

Old trees, new plan

The fight over old growth may resume with the latest BLM logging proposal

By Susan Palmer

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COTTAGE GROVE — They come upon the big trees partway up a ridge west of Susan Gabriel's land just outside Cottage Grove. Gabriel lives in a modest house on 20 acres in a narrow trough among the hills that rise up to the Coast Range, a place famous for growing some of the world's tallest trees.

Gabriel and her friends, out for a walk on a late summer day, enjoy the quiet of these woods. The mix of Douglas fir and incense cedar grows so tall the trees' crowns disappear in the layered canopy above. Gabriel, an artist whose whimsical metal sculptures surround her home, loves this trail and walks it frequently.

"For me, it's like my spiritual life, and I feel really connected to creation, to the center of all things," she said.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management oversees this woodland, part of its 2.2-million-acre checkerboard of public forests in Western Oregon.

Gabriel is one of a loose affiliation of neighbors who have taken an interest in Oregon's trees in recent years. Just now, their major concern is the BLM's drive to increase logging on its lands.

Once again, the big trees of Western Oregon are at the center of a battle. The basic question is simple: Should the old, federally owned trees be left standing, or should a sizable number be logged?

Many people thought the fight over old growth was settled in 1994 when the federal government adopted the Northwest Forest Plan, which drastically curtailed logging and set aside reserves for northern spotted owls and other species at risk of extinction.

But the timber industry and the Bush administration are in the midst of a major push against those restrictions.

The new logging war still rouses the passions of the old one, which dominated headlines from the late 1980s through 1994.

It's the same fight with some challenging new dynamics.

To understand it requires some background in the complex relationships among federal agencies and the many laws that govern how they manage public lands.

The BLM is redrawing its Western Oregon forestry blueprint. When it completes this in December 2008 — and if its plan withstands legal challenge — the BLM could almost triple its logging.

The BLM is crafting this higher-output strategy in response to a timber-industry lawsuit — settled by the Bush administration — requiring the agency to return to the sustained-yield logging described in a 1937 federal law.

Under the BLM's proposal, logging would be based in part on a new recovery plan for the northern spotted owl that's being written by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Both the BLM plan and the owl recovery plan are under heavy fire from environmental advocates. Many scientists allege the owl plan is flawed. Democratic officials argue that the White House is meddling in the science. And the federal Environmental Protection Agency says the heavier logging that is likely under the new owl plan would harm Oregon watersheds.

The proposed owl recovery plan matters because Fish & Wildlife — the watchdog agency for the Endangered Species Act — uses it to determine whether logging on public lands is harming the bird, which is listed as threatened.

The timber industry applauds the prospect of an increased Oregon harvest. Many cash-strapped rural counties look to get a share of federal logging sales to help solve severe budget problems that have reduced law enforcement, shut libraries and limited public health services.

But environmentalists see the BLM and Fish & Wildlife plans as a double threat that will gut the Northwest Forest Plan. Designed in the early '90s by veteran foresters looking for a balance between protecting species and a predictable timber harvest, the Northwest Forest Plan authors warned that it was not a quick fix.

“It’s only been 13 years,” said Dominick DellaSala, executive director of the Center for Conservation Science and Policy. “The Northwest Forest Plan was a 50- to 100-year strategy. There’s no way we can judge it at this point.”

Advocates of the Northwest Forest Plan say the logging restrictions have given federal forests in Western Oregon a brief respite from the decades-long hammering they suffered under gung-ho logging.

But whether they’ll be able to halt the logging drive is unclear.

Thirteen years after federal experts signed off on the Northwest Forest Plan, the basic problem remains: Can Western Oregon’s federal lands do all that’s demanded of them? That would mean yielding an unending flow of logs and cash while providing clean water and preserving the species that rely on old growth forests.

Promises unfulfilled?

In its 1980s heyday, Starfire Lumber in Cottage Grove employed 150 people working three shifts. The mill specializes in big, tight-grained beams of Douglas fir, the kind that appeal to architects creating elegant ski lodges and rustic hotels. These days, Starfire employs 75 people and runs a single shift.

Big logs, many well over four feet in diameter, are stacked in the yard waiting to be milled. Within the mill building, the sawyer’s 7-foot, double-cut band-saw slices through the logs like a knife through butter. The finished product: magnificent beams, some well over a foot thick and more than 24 feet long.

“There is a tremendous demand for this type of product, and you’re not going to get it out of second growth thinning,” said Starfire manager Robbie Robinson.

Since the Northwest Forest Plan took effect, Starfire has had to go farther afield to get the big trees. While other mills retooled to handle smaller logs from private forests and thinning on public lands, Starfire and a handful of other local mills have kept their big-tree niche.

To do so, the company trucks in more than 60 percent of its logs from Canada, Washington and California.

In rainy, temperate Western Oregon, where trees grow with astonishing speed, Robinson finds it incredible that he has to go out of state for wood.

