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Save family forests with conservation plans

The reticence of federal agencies to work with small family forest businesses to establish habitat-conservation plans suggests there might not be much of a future for these enterprises, say columnists Tom Fox, president of the Family Forest Foundation, and Lewis County Commissioner F. Lee Grose.

By Tom Fox and F. Lee Grose

Special to The Times

Small family forest businesses are increasingly convinced they do not have a future in forestry in the state of Washington.

Family forest landowners represent about half of the state's 10 million acres of private forestland and federal and state government agencies have not yet come to grips with how to address our needs.

Small, family forest landowners in Lewis County, led by the Family Forest Foundation (FFF), working with Lewis County Commissioners have spent 12 years trying to find a voluntary incentive-based solution to this dilemma. These grassroots family forest owners have led the effort to work with the National Marine Fisheries Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the state's natural-resource agencies to develop a countywide Family Forest Habitat Conservation Plan.

The conservation plan was originally submitted to the federal agencies on Sept. 4, 2007, but was withdrawn at their request. After over a year where only two meetings were scheduled and no constructive suggestions for improvement or scientifically valid reasons to change the proposal from the federal agencies were provided, Lewis County resubmitted the conservation plan Jan. 12.

The federal agencies' non-scientific rationale for refusing to submit the conservation plan for public review has led many to think that this debate is not really about scientific issues. Rather, it seems to be about some agencies' unwillingness to consider alternatives to the Forest and Fish Agreement. This point is underscored by the fact that while the agencies claim there is a "scientific dispute," they refuse to engage in an independent, scientific dispute-resolution process.

Family forest landowners — those most at risk of conversion — are limited only to the statewide "one-size-fits-all" forest-practice regulations that significantly limit the ability of small forest landowner businesses to survive economically. For these family businesses, the average loss of

economic value resulting from these regulations exceeds 20 percent, and in some cases is as high as 100 percent.

This science-based habitat-conservation plan provides significant environmental enhancements beyond the Forest and Fish Agreement, such as smaller harvest size, increased rotation ages and robust conservation measures for upland species. An investment of more than \$3 million in private and public funds, not to mention thousands of hours of volunteer time, have gone into this plan's grassroots effort over the past decade. Included in this investment was a collaborative, transparent and consensus-based independent scientific-review process on the fundamental element of the proposal. Agency staff participated in the process and the outcome supported the plan's key findings, but the agencies refused to acknowledge the outcome.

The potential refusal by federal agencies, and lack of support from state agencies to allow public review of this science-based plan leaves family forestland business owners feeling betrayed, frustrated and wondering where to turn.

Rather than embrace new science within the regulatory construct, state and federal leaders appear to be focused on an incentive-based approach that relies upon public financing for ecosystem services. This concept has been around for a long time, yet no financing is available for family forest landowners. It will be a long time, if ever, before the public will pay for services they currently get for free, plus this will not solve the problem. Given this, family forest landowners appear to have two choices:

- Continue to manage under the ever-increasing regulatory bar of the Forest and Fish agreement with its disproportionate impacts on small-scale ownerships, or
- Convert their lands to a more profitable land use

We believe it's in the public's best long-term interest to help find ways to support sustainable forest management, especially for family forests, the most vulnerable to regulatory excesses. The implementation of tools that provide regulatory relief and stability, such as the Family Forest Habitat Conservation Plan would be a significant step in the right direction.

Tom Fox is president of the Family Forest Foundation and F. Lee Grose is chairman of the Lewis County Board of Commissioners.

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