



# Commercial Timber Harvest on Public Lands in Oregon

A position of the Oregon Society of American Foresters

***The Oregon Society of American Foresters supports commercial timber harvest as an appropriate objective and primary tool for promoting healthy, sustainable forests on public lands in Oregon.*** Most of these lands are affected by laws that allow or mandate sustainable harvest with resource management planning. Where fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, or recreation is a priority, commercial harvest can be compatible and even promote these values when carefully planned and supervised by professional foresters and other resource specialists. Commercial timber harvest provides important economic and social benefits that help sustain local communities, especially in rural areas. These benefits often extend more broadly than government payments in lieu of shared harvest revenues. Management and use of renewable, recyclable, biodegradable, and energy conserving forest products from public lands are imperative given increasing human needs and environmental sustainability concerns. The expanding scope and cost of addressing Oregon's forest health, wildfire and safety hazards add further urgency to the need for active management and restoration of public lands, including commercial harvest.

**Issue** Some groups and individuals have called for greater restrictions or a total ban on commercial timber harvests on public lands in Oregon, such as federal, state or municipal forests. Supporting arguments focus on environmental risks and the view that commercial activity on public forests is inappropriate, costly, and simply benefits large corporations. Some opinion polls and policy decisions to limit harvest on public lands are cited as evidence of support for such restrictions. However, most arguments to prohibit commercial harvest on public lands are based on inaccurate and outdated generalizations about environmental impacts and an unwarranted vilification of economic enterprises. Moreover, improving forest health, wildfire and safety problems in many public forests where harvesting has been greatly reduced suggest that further restrictions in Oregon could simply exacerbate forest resource and socioeconomic concerns in affected areas. Demands for most forest products also continue to increase, and the negative environmental impacts from the use of alternative non-renewable materials or timber sources outside Oregon can be significant and far-reaching.

## Background

### **Oregon's public forest lands are very extensive and productive**

Oregon has 16.6 million acres of public forest lands, an area about equal to all of western Oregon north of Grants Pass. Most (13.2 million acres) of these public forests are productive and thus they represent about 60 percent of the land in Oregon that can grow commercial timber; included are some of the most productive forests in the world. About 12.3 million acres of these productive forest lands are in federal ownership, and 0.9 million acres are state, county and municipal lands. Nearly one-third (3.8 million acres) of these productive lands are withdrawn specifically from commercial use as wilderness areas, parks and other major reserves. Given the scope and productivity of Oregon's public forests and their diverse uses and values, policies that significantly restrict commercial harvest have both local and global effects.

### **Sustainable commercial harvest is allowed or required**

The 9.4 million acres of unreserved, productive public forest lands in Oregon are established and managed under laws that allow or mandate sustainable commercial harvests. For example, federal forest managers are directed to "furnish a continuous supply of timber for the...citizens of the U.S." (Organic Act of 1897) and provide "a permanent source of raw materials for the support of dependent communities and local industries of the region" (O&C Act of 1937). Such laws also direct a significant portion of the income from such timber harvests to local governments, recognizing that extensive areas of public lands can significantly reduce property tax revenues. Oregon law, for example, requires most state forest lands to be managed with about two-thirds of the timber revenues shared with the local counties, schools and taxing districts where the forests are located. In addition, laws requiring prompt reforestation and maintenance of forest land productivity directly promote the sustainability of forest benefits.

### **Evolving policies and practices protect other values**

Timber harvest planning and practices have improved greatly in recent years and continue to respond to both evolving knowledge, technological and engineering advances and public concerns and laws for protecting diverse resource values. Forest road practices also have seen wide improvements, and advanced harvest systems reduce the need for new roads while lessening impacts to the ground. On federal lands, Resource Management Plans focus on conservation of important fish and wildlife habitat. On State Forests (e.g., the Tillamook), in addition to the strict requirements of Oregon's

Forest Practices Act, management plans include steps to improve mature forest habitat for key species. Such directives restrict harvest in sensitive areas and add to the costs of operations on public lands in Oregon. However, economical harvest usually is possible when planned well and not subjected to extensive delays from intentionally obstructive legal appeals or unlawful protests.

