EAST OREGONIAN OPINION

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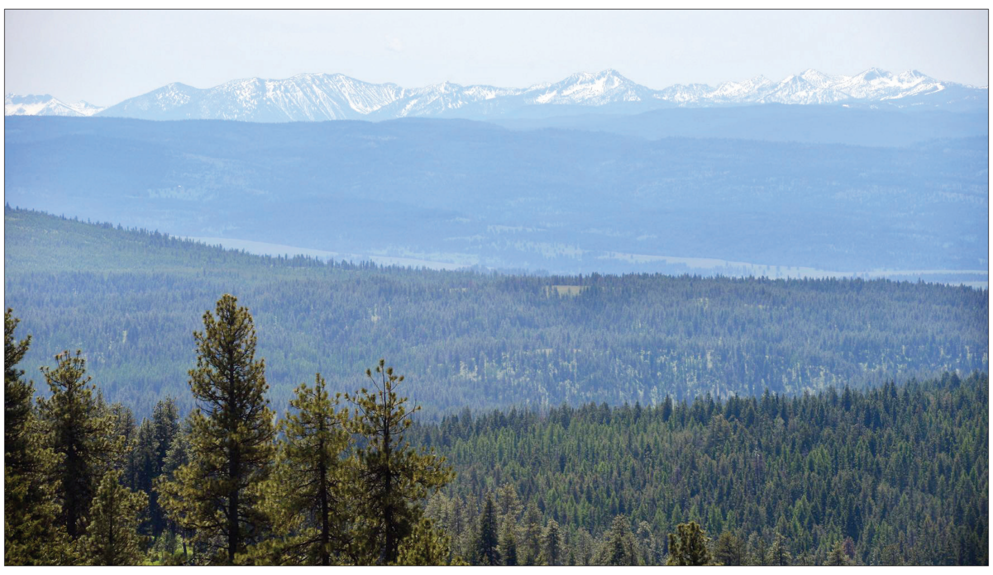
OUR VIEW

Forest plan and public opinions



EO file photo

The Blues Intergovernmental Council has been formed to help frame the process of developing a new methodology for forest planning for the Wallowa-Whitman, Malheur and Umatilla national forests. A series of meetings between county commissioners and key U.S. Forest Service personnel have been held across the Blue Mountain region over the last year to help kick-start a framework for cross-jurisdiction work.

The Forest Service is having another go at writing new long-term management plans for the three national forests in the Blue Mountains and this time, officials hope, things will be different.

Whether this new approach yields the success that has eluded the agency for more than a decade, however, is no certain thing.

The Forest Service has been working for about 15 years to write new management plans for the Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla and Malheur national forests. Those documents serve as guidelines for forest officials as they make separate decisions about specific projects, such as timber sales, livestock grazing and recreation projects.

Although management plans are supposed to be replaced every 10 to 15 years, the current plans for the three national forests in the Blue Mountains date to 1990.

The Forest Service unveiled new plans in June 2018. But after hearing complaints about the plans from a variety of perspectives — some opponents contend the Forest Service didn't propose enough logging, while others complained the agency wasn't doing enough to preserve forests, among other issues — the agency's regional forester, Glenn Casamassa, announced in March 2019 that the agency would restart the process.

The centerpiece of the Forest Service's new approach is the Blues Intergovernmental Council. During the past year, county commissioners from the region have been meeting with Forest Service officials to discuss ways to ensure that residents of the Blue Mountains will be involved in the planning process, and that their concerns will be considered as Forest Service employees write the management plans.

"The attempt here is to create just a more open, inclusive approach where the Forest Service is working closely with our communities in order to make sure that we are developing a plan that is gonna stand the test of time," said Eric Watrud, supervisor of the Umatilla National Forest.

That sounds reasonable.

But it's not as though the Forest Service's previous attempts to write new plans were not "open" and "inclusive," to borrow a pair of adjectives from Watrud.

Indeed, as federal law requires, the process gave residents several chances to express their opinions about draft versions of the plans either by attending public meetings or by submitting written comments.

And hundreds of people availed themselves of those opportunities.

Yet, even with copious quantities of public comments, the plans the Forest Service put out in 2018 generated so much dissatisfaction that Casamassa decided to withdraw them.

The widespread condemnation was hardly surprising.

After all, opinions about how the Forest Service should manage these 5 million or so acres of public land vary about as widely as opinions on any topic. The notion that any management plan could come close to simultaneously satisfying people who think the agency isn't cutting nearly enough trees, and people who think it's cutting way too many, is not so much naive as hopelessly optimistic.

The concept behind the Blues Intergovernmental Council is sound. Using elected county commissioners as a sort of liaison between the public and the Forest Service could give residents a stronger sense that their comments are not only considered, but incorporated into the final product.

But at some point Forest Service officials need to acknowledge that the management plans will inevitably prove unpopular, in some respects, to just about everyone. Such is the nature of managing land on behalf of the public.

OTHER VIEWS

Campaign finance reform should be 2020 focus

Medford Mail Tribune

Efforts to reduce the influence of money in Oregon politics face an uphill battle in next year's legislative session for the simple reason that lawmakers will need to vote for rules that limit how much money they can collect when they run for reelection.

