

Oregon's family forestland owners face challenges

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Inheriting the family farm or woodland has been a traditional expectation in Oregon's culture over the past 150 years. The formula was simple: A generation would tend to an agricultural or small forest tract with the assumption that subsequent generations would continue stewardship of the land. But much has changed in Oregon's culture in the past few decades. The survival of family-owned forests – some of the most visible forestlands in the state - looks uncertain.

"Losing forestland to development is a real risk," said Mike Cloughesy, director of forestry for the Oregon Forest Resources Institute. "Much of Oregon's small woodlands lie on the outskirts of urban residential areas, and that land is highly desired for other non-forest uses." About 15 percent of Oregon's forests – 4.7 million acres – are in private, non-forest products industry ownership, including owners of small woodland tracts ranging from two acres to 5,000 acres. Conversion to non-forest uses, including residential development, permanently removes the land from forest use. "Family forestlands are important to Oregon's future because of a wide variety of forest types and the varied wildlife habitats that they provide," said Gary Springer of Corvallis, a family forestland owner. "That is primarily a function of the wide range of reasons that individuals own these lands. Their management reflects the various goals of forest ownership and a wide range of habitat results from it." Springer is vice-chair of the Committee for Family Forestlands, formed by the Oregon Board of Forestry to report on issues of concern to family forestland owners. Increasing economic pressures during recent decades have made continuing forestry on smaller forested tracts less affordable. A host of challenges, including rising labor and fuel costs, changing raw timber markets and climbing development values, have added costs to managing forestland while reducing potential income from forest owner stewardship. Economics have been a driving factor for land conversion during the past decade. But with family ownership the business decisions become deeply personal – and sometimes divisive within families. "I heard it said at a recent family forestland symposium that the biggest challenge to keeping forestland in the family is the transfer of personal values," said Springer. "The question becomes: will the next generation inherit those values as well as the land? If the answer is no, then that is quite a threat to future family forestland ownership. I believe that stewardship values are the glue that binds families to their lands." Cloughesy said the population of Oregonians who own small woodlands is aging. "Nearly half the owners are over 65, and many families and heirs have joined the migration to urban centers. Typically, they have little interest, time or financial ability to assume management responsibility." In the United States, there are about five acres of forestland per person today, a figure expected to drop to two acres by 2060. "This will put enormous pressure on forestland owners to serve competing values," Cloughesy said. Many resources exist to support family woodland owners, including educational services from Oregon State University's Extension Service (including the award-winning 'Ties to the Land' succession-planning program), stewardship forestry consultants from the Oregon Department of Forestry, and advocacy on legislative issues through the Oregon Small Woodlands Association. And while challenges exist for the future of family forestlands in Oregon, so do potential solutions. "Emerging developments such as conservation easements, biomass fuel markets, recreation opportunities and carbon credits hold some economic potential for landowners to offset their costs of increased environmental contributions," said Cloughesy. "There is some potential for developing niche or specialty markets for locally grown forest products." While family forestland owners contribute about 11 percent of the state's total wood output, wood production is frequently not the primary motive for many family forestland owners. Other reasons often cited include scenic beauty, desire for privacy and freedom, and wildlife. "Oregon will either create a positive environment for continued family forestland ownership into the future or we will not," said Springer. "If not, some of the most visible parts of the state's forestlands will largely disappear into other, non-forested uses."

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