

Feds hold up timber harvest plan for small landowners

By Buddy Rose

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Family Forest Foundation (FFF) officers held a Town Hall meeting May 22 at the Veteran's Memorial Museum in Chehalis to provide information to the public regarding the current status of the Habitat Conservation Plan for family forest landowners in Lewis County. About 40 people attended the meeting, including County Commissioners Ron Averill and Lee Grose as well as past Commissioner Dennis Hadaller. FFF Executive Director Steve Stinson was assisted by President Tom Fox and others during the presentation.

The foundation, in collaboration with local tribes, Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife and Dept. of Ecology, has been working on the Family Forest Habitat Conservation Plan (FFHCP) for the past 10 years, spending over three million dollars in the process. The money has come from Federal grants totaling \$2 million, about one million dollars of foundation money and \$250,000 from Lewis County.

In Sept. 2007, Lewis County submitted the proposed FFHCP to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries for their approval. Since that time, those agencies have been unwilling to commit to an objective review of the plan or establish a timeline for moving it forward to the public comment process, where it would be subject to further scientific and academic review.

The FFHCP has broad support, including Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, Representatives Brian Baird and Norm Dicks, and Jerry Franklin, a widely recognized expert on forest habitats and conservation from the University Of Washington College Of Forest Resources. FFF officers at the meeting urged those attending to submit letters to the heads of NOAA Fisheries and USFWS and to elected officials, including Governor Gregoire, voicing their support for moving forward with a scientific dispute resolution process and public review of the FFHCP.

The FFHCP would help Lewis County small forest landowners harvest more timber from their lands while protecting public resources in scientifically credible ways. It would be used in place of the current statewide "Forest and Fish" regulations, which are more suited to industrial forestry practices than to small landowners. There are about 2,200 small forest landowners in Lewis County, managing in excess of 130,000 acres of forest.

If approved, the FFHCP would provide 100 years of regulatory certainty to family forest landowners as well as habitat for the 65 species it was designed to protect. Landowners would voluntarily apply to the county to use the FFHCP on their land and would be given a Certificate of Inclusion. They would then be required to follow the harvest guidelines outlined in the plan, which include thinning within riparian buffer areas and growing trees for a minimum of 50 years in upland areas.

Landowners and approving agencies would have to ability to "opt out" later with no penalty if circumstances warranted. Landowners choosing not to use the FFHCP would fall under the harvest provisions of the current Forest and Fish rules.

For more information about the FFHCP, contact the Family Forest Foundation in Chehalis at 736-5918 or email Stinson at stevestinson@familyforestfoundation.org.