

# Lawmakers cut timber industry tax

By **TONY SCHICK**  
and **ROB DAVIS**

Oregon Public Broadcasting  
and The Oregonian

Oregon lawmakers pledged to increase taxes on the timber industry and rein in its influence during this year's legislative session. Instead, they handed the companies an unexpected gift — another tax break.

As the session wrapped last week, lawmakers gutted the remaining \$15 million annual harvest tax paid by timber companies for cutting down trees. The move eliminated about \$9 million in annual revenue that helps fund Oregon State University's forestry research and the Department of Forestry's enforcement of state logging laws. Money for the programs will temporarily come from the state's general fund, forcing the costs onto taxpayers.

The tax cut came in the final days of the session after the state Senate failed to pass a separate measure, approved by the House of Representatives, that aimed to overhaul the Oregon Forest Resources Institute. Lawmakers left in place nearly \$4 million in annual harvest taxes for the institute's budget, along with \$2 million to fight wildfires. The institute had sought to discredit scientists and acted as a de facto lobbying and public relations arm for the industry, an August investigation by The Oregonian, Oregon Public Broadcasting and ProPublica revealed.

While the funding for the institute and for fighting wildfires is permanent, the portions of the harvest tax that fund Oregon State and the forestry department must receive three-fifths approval from lawmakers every two years to remain in place. This year, a dispute between the House and the Senate over the tax left lawmakers closing the session without agreeing to a renewal.

The result: Timber companies, including the real estate trusts and Wall Street investors who have become the



Smoke rises from clearcut land and mixes with fog at an industrial forest in Oregon's Coast Range.

Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

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Tom DeLuca | dean of the Oregon State University College of Forestry

largest owners of Oregon's private forests, saw their tax burden lowered once again, marking a win for an industry that maintains outsized influence in state politics.

Despite shrinking its contribution to the state's economy, the timber industry has donated more to Oregon legislators in the past decade than to lawmakers anywhere else in the nation.

Tom DeLuca, dean of the Oregon State College of Forestry, said he was "hugely disappointed" by the tax cut. He also said he was heartened to hear that lawmakers will tap the state's general fund this year, but he worries what will happen if they fail to permanently restore the tax.

"It would be a major hit," DeLuca said. "It's hard to say how we would manage a hit

like that. It does leave me with quite a bit of concern about how much stability there is there."

An investigation last year by the news organizations revealed that schools and counties lost an estimated \$3 billion over three decades as lawmakers repeatedly cut the state's severance tax, which assessed a fee on the value of the trees logged by private timber owners.

While the severance tax was eliminated for all but small landowners in 1999, timber companies continued to pay a harvest tax on the volume of trees they logged. That tax provides about \$3.2 million annually to Oregon State's forestry school, roughly 15% of its budget for research and a broad swath of projects.

During the session, House Democrats attempted to make the harvest tax permanent after several said they'd grown tired of how lobbyists and other lawmakers use it as leverage each session to bargain for other measures.

Three weeks ago, the House also passed a bill to cut the institute's budget by two-thirds, redirect the money to climate research and increase oversight of the institute. The bill included a requirement that the institute end its public advertising campaign.

The Senate killed the institute measure and voted to keep the harvest tax on a schedule to expire every two years. But the tax died when the chambers failed to resolve the dispute before the legislative session ended.

Charles Boyle, a spokesperson for Gov. Kate Brown, said Brown hopes ongoing negotiations between environmental groups and timber companies over the future of Oregon's logging laws will "help build the trust needed for us to reach a negotiated reform package for the harvest tax in the coming months."

Boyle said the governor is awaiting the results of an ongoing secretary of state

audit of the institute, which she requested in response to the news investigation. Findings from the audit are expected in July.

The state's largest timber lobbying group, the Oregon

Forest & Industries Council, opposed eliminating the institute but was open to a compromise that included maintaining the harvest tax, said Sara Duncan, a spokesperson for the group.

