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Forest Habitat Plan Heads to Feds

Family Forest Land Plan Is First of Its Kind in Country

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Steve Stinson, executive director of the Family Forest Foundation, gazes at Prairie Creek on Bunker Hill Road while Tom Fox, president of the foundation, looks on Wednesday afternoon. The two men were at the property of Bob Christensen, whose family forest land was used as a pilot for the foundation to develop a habitat conservation plan that was submitted to federal regulators Tuesday. Environmentalist groups oppose the plan, saying it doesn't allow for enough protections around streams.

Democrats, who co-signed a letter to the agency urging approval of the plan.

Lewis County has about 130,000 acres of family forest land, and the voluntary plan - the first of its kind in the country - could be available to about 2,400 land owners.

Lewis County small forest land owners could choose to adhere to a new proposed habitat conservation plan that was submitted to federal regulators Tuesday.

However, opponents say the plan carves away too many environmental protections for endangered species, especially salmon, when other strategies are available.

The habitat conservation plan was submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries offices in Lacey Tuesday, according to Steve Stinson, executive director of the Family Forest Foundation, a coalition of small forest land owners.

"This is a bottom-up, site-specific approach," Stinson said of the plan, which took 10 years to develop at the cost of \$4 million in private and public funds.

The goal of the plan is to make family forests economically sustainable, which would prevent land owners from selling to developers and ultimately protect forest land, said Stinson, whose family owns 1,185 acres of the Cowlitz Ridge Tree Farm.

The Family Forest Foundation will host an open house at 8:30 a.m. Oct. 6 at the Veterans Memorial Museum to discuss the proposed plan with interested forest land owners. Stinson said the foundation will also discuss how forest land owners can best transfer their land to future generations.

The plan has gained the support of U.S. Sen. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell and U.S. Reps. Brian Baird and Norm Dicks, all Washington

A small forest land owner is someone who produces less than two million board feet of timber per year, which could be used to build about 200 family-sized houses.

The plan will now enter the public comment stage with the federal agencies, where it will face opposition.

Peter Goldman, executive director of the Seattle-based Washington Forest Law Center, a nonprofit environmental group, said he opposes the habitat conservation plan because he fears the decreased buffers will mean decreased protection for species habitats.

"It doesn't meet the science that's necessary to protect salmon in rivers," Goldman said.

He added that he wants to help small forest land owners, and he believes the land owners backing the proposed plan are responsible and would do their part to protect the land. However, Goldman said he fears the proposal could open the door for other, less responsible land owners to see relaxed restrictions.

Plus, he said, other programs exist to help small forest land owners, such as riparian easement plans through the state Department of Natural Resources or land trust to protect development rights.

But, Goldman said, backers of the habitat conservation plan "want to have the God-given right to log down to the stream."

The Quinault Indian Nation, located in northern Grays Harbor County along the coast, also opposes the plan out of concerns for the science behind it.

"We believe that as it is currently written the proposed (habitat conservation plan) does not adequately protect fish and fish habitat upon which the Nation relies to exercise its treaty fishing rights," Quinault Indian Nation President Fawn R. Sharp wrote in a letter to the four-member congressional delegation.

Stinson, however, said the new proposed regulations would still be governed by the Washington Department of Natural Resources. Buffers surrounding wetlands would be smaller in some cases, but based on the idea that smaller bodies of water require a smaller buffer to protect fish habitat, he said.

"It's time to think out of the box," Stinson said.

Tom Fox, president of the Family Forest Foundation, said the proposed plan offers flexibility to small forest land owners because it is voluntary.

"You can go do this if you want," he said.

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