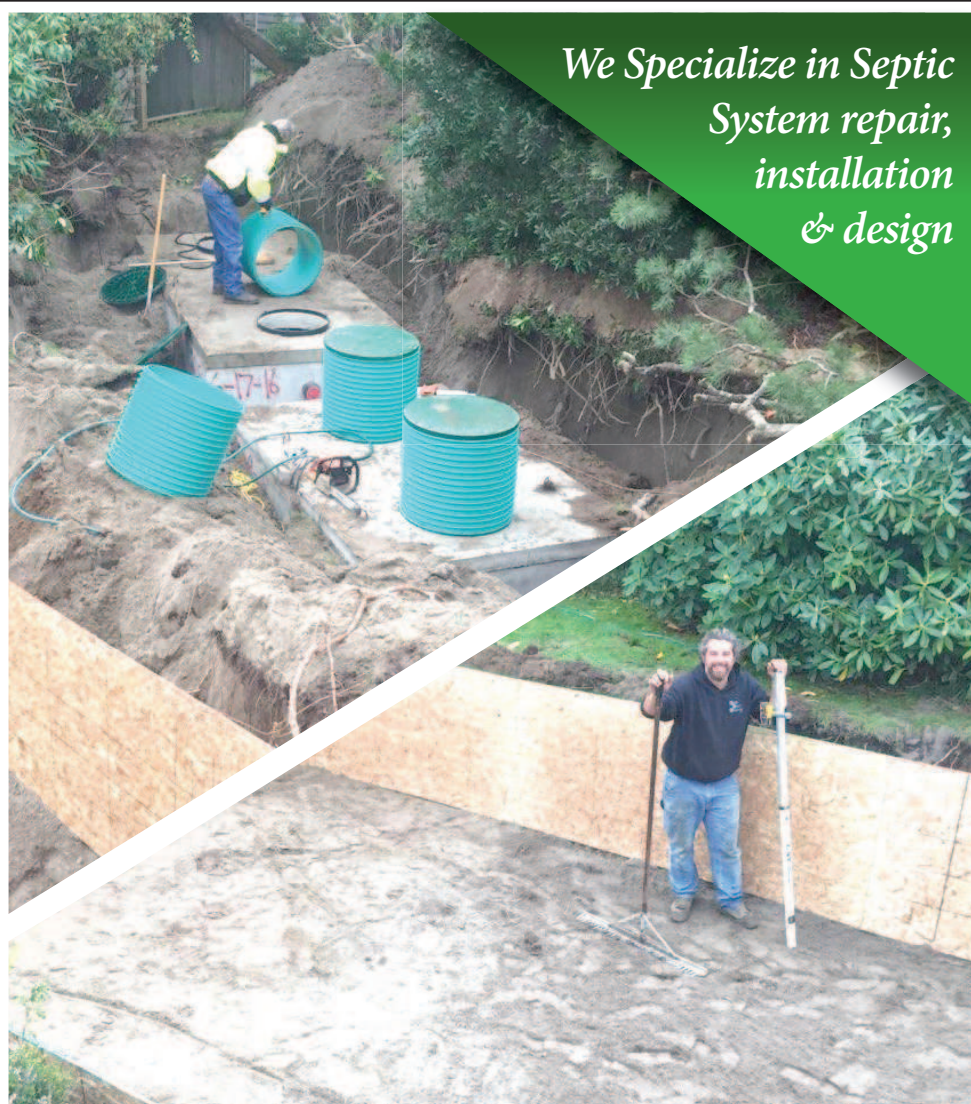
Their launch spot met the legal definition. "Generally pleasing," they noted in a report.

On they floated, past a state campground called Beaver Eddy. It met the legal test, too: "A pleasing river view with steep forested slopes."

Downstream, they passed another campground called Morrison Eddy. The view? "Of very high scenic quality."

And in an area heavily logged for generations, where all the old growth vanished by the end of World War II, the

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