

'Credible' Habitat Conservation Plan for family forest lands resubmitted by Lewis County

By Buddy Rose

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Lewis County and the Family Forest Foundation recently re-submitted their Family Forest Habitat Conservation Plan (FFHCP) to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service. If approved, the plan would apply to harvest and other forest practices on family forest lands within Lewis County.

The FFHCP was originally submitted to the Services Sept. 4, 2007, but was withdrawn at the suggestion of the Services to work through some additional issues that were raised. After over a year during which only two meetings were able to be scheduled and no constructive suggestions for improvement were provided by the Services, Lewis County decided to resubmit the FFHCP.

In a recent press release by the county and Family Forest Foundation, FFF President Tom Fox says, "The purpose of the FFHCP is to develop forest practices that better fit the family forest lands of Lewis County in a way that helps owners harvest more timber in more efficient ways while also protecting our public resources in scientifically credible ways."

Preeminent forest ecologist, Dr. Jerry Franklin, reviewed the Draft HCP, attended several meetings with the government services and concluded, "This debate is not really about scientific issues, although I think that the HCP has a sound scientific basis. Rather, it seems to be about some agencies unwillingness to consider alternatives to the Forest and Fish Agreement. As a scientist and a citizen I think that the proposed HCP ought to be allowed a public review on both its scientific and social merits."

"After committing significant resources to develop a county-wide Habitat Conservation Plan for family forest landowners, the resulting FFHCP represents state of the art conservation measures and embodies the best available science. It would provide the county's family forest landowners with much needed regulatory relief and stability," says Steve Stinson, Executive Director of the Family Forest Foundation.

The next step in the planning process is for the Services to move the proposal forward for public comment under the National Environmental Policy Act.

"After 12 years in a local grass roots effort, and over 3 million dollars of Federal, State, County, and private funds invested in the FFHCP, public review of the document is the least the Federal services owe Lewis County family forest owners." says Lee Grose, Lewis County Commissioner.