"In the middle of intense negotiations to find a compromise on OFRI, the biennial harvest tax bill was hijacked in a power play meant to end any successful resolution," Duncan said. She added that the group looks forward to "more thoughtful and less politically motivated work in the coming months."

Sean Stevens, executive director of Oregon Wild, an environmental group, accused Senate President Peter Courtney, a Democrat who represents Salem, of sinking the institute bill to appease Republican senators as the end of session drew near.

"There weren't the votes," Courtney said in a four-word statement responding to questions about whether he supported the the institute bill or endorsed the institute's lobbying efforts.

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## Heat sets up 'grim' migration for salmon

By **LYNDA V. MAPES**  
Seattle Times

This is shaping up to be a dire summer for fish and trees.

Temperatures in the Columbia and Snake rivers are already within 2 degrees of the slaughter zone of 2015, when half the sockeye salmon run was lost because of high water temperatures. An estimated 250,000 sockeye died that year long before reaching their spawning grounds.

The sockeye run is at its peak right now just as temperatures hit record highs across Washington state and in Idaho. Spring and summer Chinook and steelhead migrating in the rivers also are at risk.

Salmon are cold-water animals. Temperatures above 62 degrees make them more vulnerable to disease, and as temperatures climb higher, they will stop migrating altogether.

The risk of heat stress is present in the mainstem rivers, but also in fish ladders, where salmon will turn around and head back down river if the temperature is higher at the top of the ladder than where they entered it. Cooling water released at the top of the ladders can only do so much as air temperatures reach unprecedented highs.

Water temperatures are already at dangerous levels despite an earlier start to cold-water releases from deep in the Dworshak Dam, on the Clearwater River, upstream of Lower Granite Dam on the Lower Snake River. Nonetheless, temperatures in the tailrace at Lower Granite are still edging above safe levels for salmon and are even hotter downriver.

"We are crossing the line to temperatures that can be disastrous for fish," said



Steve Ringman/Seattle Times

**Fish managers fear a sockeye slaughter similar to losses of 2015 is in the making in the heat and drought of this summer.**

Michele DeHart, manager of the Fish Passage Center, which monitors and studies fish migration in the Columbia and Snake rivers. "I would say the outlook is pretty grim."

Claire McGrath, fisheries biologist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration based in Portland, said managers are throwing everything they've got at the problem — and even mustering trucks to take sockeye out of the Lower Snake River — if they make it to Lower Granite. Instead of migrating naturally in the river, the fish would take the highway to an inland hatchery for spawning.

"Idaho is preparing to move fish, if they have to," she said, adding that very low flows in the Snake River, at 60% of average, are compounding the temperature problem.

Trucking fish obviously is not preferred to natural, in-river migration, McGrath said. "But not at the risk of losing most of the run."

After the last sockeye meltdown in 2015, the Fish

to the state Department of Ecology.

Then June — long called "Juneuary" by locals West of the Cascades for its relentless cool, wet gloom — instead came on hot and dry and now is punishing trees with baking heat.

Hot dry weather pulls water out of trees, and with inadequate moisture in the soil, the interior plumbing of trees ruptures, or cavitates, noted Tom Hinkley, former director for the University of Washington's Botanic Gardens' Center for Urban Horticulture and emeritus professor at the university's School of Environmental and Forest Sciences.

Stressed trees are more vulnerable to bugs and pathogens. Of course the worst tree killer is fire — and conditions this year are set for fire, with dried out vegetation and soils.

Even if trees die back but survive this year, they will be stunted in next year's growth. That is because this is the time when trees need to be growing their strongest, and socking away food stores for next year's spring growth spurt. But they have little moisture with which to power photosynthesis, by which they make food and grow new tissue.

The suffering of trees this spring and summer will be recorded. Not only on a landscape that will see more dead trees and trees dying back, usually from the top down. But in rings that in the future will show a harsh season with little growth, as the tree hunkers down, just trying to survive.




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