

Family forester protests riparian buffer burden

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Stricter forest rules add to burden; state help disappears

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Years ago when Rick Dunning, now executive director of the Washington Farm Forestry Association, bought timberland in southwest Washington, he saw it as an investment that could be passed on to his children.

His three children are now grown, but the state's newly adopted forest practice rules that call for larger buffer zones along rivers has him doubting whether his dream will ever be realized.

"There needs to be a belief that there's certainty for the economic future of tree farming," he said. "The state is dangerously close to throwing the more than 5 million acres of small-forestland-ownership baby out with this growing regulatory bathwater."

Ten years ago, when the state passed the forest and fish rules, there were promises that the rules' disproportionate impact on small-scale forest landowners would be moderated by special programs designed with them in mind.

Dunning said that millions of acres of forestland owned by small-scale tree farmers are in lower elevations, which have more rivers than higher elevations. As a result, buffer requirements prohibit small-scale forest landowners from harvesting a larger percentage of their land than large industrial timber companies, which own much larger tracts.

In addition, according to a University of Washington study, many privately owned forestlands are close to population centers, so they're at the greatest risk of being developed.

Dunning warns that converting forestland into condominiums, parking lots or malls would mean the loss of open space and fish and wildlife habitat that people in suburban and urban areas have come to value.

With the new forest practice rules that the state adopted on Aug. 12, Dunning has become increasingly discouraged.

Extensive budget reductions and cuts to programs for small-scale forest landowners went into effect July 1. All three stewardship forester positions in Western Washington were eliminated, as were all small forest landowner forester positions.

Another blow was the zeroing out of funding for the Forest Riparian Easement Program, which was designed to partially compensate small forest landowners for the trees they leave along waterways to comply with fish and forest rules.

In an interview with Capital Press, Heath Packard, legislative liaison with the Washington state Department of Natural Resources, acknowledged that the department is seeing the culmination of many years of frustration on the part of family foresters.

Packard said the department wants to keep family foresters on the land while also guaranteeing environmental protections.

The Forest Ecosystem Collaborative scheduled for September could serve that goal. During the collaborative, representatives of tribes, conservation groups, industrial and non-industrial forest landowners, legislators and state agencies will seek common objectives for forestland in the state.

"Rather than protracted arguments and plans that just nibble around the edges while the forest landscape is disappearing around us, the collaborative could unfold a vision of the future for our forestlands," Packard said.

Dunning said if it doesn't work, "it might be a good time for small forest landowners to consider selling out."

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