Ashland Sen. Jeff Golden is heading a committee working on drafting contribution limits that would take effect if voters agree next November to amend the Oregon Constitution to allow that. Already, legislative leaders from both major parties are expressing reservations.

Oregon is one of only five states that imposes no limits whatsoever on political campaign contributions, because the state Supreme Court has ruled that limits infringe on citizens' free expression.

Golden is a longtime supporter of campaign finance reform.

"There is at minimum the perception of undue influence of money in politics," he said.

We would put it more strongly. This is a matter of more than just perception.

For an example, look to Oregon's failure to enact meaningful safety regulations on rail shipments of crude oil through the state, even after an oil train derailed and exploded in the Columbia Gorge in 2016.

Oregon has the weakest rules governing oil train shipments on the West Coast. Two bills that would have matched laws on the books in Washington died without a hearing this year.

Why? Just maybe because railroad company campaign contributions average $3,542 per Oregon legislator — the sixth highest amount of any state in the country.

Overall, corporate interests gave more per capita to winning legislative candidates in Oregon over a decade than in any other state, documented in a series of reports in The Oregonian earlier this year.

Lawmakers placed a constitutional amendment on the November 2020 ballot to allow limits on campaign contributions, but failed to pass actual limits during the 2019 session. Golden's committee is tasked with drawing up legislation that can win support in the short 2020 session after a bill failed to win passage this year. Some critics of that measure said it didn't go far enough; one Republican lawmaker said it went too far.

Similar objections have surfaced to a plan suggested by Golden's committee. Senate Majority Leader Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, said the proposal's limits on individual contributions were too low to allow candidates to counter third-party expenditures or contributions from advocacy groups. Republican Sen. Fred Girod of Stayton said the proposal's limit of $15,000 from state party committees and others would favor Democrats, who are generally supported by public employee and teachers unions, and called for lower limits for committees.

That's the downside of expecting elected officials to change the system that got them elected. But it can be done, if legislators make it a priority. It will help if voters put pressure on their lawmakers to rein in the spending spree that now dominates state politics.

Trump should veto greedy Green Act

PHIL KERPEN
COMMENT

In a mad dash to expand all their favorite "green" cash grabs before the end of the year, House Democrats have published their most bloated smash and grab yet.

They call it the Green Act, but a better name might be the Greed Act. The bill extends wind and solar subsidies — which we've been promised for decades would be temporary — for yet another five years. In an effort to gain support from farm states, it revives the biodiesel credit.

Most outrageously, the Green Act cancels the phase-out of the electric vehicle subsidies by tripling the per-manufacturer cap. It also ignores rampant fraud and creates a new subsidy for used electric vehicles, despite the fact the original rationale — dependence on foreign oil — is now completely obsolete.

Because no green cash grab would be compete without lavishing taxpayer dollars on the campus left, the bill includes an eye-popping $5 billion in grants for university "environmental justice" programs. Shameless.

With Nancy Pelosi firmly in control, the Green Act could well pass the House, either by itself or more likely as part of a larger year-end package. So the real fight looks likely to be in the Senate, where Minority Leader Chuck Schumer can be expected to go to the mat for the electric vehicles subsidies, if not the whole package. In fact, he recently proposed an electric-vehicles-subsidies-meets-cash-for-clunkers on steroids concept that would pay to scrap every internal combustion vehicle in the country in the most brazen display of wealth destruction via central planning ever attempted outside of the Communist Bloc. So he can be expected, at a minimum, to push hard for the House language on electric vehicles.

That language would triple the cap on subsidies of 200,000 per manufacturer — which has already been reached by Tesla and GM, who of course have unleashed armies of lobbyists to keep the taxpayer largesse flowing. A token cut in the credit amount from $7,500 to $7,000 would be meaningless, thanks to a new credit of up to $2,500 for used electric vehicles.

This program is an almost pure tax break for the rich, and those rich are well represented by their Democratic representatives and senators. Especially from California, which gets nearly half of all the subsidies dollars, and New York, which ranks second.

The Pacific Research Institute looked at IRS data and found that more than half of the electric car buyers claiming the credit make more than $200,000 per year and nearly 80% make more than $100,000. Just 1% make $50,000 or less.

Worse, a significant number of the predominantly wealthy people claiming the credit are doing so fraudulently. The Treasury Inspector General found in a new report that 16,510 tax returns claiming "potentially erroneous" electric vehicle tax credits, totaling $73.8 million. The IRS doesn't check VINs, and it looks like credits have been allowed for ineligible vehicles. It also appears there is a particular problem with leased vehicles, in which the leasing company claims the credit and builds it into the lease payment, but then the lessee claims the credit a second time, effectively doubling the subsidy.

The simplest way to end the fraud would be to let the program phase out as scheduled. But Congress looks at rampant fraud and instead wants to expand the program. Unreal.

Nothing in the Green Act deserves to see the light of day in the Senate, especially the expansion of electric vehicle tax breaks. But if it does, President Trump should make clear that he'll have his veto pen ready.

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