

Timber Trade-Offs. Plans to increase harvest has ramifications

Idaho Land Board's plan to increase harvest has ramifications for old-growth forests, endangered animals — and Idaho schoolchildren

The state forests that help pay for Idaho's schools have avoided the timber wars that sharply reduced harvests across the West during the last decade.

Now an Idaho Department of Lands proposal to increase the harvest of some of its biggest, oldest trees has sparked a debate about old-growth forests, endangered species and sustainability. It comes as the State Endowment Fund struggles to make up for \$200 million of losses in the stock market and as the woodland caribou herd that lives in the state forest teeters on the brink of extinction.

The controversy comes after most of the state's timber mills have retooled for smaller diameter logs, making them unable to process the larger logs the state proposes to cut. It trails the decline of logging on national forests because of concerns over water quality, endangered species and old-growth timber. And it follows on the footsteps of Boise Cascade Corp.'s decision to get out of the old-growth timber business.

"This is outrageous," said Rick Johnson, executive director of the Idaho Conservation League. "The state of Idaho is managing its land as though it is a generation ago."

Not so, says Winston Wiggins, Idaho Department of Lands director and the man who is spearheading the proposal.

"This is not a target-old-growth program," Wiggins said. "This is the state's healthy forest initiative," a reference to President Bush's plan to thin overgrown national forests.

In September, the State Land Board unanimously approved the department's accelerated harvest, increasing the annual cut from 183 million board feet to 213 million board feet by 2007. It takes about 15,000 board feet to build a house.

The Department of Lands needs the approval of the Idaho Legislature and Gov. Dirk Kempthorne for the plan. If the Legislature approves this session, then timber could go up for sale in 2006. Kempthorne chairs the Land Board but abstained when it voted to approve the proposal. However, the governor's press secretary, Mike Journee, said the governor supports it.

"He agrees with the Department of Lands," Journee said. "He supports their position on it."

A different mission

The Department of Lands manages 2.5 million acres, including 780,000 acres of commercial timberland. Revenues from timber sales go directly to public schools, colleges, hospitals and charitable institutions.

The Idaho Constitution requires the state to manage the land for the maximum long-term financial return. That's a far different goal than the multiple-use mission of the U.S. Forest Service on national forest lands in the state. Idaho can't simply set aside land for scenery, wildlife habitat and other values that don't bring in money.

"The Idaho court has severely limited what we can do," Wiggins said.

Jay O'Laughlin, a University of Idaho forest economist, said a 2001 University of Idaho study found that the state limited its return on state timber lands to 2 percent because it was allowing trees to grow beyond 80 years.



State forest lands in the Selkirk Mountains around Priest Lake in North Idaho are important habitat for endangered woodland Caribou and Grizzly bears.



Mark Sprengel

The Department of Lands hopes to cut and sell large diameter trees like these old growth ponderosa pines in the Hunt Creek drainage on the Priest Lake State forest.



Statesman file photo

Students in Elk City pledge allegiance to the flag. The Department of Lands is required by the Idaho Constitution to manage its timberlands for the maximum long-term financial return so the money can be distributed to schools throughout the state.

Wiggins said the actual return from state lands averages about 7 percent and that the accelerated harvest will make it even more productive.

Ultimately, the department has one primary constituent to please, O'Laughlin said.

"What do the schoolchildren of Idaho get from leaving trees in remote areas of Idaho?" O'Laughlin said.

Attorney Laird Lucas, whose lawsuits against the Land Board for the Idaho Watershed Project helped limit the department of Lands' ability to offer low-cost grazing, said he believes protecting endangered species habitat and water quality is a part of protecting the state's forest investment.

"If the lands are degraded, over-logged or they put in too many roads, then the state has to spend a lot of money fixing the problem," he said.

Clash with caribou

Lucas is working with several environmental groups who have filed a 60-day notice against the department in federal court, charging them with violating the Endangered Species Act. The groups, including the Idaho Conservation League (a statewide organization) and the Selkirk Conservation Alliance (an environmental group in Priest River) say the department's logging and road building program, especially near Priest Lake, is threatening the survival of endangered woodland caribou, grizzly bears and bull trout.

