Read signals intent to pursue public ownership for Elliott Forest

By CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE
Capital Bureau

Courtesy Oregon Department of Forestry

Oregon Treasurer Tobias Read said Tuesday that he sees a "path forward" for public ownership of about 82,500 acres of the Elliott Forest in Coos and Douglas counties.

SALEM — After a sustained outcry from environmental groups, Oregon Treasurer Tobias Read appeared to signal his intent Tuesday to side with the governor in her evolving plan to stop the impending sale of an expanse of coastal forest in southern Oregon.

Read said Tuesday that he sees a "path forward" for public ownership of about 82,500 acres of the Elliott Forest in Coos and Douglas counties.

Last month, though, the treasurer voiced qualified support for a proposal to sell the forest to a partnership between a Roseburg timber company and a Native American tribe.

Read announced Tuesday that he would work with the Department of State Lands to develop a plan for the forest that would end its obligation to generate revenue for the Common School Fund, which is essentially an endowment for K-12 education.

In 2015, the State Land Board — then comprised of Gov. Kate Brown, then-Treasurer Ted Wheeler and then-Secretary of State Jeanne Atkins — decided to sell the land after litigation challenged the state's management of areas occupied by protected species. The state said lawsuits prevented it from harvesting enough timber to generate money for the fund.

But a year later, only one entity — the partnership between Lone Rock Resources, a Roseburg timber company, and the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians — had submitted an acquisition proposal, which drew fire from the state's environmental groups.

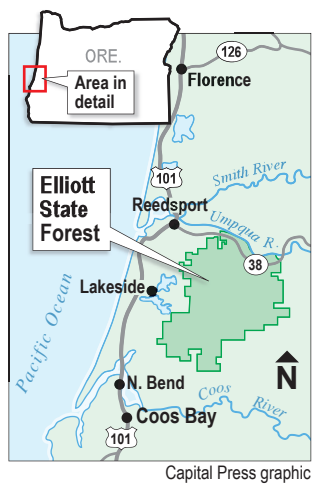
And Brown has said she no longer wants to sell the forest.

Environmental activists have been lobbying the board for months, and of late have focused on Read.

They warn that the sale of the Elliott to a private company would realize fears that under the administration of President Donald J. Trump, states will follow the president's lead and privatize public land.

In a statement Tuesday, Brown alluded to those concerns, saying public ownership was "critical" to sustainable timber harvests and protecting the environment for future generations.

"I remain committed to exploring a path toward public ownership of the Elliott that continues to honor the Common School Fund," Brown said. "I am heartened that Treasurer Read shares this vision and I appreciate his unwavering commitment to the state's fiduciary responsibility to Oregon schools."



Capital Press graphic

Brown has proposed using the state's bonding capacity to buy a portion of the forest. Read said Tuesday that the governor had worked to drum up support for that strategy.

"I have made it clear to all sides that if Gov. Brown brought forward a viable alternative I would consider it," Read said. "The governor and her team have continued to refine her framework, and most importantly she has worked to build support for key bonding components among legislators, including the Senate president."

Oregon Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, has suggested using revenue bonds payable from revenues generated by the forest — whether through timber harvests or other activities.

The lone Republican on the land board, Secretary of State Dennis Richardson, voted in favor of moving forward with the sale in February. His office did not immediately respond Tuesday to a request for comment on Treasurer Read's announcement.

On Sunday, the Democratic Party of Oregon passed a resolution that urged the state Land Board to work with the governor on the public ownership option.

The move puts newly elected party chair Jeanne Atkins in the position of advocating against a concept she signed off on when she was secretary of state and member of the land board in 2015. Read, who was elected treasurer in November, is a Democrat, as is Brown.

The land board meets again May 9 in Salem, Until then the Department of State Lands is both preparing a sale agreement and a report on public ownership options.

CRASH: Factors leading to crash under investigation

Continued from 1A

ODOT advised travelers to use alternative routes.

Lt. Mike Turner with OSP said they are still working to identify the victim. A preliminary investigation shows the driver was heading northbound when she went into the southbound lane and sideswiped one of the trucks, striking its rear axle. She then hit the second truck which caused her vehicle to roll.

Turner said factors such as speed and alcohol are under investigation.

James Wonser, 39, of McMinnville, was among the first witnesses to arrive shortly after the wreck happened. Wonser said he was on his way to Milton-Freewater when he discovered the scene, though he did not see what had happened beforehand.

Wonser, who is trained in CPR and first aid, said he jumped out of his van to see if there was anything he could do. That's when he saw the body and called 9-1-1.

"I thought I would come and see if anybody needed help. I guess it was too late," he said.

Contact George Plaven at gplaven@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0825.

Staff photo by George Plaven

One woman died Tuesday afternoon in a wreck on Highway 11 north of Pendleton.

WHALES: Research part of current exhibit at Smithsonian

Continued from 1A

hormone, can reveal if a whale was exposed to ship traffic, environmental noise, climate change and other stressors.

The team reconstructed the life of a beached blue whale that washed up in 2007 near Santa Barbara, California, after likely being struck by a ship. The researchers learned the 12-year-old whale got a load of contaminants transferred from his mother in his first year of life. The whale's stress hormones and testosterone levels spiked about age 10 when he probably became sexually active. Mercury levels spiked twice when the whale was about 5 and 10. DDT, banned now, was detected in the whale's earlier years. Just before he died, his cortisol increased 800 percent.

