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GUEST OPINION

Forest Practices Act can (but doesn't) do the job

By Tim Palmer

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Much attention has been given to Oregon's federal forests and their multiple uses, from the spotted owl controversy of the 1980s, to the hard-earned restoration of salmon spawning habitat, to the O&C debate. Yet 38 percent of Oregon forests are privately owned, and more than half of that belongs to industrial timber companies, with principally one goal in mind.

Understandably, that goal is to maximize profits by logging. But the consequences go far beyond money in the bank. The harvest of trees covering nearly one in five acres of Oregon's forest has dramatic outcomes on the streams flowing through those lands. That water is owned by the state, which means all of us.

Even more important, industrial logging effects the waterways downstream — rivers and estuaries sustaining sport and commercial fisheries with their related jobs, food and recreation, plus drinking water to homes, towns and cities. A half-century of science has confirmed repeatedly that the steepness of logged slopes, the amount and type of road construction, the closeness of logging to waterfronts and the intensity of both soil and canopy disturbance — including the spraying of pesticides — all govern how well our streams will be protected, or how severely they'll be degraded.

Those facts justify state government's role in establishing and enforcing effective standards of harvest under the Oregon Forest Practices Act.

The problem here lies with "effective." Oregon law allows cutting on slopes of any steepness — straight-up is not too much, except in specific places where public safety is at known risk. The rules permit logging within 20 feet of most waterways. They require no buffer whatsoever for small streams without fish. The rules sanction aerial spraying of herbicides within 60 feet of streams (as if the wind doesn't blow), and the dousing of toxins directly on small streams (as if their water doesn't flow into larger streams).

Analysis of the rules of surrounding states — even Idaho — found that all had substantially higher standards than Oregon.

To be fair, some logging companies — including giants as big as Weyerhaeuser — often practice higher levels of performance. Others don't.

Modernized rules would level the playing field for all.

Industrial logging causes streams to warm beyond acceptable standards of temperature — intended not for optimum water quality but simply to curb the grossest loss of habitat needed by native fish. With direct implications to its own program, the State Department of Forestry's RipStream study found that logging on industrial land caused a greater rise in water temperature than logging elsewhere with wider buffers. We've known that better buffers were necessary even before the state's Independent Multidisciplinary Science Team recommended them to the governor back in 1999 (Recovery of Wild Salmonids). Recent analysis by Ph.D. biologist Christopher Frissell, using the state's own findings, indicated that no-cut buffers of at least 100 feet are needed to maintain stream temperatures. A hundred feet is not much, given 6 million acres of industrial forest land in Oregon. Uncut forest buffers shade the streams and keep them cool, stabilize banks with roots, and filter out muddy runoff that's headed toward the water from disturbed areas nearby.

Earlier this year, Oregon became the first state to have its regulatory program disapproved by the federal Environmental Protection Agency and NOAA Fisheries. The shortcomings were failure to protect small coastal streamfronts, to address damage from logging roads, to minimize landslides, and perhaps most important, to control the aerial application of pesticides. All this is timely because the Board of Forestry is reconsidering its rules.

Precautions are needed to prevent the spraying of herbicides on homes and people, such as what sickened 40 residents of Cedar Valley near Gold Beach in 2013. Additional measures, such as those required by Washington State to identify hazard zones, could minimize landslides that routinely damage salmon habitat. I personally saw this in 2012 when the entire "buffer strip" slid into the South Fork Coquille River and its choice chinook spawning beds after massive acreage was clearcut above the buffer. Despite outward appearances — hundreds of feet of shoreline reduced to an oozing quagmire the whole way upslope to the timber sale — the logging complied with regulations, according to state officials.

It's time for Oregon to join the 21st century.

Action on the Board of Forestry's agenda won't solve all the problems of our streams, or of our neighbors being doused and sickened by helicopter-sprayed pesticides, but it's a step in the right direction to safeguard our fish, wildlife, water and homes.

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