

**Oregon State Bar
Sustainable Future Section**

Photo: J. Michael Mattingly

The Long View

Restoring Forest Health: Collaboration and Responsibility



*By Susan Jane Brown and
Mark Webb*

It took no time at all after the presidential election for pundits to begin to pontificate on what the changes in Congress would mean for various stakeholders. In Oregon, *The Oregonian* surmised that Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) – who will likely assume the Chairmanship of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee – would use his increased influence to advance federal legislation addressing the ecological and socioeconomic “cliff” facing the forests and rural communities of eastern Oregon. The attention is long overdue.

Forestry and logging in Oregon (and the West generally) has a long history. The vast forests of our region, once considered endless and inexhaustible, were harvested in order to bring economic prosperity to the expanding western frontier. In eastern Oregon, harvest focused on the huge Ponderosa and larch trees while professional foresters of the time assured land managers that suppressing forest fires and aggressively replanting logged areas would give us healthier, faster growing forests. Timber harvest infrastructure – mills, loggers, roads, etc. – depended on reaping that bounty to generate benefits for the communities that grew near public forestlands.

Decades later, a new generation of professionals – foresters, researchers, and yes, lawyers – contributed to the law of unintended consequences: prolonged harvest of a rich and seemingly boundless resource depleted the once abundant large trees, fire suppression contributed to unnaturally high fuel loads, and the combination increasingly compromised the health of east side forests. The well-intended response was a series of environmental laws designed to prohibit the despoliation of forest resources such as water, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities. However, little consideration was given to how these new laws would further exacerbate declining forest health or affect the socioeconomic infrastructure that was on the front line of the changes taking place in forest management.

Oregonians are no strangers to what happened next: the forest wars of the 1980s and 1990s. “Owls versus jobs,” “clear cuts for kids,” “analysis paralysis,” and other one-dimensional tag lines papered over the real problem of declining forest health and rural self-sufficiency. Laws designed to help, such as the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, delayed difficult public conversations about how best to utilize a common natural resource, and provided false hope that people thousands of miles away could better solve challenging natural resources problems than the men and women who actually faced them on a daily basis. The socioeconomic vitality of resource dependent counties continued to weaken as wood-processing infrastructure was crippled or lost. The result: community life and school enrollment declined, unemployment and poverty rates rose, and the need for mental health, substance abuse, and other public health and safety services increased.

Today, rural communities in eastern Oregon are embracing the view that adversity breeds innovation. Also, more stakeholders appreciate that east side forest health requires active management. It sounds simple, by working together – environmentalists, loggers, local elected officials, land managers, and others – these communities are taking responsibility for their future in a manner that is good for the land. On the Malheur National Forest in Grant County, the Blue Mountains Forest Partners – a collaborative group of diverse stakeholders – has worked together for more than six years to develop a common vision for how we can thread the needle and provide for economic, social, and ecological sustainability, despite declining federal investment in National Forests. Litigation has been eschewed in favor of working out disagreements in the forest and meeting room rather than in the courtroom.

Our conversations have been hard at times, and there is much more work ahead, but it is clear that all of the stakeholders involved care very deeply about the fate of the forest as well as the communities that depend on them for survival. Shared learning has led to the conviction that rather than “tools of destruction,” scientifically-informed timber harvest is necessary to restore forest health, and the only way to accomplish this goal is to sustain existing milling infrastructure. Without the socioeconomic infrastructure (people and facilities) in place, we cannot hope to restore ecological health to the landscape or

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provide quality hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, wildlife habitat, and other amenity values the public expects.

Our collaborative group has worked within the existing legal framework to improve the resilience and well-being of forests and communities in the Blue Mountains. That framework is complicated, frequently frustrating, and sometimes at odds with our science-based restoration vision. In fact, new laws are more likely to hinder our efforts than help. Instead, by working together rather than in opposition, and by focusing on common ground – restoring the big pines along with complex forest structure in an economically sensible manner, reintroducing fire on a treated landscape, and enhancing functional aquatic habitat – we've reduced controversy, reoriented our approach to federal land management, and taken significant steps towards restoring more than a million acres of public lands.

Collaboration is not a panacea: restoring millions of acres of forest – a federal asset – will take substantial investment, something that is in short supply locally, regionally, and nationally. Challenges remain, and divisive issues can threaten nascent relationships. Still, collaboration empowers stakeholders to take responsibility for their communities and the forests that surround them – it is the best way forward. But it will prove successful, and move our east side forests towards a more healthy and resilient state, only if mills are a part of the effort. ■

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