Mark Sprengel, executive director of the Selkirk Conservation Alliance, said the state wants to cut old-growth trees in exactly the same areas critical to the remaining 50 caribou that live in the Selkirk Mountains. The caribou, once native to large portions of Idaho, now remain only in this mountain range just south of Canada.

Wiggins said the location of the new timber sales has not been determined, so he questions Sprengel's research.

The state's already-extensive road system brings snowmobiles deep into the caribou's home in the winter and also attracts hunters who may illegally kill grizzlies in the area. Old roads also bleed sediment into streams, damaging habitat for bull trout.

The Department of Lands received more than \$500,000 from the federal government to develop a habitat conservation plan that allows the agency to destroy some habitat as long as it protects enough to ensure the survival of the endangered species.

But the plan will take time to complete. Sprengel, Johnson and Lucas believe Wiggins' plan to increase the harvest is aimed at taking out the old growth before federal authorities require them to protect the trees.

"I would argue they are going to draw out this habitat conservation process," Sprengel said. "By the time it's done all the old growth will be gone."

Worry about jobs

Some residents in the Priest River area are worried that many timber jobs will be gone if the accelerated harvest leaves a smaller supply in a decade when it's over. Ted Runberg, a former school administrator who is working on economic development in the area, wants to make sure there is a steady supply of logs for the five timber mills left in the area.

"I'm concerned that it's sustainable," Runberg said. "If you take it all off now, where are you going to end up?"

Bob Boeh, vice president for Riley Creek Lumber Co. in Priest River, said that's unlikely. A recent study by independent foresters called the state plan conservative.

"Winston (Wiggins) knows the customer," Boeh said. "He knows what's scientifically justified."

“Just because there are larger- diameter trees there doesn’t mean he has to cut them all.”

Few mills

One of Wiggins’ biggest challenges will be finding mills to process the larger logs. Most mills in Idaho already have retooled their plants to increase efficiency. This has made them limit the size of logs to between 20 and 30 inches in diameter.

Boeh’s mill takes only logs 27 inches or smaller. The few mills that do take larger logs pay less for them because they are harder to process.

Wiggins said his department is having no problem selling larger logs and is still getting enough for them to make harvesting them economically viable.

“The milling capacity for larger logs is narrowing, but it’s still there,” he said.

Stock market storm

Wiggins’ proposal follows one of the worst three years state schools have faced in funding from timber receipts and the state endowment fund.

First, state voters approved a constitutional amendment that allowed the state to invest the endowment fund in the stock market. Unfortunately, it invested when the market was near its peak in 2000. The fund tumbled by more than a quarter of its worth from \$800 million in 2000 to a low of \$595 million in January this year. At the same time, timber prices were dipping with the weak economy.

That created a “perfect storm for investments,” said Matt Haertzen, who took over as the Endowment Fund Investment Board’s investment manager in January. Funding provided to schools dropped from \$45 million to \$38 million. By last week, the Endowment Fund had risen to \$714 million as the market recovered.

Win-win alternatives

Despite the constitutional mandate, the department does have alternatives that would both preserve its old growth and fund schools. For example, the state of Washington made most of its old growth off limits for cutting in the 1980s. The Legislature bought the harvest rights, keeping its commitment to the endowment fund while saving the trees.

A federally funded program allows the state to buy easements from timber companies to ensure the land is not developed. A similar program, perhaps privately funded, could let Idaho bring in revenue for trees it leaves standing.

Wiggins said he’s open to alternatives.

“We as a department are obligated to entertain all proposals for bringing in revenue,” he said.

Lucas said environmentalists are willing to talk about easements if the state gets serious about protecting endangered species.

Like most Idahoans, Runberg wants to increase school funding and protect the natural values that even Wiggins acknowledges are important. He urges state leaders to seek a collaborative path in state lands management.

“We can go in with our biases, but if we are not willing to develop a consensus, then we are at loggerheads,” he said. “Then someone wins and someone loses.”

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