

Counties Offer Flawed Proposal to Sell Off 1.2 Million Acres of America's Public Lands

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Oregon Wild opposes effort to tie widely supported county payments program to controversial old-growth logging initiative

The current proposal being floated by several Oregon counties proposes to finance the national County Payments Program by removing environmental safeguards and logging Oregon's remnant old-growth forests

Last week the conservation group Oregon Wild, formerly the Oregon Natural Resources Council, announced its strong opposition to a proposal being floated by several Oregon counties to sell off over 1.2 million acres of America's public lands. The scheme seeks to link the unrestricted logging of these lands to the popular County Payments program.

"Oregon Wild strongly supports the County Payments program, and we'd like to work with county governments to find a way to continue it," said Steve Pedery, Conservation Director of Oregon Wild. "However, we oppose this scheme to link funding for counties with a massive sell-off of America's public lands and the loss of some of our last old-growth forests."

The County Payments program is the result of widely supported legislation adopted by Congress in 2000. It provides a stable level of funding for rural schools and county governments that were once tied to the unpredictable boom and bust cycle of the logging industry. The program has been extremely successful, and has helped end the bitter "timber wars" of the 1990s by bringing conservationists, educators, and rural governments together.

"Oregon Wild has testified before Congress in support of extending the funding for the County Payments program," observed Pedery. "In 2007 we will continue to work to renew this important initiative."

Unfortunately, the current proposal to sell off 1.2 million acres of public land now being offered by some counties seeks to tie funding for the popular county payments program to a controversial old-growth logging initiative.

The recent history of these lands includes a 2003 "sue and settle" agreement between the logging industry and the Bush administration. This began a process of removing environmental safeguards from nearly two and a half million acres of forestland in Western Oregon. These public lands, sometimes referred to as "O&C Lands", are managed by the United States Bureau of Land Management and contain some of the largest stands of old-growth forest left in the Western United States. The sell off proposal targets these lands.

The Bush administration, logging industry, and some counties falsely claim that an obscure 1937 law relating to these "O&C" lands supersedes other laws intended to protect clean water, fish, wildlife, and recreational opportunities on America's public lands. By removing these lands from the protections of the Northwest Forest Plan, they aim to log these old-growth stands. However, the initiative has been highly controversial, and is strongly opposed by hunters, anglers, conservation groups, and many rural landowners.

This proposal to sell off 1.2 million acres of public lands appears to be an effort to ensure these old-growth forests are opened to clear cutting, even if the Bush administration's plan fails due to public opposition.

"By offering this proposal to sell-off 1.2 million acres of America's public lands, it appears that the logging industry is trying to use funding for County Payments as a fig leaf to hide their desire to clear cut these last stands of old-growth forest", said Pedery.

The Bush administration recently floated a similar proposal to sell off public lands to fund county payments, but the proposal met with strong opposition from the public and it died after being roundly criticized by both Republicans and Democrats in Congress. The 1.2 million acre proposal is sure to be even more controversial, as it involves more land and is more directly focused on the endangered old-growth forests. It would also bring industrial clear-cut logging practices into watersheds that supply drinking water for a number of Oregon communities, and further threaten Oregon's salmon and steelhead runs.

Oregon Wild does see some signs of progress in the proposal. First, the counties appear to acknowledge the importance of these lands for fish, wildlife, recreation, and clean water. This represents a change from their previous stand, which was that the "O&C" lands should be managed exclusively for logging. Unfortunately, while the counties suggest lands not sold off could be managed to protect these values, they include few

specifics. And while they offer continued public access to lands targeted for unrestricted logging, the value of that commitment is dubious. Clear-cut logging, and ensuing erosion and potential mudslides, greatly diminish the value of these lands for hunting, fishing, hiking, and other forms of outdoor recreation.

Secondly, the counties also appear to be acknowledging that the Bush administration's plan to remove environmental safeguards for the "O&C" lands faces an uphill battle. Recent polling by Oregon Wild has shown strong public opposition to old-growth logging, and federal courts have recently found several similar initiatives by the Bush administration to be illegal.

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