More than two decades ago, the Forest Service and BLM offered close to 5 billion board feet a year in timber sales.

Biologists argued that level of logging was contributing to the demise of northern spotted owls and the marbled murrelets, birds whose populations were plummeting. Environmentalists won court injunctions in 1990 that virtually shut down logging on public lands.

The Northwest Forest Plan, adopted by the Clinton administration in 1994, laid out a supposed fix for the forests in California, Washington and Oregon. It estimated an annual harvest of 1.1 billion board feet a year, but never quite delivered. Thus far, the top year has yielded 885 million board feet harvested. The worst year was 148 million board feet.

“There was a promise made and it was not fulfilled,” Robinson said.

In fact, the Northwest Forest Plan was full of promises. It would preserve the oldest trees; it would lead to recovery of owls and marbled murrelets; it would improve conditions for fish and other aquatic species in watersheds degraded by clear-cutting and road-building; and it would survey wildlife before logging to minimize potential risks to hundreds of other species.

On the flip side, it predicted a sustainable level of timber. It promised jobs for loggers and mill workers. It promised to allow community input on its management decisions. And it promised to end the logjam of lawsuits that had shut down federal timber sales in the early 1990s.

Industry critics say it promised too much and hasn't delivered. Environmental advocates say it needs more time and fine-tuning.

Owls still declining

The northern spotted owl lives in the messiest part of the forest. There, massive trees more than 200 years old thrive next to silvery dead snags and trees just coming into maturity at 80 years. In places where winds have downed big trees and opened up a stream of sunshine in the canopy, young trees spring up and strive toward the light.

The forest floor is a jumble of downed logs, ferns, moss, lichen and a bewildering array of tiny creatures that thrive in the damp duff of dead needles and decaying logs.

Call it old growth, call it late successional, call it structurally complex, it's the place where the owl is at the top of the food chain living in the most valuable real estate in the woods.

The Northwest Forest Plan governs 24.5 million acres of federal forests. It restricted logging to just 5.6 million acres. The national parks, monuments, and wilderness — 8.7 million acres — were already off-limits to logging. And the plan reserved another 10 million acres as either late successional areas for owls, riparian buffers along streams and wetlands, or simply to preserve the look of the forest in recreation and backcountry areas.

Despite the creation of those reserves, owl numbers have not improved. The most recent population studies show a 3.7 percent annual decline from 1994 to 2003 across the owl's range.

That's no surprise to Andy Stahl, executive director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics. The plan predicted the owl wouldn't immediately react to the logging cutbacks. That's because not all the areas designated as reserves were actually stands of old growth, Stahl said.

The expectation was that eventually the younger stands would become habitat for the owls. “They said, ‘Here's the plan, the owl continues to take it in the shorts for 50 years. The critter may go extinct, but we're hopeful it won't.’ □”

The marbled murrelet, a threatened species also protected under plan guidelines, has seen a steady decline in habitat, although its population has remained stable.

The plan has had notable successes — watershed improvements on 57 percent of the riparian areas, and greater than expected increases in the acreage of late-successional stands.

A comprehensive review of its impacts, written by the same foresters who helped design the plan, concluded that it was better at stopping logging than at implementing the economic and social policies it had outlined.

Perhaps it's no surprise the lawsuits have continued.

Mired in the courts

From the moment the Northwest Forest Plan was implemented, somebody has been suing the government over it.

Environmentalists and the timber industry immediately challenged its authority, but in almost all cases, judges backed it as a legal instrument for meeting federal environmental standards. The Forest Service and the BLM have tried to ramp up logging to meet the plan's harvest projections, but environmentalists have succeeded in stopping or scaling back many timber sales by showing that the agencies were failing to follow the plan's environmental rules.

The timber industry, meanwhile, took issue with key plan protections such as the aquatic conservation strategy that safeguards watersheds and fish, and the survey and manage provision that requires foresters to look first for species that might be harmed before an area is logged. These suits began to make headway after 2001. Under the Bush administration, the environmental provisions were weakened or eliminated.

Wrangling from both sides prompted reviews of the status of the marbled murrelet and northern spotted owl.

Perhaps the most significant action: The Bush administration quickly settled a suit over BLM lands by requiring the agency to return to its timber production roots. That decision, the BLM says, releases it from Northwest Forest Plan oversight.

The BLM will take public comments on its new management plan through Dec. 10, then spend the next year finalizing the plan.

Environmentalists refer to it as a sweetheart settlement with an administration eager to meet industry needs.

But Chris West scoffs at that. West is spokesman for the American Forest Resource Council, an industry group at the forefront of the fight to increase logging. The timber industry views the Northwest Forest Plan in the same light. President Clinton worked hand-in-glove with environmentalists more than a decade ago to shut down logging, West said. "They wrote the book on sweetheart deals."

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