### **Commercial harvest is a key management tool**

Oregon's forests are constantly changing. Trees and other vegetation grow and add biomass, shed branches and foliage, and die from crowding or insect or disease infestations. This dynamic nature of our forests makes timber harvest an important management tool for restoration, fuel and fire reduction while providing forest products. On both federal and state lands, teams of professional foresters, biologists, other resource specialists, and engineers carefully plan and supervise harvests to protect or enhance diverse resource values. Important work such as improvements to fish habitat and roads are enhanced by the income, equipment and skilled personnel made available by local commercial harvest operations. Resource professionals recognize that harvest plans must vary widely among diverse management areas and objectives. No single, simple strategy fits all.

### **Economic benefits are large and broad**

Commercial timber harvests provide significant economic benefits, including helping to pay for management for diverse values. As the nation's leading softwood lumber and plywood producer, Oregon's wood products industry brings substantial income to the state and employed about 61,000 workers in 2016, a level second only to the high-tech manufacturing sector. Wood products employment is especially important in rural communities where other high-wage jobs are few, and it also remains significant even in Oregon's urban areas. Basic industries like forest products also generate significant wealth both directly and far beyond the industry itself through a strong "economic multiplier" effect. Given their location, productivity and size, public forest lands have a key role in commercial timber production and employment throughout the state, even where other values are emphasized. Payments to state and local government from timber harvest on public lands are important revenue sources in much of Oregon. During the 1980s, annual O&C/CBWR (western Oregon lands managed by the BLM) timber receipt payments to counties exceeded \$100 million, while annual US Forest Service (USFS) timber receipt payments to local governments and schools also exceeded \$100 million. By 2016 if based on actual harvest, O&C/CBWR receipts would have dropped to \$24 million, and in 2015 USFS receipts would have dropped to \$7 million. In the 10 year period ending 2010 harvest from state managed lands generated nearly \$65 million annually for counties and local schools, but dropped to \$55 million by 2016. Loss of timber harvest receipts has resulted in severe budget cuts in many Oregon counties, and resulted in Curry, Polk, Douglas and Josephine Counties recently being designated "fiscally distressed" by the Oregon Secretary of State.

### **Forest products are a vital renewable and sustainable resource**

Overall, the U.S. is now a net importer of both energy and wood. And because domestic demand for most forest products continues to rise, major harvest restrictions on public land in Oregon result in an increase in harvesting in other ownerships, regions and countries, including many that have far less stringent environmental standards or are much less productive (i.e., more acres must be harvested for similar yields). The rising cost of forest products, partly due to local restrictions that add to production costs and reduce market supplies, also increases the use of alternatives such as steel, plastic and concrete. These materials pale in comparison to forest products in terms of fundamental sustainability, i.e., none is produced from an active air pollution cleanser and carbon sequestering organism (trees) with very little energy, while also being exceptionally renewable, recyclable, and biodegradable. Large buildings of concrete and steel are large emitters of carbon in both their construction and maintenance, but large buildings of innovative wood products can substantially reduce carbon footprints. Forest biomass also can provide an alternative energy source to fossil fuels. The substantial environmental impacts that arise indirectly from broad harvest restrictions are rarely considered in opinion polls and politically motivated policy decisions.

### **Active management is widely needed**

Where major concerns for other values are identified by site-specific assessments and collaborative planning, timber harvest can be locally restricted on public lands. In contrast, broad prohibitions provide no flexibility and do nothing to address such serious concerns as Oregon's rapidly expanding forest health and wildfire hazards. Ironically, such prohibitions would trade manageable risks for the largely uncontrollable and violent forces of nature, with potentially far greater environmental damage to the values that are the focus of "protection." The Western Governors Association and the General Accounting Office (a major federal agency that conducts nonpartisan analyses) have stressed the need for very extensive active management to reduce these widespread forest health and wildfire problems. A growing concern on federal lands as commercial harvest has greatly declined is the shrinking amount of forest openings with younger vegetation, which provide unique habitat ("early seral") for many wildlife species. The large scope of active management and restoration needed makes commercial timber harvest a vital tool and revenue source for management. It also can provide high levels of environmentally friendly products and economic benefits to Oregon communities, as well as the healthy, safe and fire-resistant forests that attract both visitors and businesses.

*Adopted by the Executive Committee of the Oregon Society of American Foresters (OSAF), January 23, 2017.  
This statement will expire on January 23, 2022, unless after thorough review it is renewed by the Committee.*