

Esquivel: Federal Forests Must be Managed, Not Abandoned

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When I returned to Oregon in 1970 after serving in the Vietnam War, I would spend my evenings pulling green chain at a lumber mill and earning \$3.74 per hour in the process.

That might not sound like much, but if you adjust it for inflation, it would be around \$22.50 in today's dollars.

In my early thirties I landed a job as the general manager at a wood products company.

With those kinds of wages workers could truly live the American Dream. They were able to buy a house and car, could afford to support a family and eventually send their children off to college. Those kinds of jobs helped build our middle class.

Today the kinds of opportunities that were afforded to me and members of my generation no longer exist for our young people. There is any number of reasons for that. But in Southwest Oregon it is due largely to the continued mismanagement of federal forest lands.

Oregon is unique in many ways. One is that in this state money literally does grow on trees.

Another distinguishing feature is that many of our counties include parcels of land once granted by the federal government to the Oregon and California Railroad Company.

Those lands are laid out in a checkerboard pattern where they are adjacent to parcels owned by private individuals, the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and the Oregon Department of Forestry

The 1937 O&C Act mandated that the lands be used for sustained yield harvest, with the proceeds being split between the federal government and local counties so they could fund essential services.

One can only imagine the difficulties involved in managing land that is configured in such a manner. But instead of rising to the challenges of doing so, these federal agencies have opted for the path of least resistance—the absolute non-management of these lands. And the communities adjoining these lands and the people living in them continue to suffer unnecessarily as a result.

The risk of catastrophic wildfire every summer has become all too familiar to people living in rural parts of Oregon, especially in the heavily forested southwest portion of the state. They've had to live through several years of watching the same areas burn over and over again, with no end in sight.

In 1987, the Silver Fire started with a lightning bolt and ended up scorching 150,000 acres. The same thing happened again in 2002 with the Biscuit Fire, but with that damage being extended to half a million acres and releasing untold amounts of carbon dioxide pollutants into the air over a very wide area.

It would have been fairly easy to send crews in afterwards to pull out all the dead, burned timber and begin replanting healthy, young trees to take the place of all the ones that were lost. But those salvage logging efforts were blocked in court by environmental organizations.

Even though those lawsuits were ultimately dismissed as frivolous, they delayed the process long enough to make the timber no longer economically viable.

Members of the environmental community have made a business out of suing the federal government, regardless of the merit of their court actions. If those lands were to be reverted to the state they would have no financial incentive to continue these harmful policies.

The economic impacts of these lost opportunities have become more apparent in recent years. At the core of all these problems is a series of broken promises.

Harvest levels proposed under the 1994 Northwest Forest Management Plan have never materialized for our mills, counties or communities. Instead, what our local governments ended up with was safety net legislation that provided payments to counties in lieu of timber receipts.

Those dollars did nothing to directly stimulate the private sector, allow for predictable supplies to our mills or develop any sort of sustainable tax base.

During the waning days of the Bush administration, federal officials compiled the Western Oregon Plan Revision (WOPR), which was intended to resolve many of these long-standing forestry management and timber supply issues. But the WOPR was essentially scuttled once the Obama administration came into power, leaving desperate counties in limbo and without relief.

For years, we've been asked by environmentalists and their political allies to envision a post-extraction economy. That included the illusion that eco-tourism would give the economic stimulus needed to make up for the loss of the timber industry.

However, the two decades since the Northwest Forest Plan paint a much different picture than that which was portrayed by opponents of sensible forestry policy and management.

Many of these counties that long relied on timber receipts have struggled and suffered through double digit unemployment, regardless of statewide or national conditions. The expiration of safety net funding has left large portions of rural Oregon without adequate law enforcement.

Retail and service industry jobs have materialized, but seldom pay above minimum wage. Even though Southwest Oregon is home to two unique tourist attractions—the Oregon Caves and Crater Lake national monuments—those sites are inaccessible throughout part of the year due to the heavy snowfall resulting from their high elevations.

We've seen the expansion of wilderness and roadless areas in the name of enhancing tourism and recreation. However, the reality is that those wilderness areas do not generate tax revenue, and never will.

Our forests need to be treated like a crop. Trees need to be planted, weeded, groomed and harvested, at which point the natural process can start all over again with this remarkable renewable resource.

Management of these timber lands needs to be turned over from an unresponsive federal government

back to the State of Oregon, which has a much better track record of responsible stewardship.

When I was growing up it was still possible to go to four or five different wood products companies in the Rogue Valley and get a job at one of them. In fact, I personally worked for a total of five. Today, four of the five are out of business, never to return. Some of those companies used to employ 300 people and some employed up to 1,400.

It isn't all because of automation, as preservationists have often claimed, nor is it due to lack of demand for product. Prior to its closure, the Rough and Ready lumber mill outside of Cave Junction had to go six hours into California to obtain a raw supply of logs—despite being literally surrounded by unmanaged federal forest lands.

We've seen the consequences of these disastrous policies, and it's time to do something differently. Our forests need to be managed, not abandoned. The futures of our communities and families literally depend on it.

About the Author

Sal Esquivel is a member of the Oregon House of Representatives. The fifth-term Republican serves as vice chair of the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources. He lives in the southern Oregon city of Medford.