The study appeared in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences journal. The research is also part of a current exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.

Usenko, of course, didn't start out with the goal of studying whale earwax. He said he was just a kid who loved exploring the outdoors, often on his family's couple of acres on the outskirts of Pendleton. His scientific curiosity grew during the hours he spent in Jess Cooper's high school chemistry and physics classes. Usenko said his career sprang from "inspiration provided by Mr. Cooper combined with a love of the great outdoors."

He spent summer days working at the Oregon State University Columbia Basin Agricultural Research Center near Pendleton, driving a small combine to harvest wheat and mustard seed and soaking in research methodology.

Contributed by Sascha Usenko

Baylor professors Sascha Usenko (left) and Stephen Trumble stand with Smithsonian's Charles Potter in front of the Objects of Wonder exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.

"They taught me a lot about scientific thought and experimental design," Usenko said.

He parlayed undergraduate and doctorate chemistry degrees into post-doctorate work at Baylor, where he is now associate professor of environmental science and director of the Environmental Science Graduate Program.

Studying whale earwax doesn't take up all Usenko's time — far from it. He has other research, too, and a family. He lives with his wife, Crystal, and daughters Violet, 4, and Olivia, 1, in Marina, Texas.

Usenko said he looks forward to delving deeper into the lives of whales.

"Studying whales through their earwax is a unique opportunity to make a giant contribution to the field," he said. "It is also an amazing opportunity to encourage the next generation of scientists and explorers."

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ROADS: Public work's budget is about $10.5M for the fiscal year

Continued from 1A

"Winter was not just hard on the paved roads," Fellows said, "the gravel roads took a beating, too."

The county owns nine graders, and usually operates one for half a day or so around Milton-Freewater, two each day outside of Stanfield, and three daily around Hermiston.

Now, Fellows said, all nine are running.

Umatilla County Public Works Department has 36 employees, including a six-person crew dedicated to road work — grading, paving and patching. Getting the work done in the wake of this winter means shifting priorities.

"We're primarily in the maintenance work," Fellows said. "It puts you behind on your scheduled maintenance. You don't get to your scheduled work — you're taking time out of one pot and putting it in another pot."

Fellows said crews already repaired a lot of the paved roads around Pendleton that winter damaged, but some stretches throughout the county still "show a lot of distress." Southeast Fourth Street in Hermiston near the Safeway stands out, he said, as does the Old River Road between Umatilla and Hermiston. He said those roads show "raveling," the rough, textured look that means the aggregate and asphalt are breaking apart.

Getting to all this, he said, is "an interesting game of chess sometimes."

The public work's budget is about $10.5 million for the fiscal year, which included about a $4.2 million carryover, according to the county finance department. Fellows said overtime for the employees is most often compensation time. There is not an extra pot of money public works can dip into.

"We work off state highway funds," Fellows said, which includes more than $3.7 million in driver's license fees. "The county road department does not receive one bit of property tax money, we don't get anything from the county general fund."

The county public works receives its share of calls from folks asking when someone is going to grade their road. Fellows said he has been on the phone with residents just as the grader arrives.

Given what this winter created, and now spring rains and runoff, Fellows and company might just get a few more calls than usual.

Contact Phil Wright at pwright@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0833.

HART: Wal-Mart most popular destination out of 32 stops

Continued from 1A

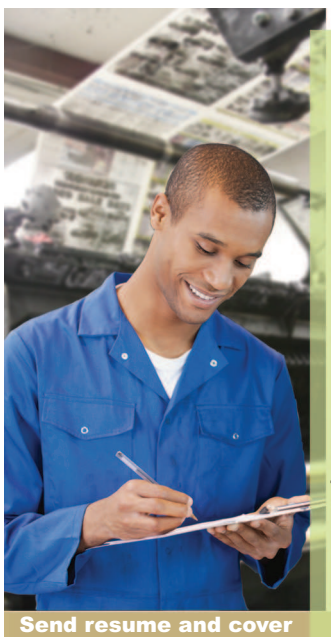
Morgan said the city is hoping to "relieve some pressure" on the taxi program through the bus system. So far, he said, it seems that some taxi ticket users are using the bus to get to appointments or the store, but then using a taxi to get home again after since the bus only comes by every hour and fifteen minutes.

So far the most popular destination out of 32 stops is Wal-Mart, followed by the stop on Columbia Drive near the Stafford Hansell Government Center and Blue Mountain Community College's Hermiston campus. In third place is the Hermiston Plaza.

The city budgeted conservatively for the bus system, and Morgan said in the first two months transportation expenses came in under projections. If that trend continues, the city could choose to keep the savings or use them to expand the hours or days that the bus runs. The transit advisory committee has also considered eliminating a few stops to allow time for more loops around the city each day. Before changes are made, however, Morgan said the committee and the tribes want to get a picture of ridership patterns during different seasons. They don't want to take on too much at once and have the project "flame out" if projections are wrong.

"The name of the game right now is that we need to just keep running the system to get more data," Morgan said.

Contact Jade McDowell at jmcdowell@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4536.



Press Position

Press person needed at East Oregonian newspaper. Our operation prints an array of weekly, bi-weekly and monthly publications. To join our team, you'll need web press operation skills, an eye for color, mechanical ability, be a good communicator and work well with others. Must be able to lift 50# and go up/down stairs on a regular basis.

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