

One Whopper of a Logging Problem

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Last week, the Obama administration scrapped a management plan intended to increase timber harvests on roughly 2.5 million acres of BLM land in Western Oregon. Why? Because the plan was "poisoned by the previous administration's skirting of the law and efforts to taint scientific outcome", said Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in a news release.

Does that mean Salazar's BLM intends to boost logging in Western Oregon in a legally and scientifically defensible manner? We certainly hope so.

The rural counties that contain the affected BLM land have suffered badly with the logging decline the plan was supposed to correct. To understand the real problem, however, you have to look further into the past than the Bush administration, which merely developed a solution, however flawed, that the Obama administration doesn't like.

The BLM manages most of its Western Oregon land under a 1937 law known as the O&C Act. The BLM is supposed to manage O&C lands predominantly for permanent and sustainable timber production, which means in simplest terms that the BLM can't cut more wood than the forests produce every year. In order to help out local governments, meanwhile, the O&C Act allows rural counties to grab half of the timber revenue.

The BLM estimates that the O&C lands covered by the now-dead Western Oregon Plan Revisions, or WOPR, can sustainably produce 1.2 billion board feet per year. Because forest management is also guided by more recent laws like the Endangered Species Act, nobody really expects to cut that much wood. Nevertheless, the number is a useful indicator of the tremendous productivity of Western Oregon's forests. In the mid-1990s, the management plans for the BLM areas covered by the WOPR were changed to incorporate restrictions related to the Northwest Forest Plan, which was supposed to provide a predictable supply of timber while protecting habitat for endangered species like the spotted owl. As a result of these changes, only 268 million board feet may be harvested on this land every year, despite its enormous productivity and despite the BLM's legal requirement to manage it for sustainable timber harvest.

Worse yet, the volume of timber offered for sale has not approached 268 million board feet per year. Between 1995 and 2002, according to the BLM, the agency offered to sell only 63 percent of the timber it had planned to.

Meanwhile, not all of the timber offered for sale is actually sold and harvested. Over a 10-year span beginning in 1995, only 60 percent of the timber offered for sale was harvested, according to a 2005 BLM report. A frequent culprit: lawsuits and administrative challenges by environmental groups.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski, like the Obama administration, opposed the WOPR. But even he acknowledged in a 2008 letter to the BLM that the land covered by the plan produced an "actual harvest of 80 to 130 mmbf (million board feet) in recent years." Such harvest levels are pathetic given the sale limit under the Northwest Forest Plan, 268 million board feet per year, as well as the vastly larger productivity of the contested area.

In effect, millions of acres of federal land supposedly managed for timber production have been closed to logging.

The timber industry responded by suing. And in 2003, the BLM agreed to settle the suit, which led to the development of the controversial WOPR plan. Even under the WOPR, harvests would have claimed less than half of the timber the affected forests produce. But cutting 500 million board feet every year would have been a vast, and still easily sustainable, improvement.

Not insignificantly, cutting that much timber would have generated \$75 million for rural Oregon counties every year, according to the BLM, as well as 1,200 timber-related jobs. Oregon needs both the money and the employment, but it will get neither. Now that the WOPR is dead, the BLM's Western Oregon land will, once again, be managed according to the Northwest Forest Plan's harvest restrictions.

It may be politically expedient for the Obama administration, in killing the WOPR, to hyperventilate about the supposed lawlessness and scientific bankruptcy of the Bush administration. But it's also misleading. It suggests that the WOPR itself is the problem when, in fact, it is merely a proposed solution to the real problem. The real problem is the effective closure of BLM land in Western Oregon to its intended use, and that problem hasn't gone away.

What's the Obama administration's solution?