

BLM plans to boost timber harvest in western Oregon

PORTLAND (AP)—The U.S. Bureau of Land Management released its long-awaited plan for managing roughly 2.5 million acres of federal forestland in western Oregon, and counties that rely on timber for revenue quickly threatened legal action.

The agency has spent years working to update the Northwest Forest Plan, trying to strike a balance between the interests of the timber industry and environmentalists. The original plan developed in the

mid-1990s failed to deliver promised yields of timber, in part because of federal laws to protect species like salmon and the northern spotted owl.

The proposal released Tuesday and still months from being formally adopted calls for three-quarters of the land to be locked up in reserves for fish, water and wildlife. The agency estimates the plan will provide 278 million board feet of timber per year, an increase of 75 million from what's currently offered.

Despite the boost, 17 counties that get a chunk of revenue from timber sales contend it's not enough and announced plans to sue. "Their plan's illegal as far as we're concerned and the counties have no alternative but to challenge it in court," said Tony Hyde, a Columbia County commissioner and president of the Association of O&C Counties.

Bureau of Land Management project manager Mark Brown said the agency is

aware of the economic situation faced by counties and the plan strives to produce the maximum amount of timber in a sustained manner.

"BLM believes in order to provide a sustained yield of timber we must take care of our other legal responsibilities, such as the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act," he said. "If we fail to do so, we will find ourselves embroiled in litigation across the landscape."

The lands known as

"O&C" are a patchwork of one-mile squares once decided by the federal government to the Oregon & California Railroad. The lands went back to the government after the railroad failed and are now managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

During the heyday of the logging industry, some county governments got so much money from O&C payments that they didn't charge property taxes. Now, many are struggling.

Some conservation groups, meanwhile, also found fault with the plan. John Kober, executive director of Pacific Rivers, said the federal agency made improvements to protect clean water and native fish but still places "too much value" in subsidizing county governments.

"Unfortunately, due to rapacious logging of private and state lands, all of the burden for conservation is placed on federal lands," he said.



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