

After a decade, Lewis County foresters have plan for family woods

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CENTRALIA, Wash. -- Doug Stinson traces his love of trees to the 1940s, when at 14 he asked his parents for permission to plant shortleaf pines on their cattle farm in the Missouri Ozarks.

Sixty years later, his sinewy hands and weathered skin betray a lifetime spent in the woods - as a smokejumper, logger and finally, owner of his family's tree farm, which covers 1,150 acres in southwest Washington.

A maze of environmental regulations governs which of the towering Douglas firs he can cut. His mail brings weekly overtures from developers willing to pay cash. It's easy to see why someone less committed to the trees might be tempted - and why the conversion of private timberland to sprawling cul-de-sacs is one of the greatest threats facing the Northwest's salmon and other protected species.

It's a problem that Stinson, his son Steve, and a few other local foresters decided to do something about. They immersed themselves in the impossibly complex minutia of forestry policy - How close to a stream should you be able to log? How much shade is needed to keep the stream cool enough for fish? - and a decade later, they have a plan.

Nearly 400 pages long, it's designed to let small-time timberland owners in Lewis County cut more of their trees while still protecting critters and, hopefully, keeping their land forested for generations. It's the first time in the history of the Endangered Species Act that a group of private landowners has undertaken such an effort, federal officials say.

The county has signed on, submitting the document this month for review by the federal agencies charged with enforcing the act. But the approach is contentious, as some environmentalists worry that it could set a template for easing logging restrictions across the state.

"You watch all this land being developed around you, and you know you could go out and make a fortune in a heartbeat," Stinson, 74, said recently as he surveyed a stand of pencil-straight firs. "Most small family landowners don't want to do that."

Family-owned forestland covers an estimated 5,000 square miles, or 8 percent of Washington. That's a far cry from the massive swaths covered by state, federal and timber company land. But many of the family-owned forests are at low elevations between residential areas and larger tracts of forest, making them the front lines in the fight against sprawl - and tens of thousands of acres are believed to be converted to development each year.

In Lewis County, an estimated 2,200 family foresters own about 200 square miles of land, with an average size of around 55 acres, according to the Family Forest Foundation, a group started by the Stinsons, local logger Tom Fox and others.

Those landowners are typically required to abide by the same logging restrictions as timber companies such as Weyerhaeuser, though the rules are more onerous on their smaller parcels, possibly making them more likely to sell.

If a stream meanders through a tree farm of 50 or 100 acres, regulations requiring no-cut and partial-cut buffers totaling 170 feet on either side can take a huge chunk out of profits.

In the 1980s, Don Christensen bought 75 acres in Lewis County that had been subdivided into 5-acre lots. Christensen kept the property as a tree farm, but a stream that runs at barely a trickle in the summertime prevents him from logging one-quarter of it, he said.

That's the type of story that infuriates the Stinsons and Fox: Christensen and others, they say, are financially punished after doing the right thing by not developing their land.

Another example, they say: Small-time landowners who let their trees grow big enough to provide much-needed habitat for spotted owls would be rewarded by being barred from logging on much - if not all - of their land if the threatened birds actually move in.

Their plan would make several changes to the state's forest practice rules for the county's family foresters, primarily by substantially narrowing the no-cut buffers along streams. It would also grant exemptions for incidental harm to species protected by the Endangered Species Act.

The foresters would agree to keep their land as working forests for 100 years; however, there is nothing to prevent them, or their descendants, from getting out of the plan and selling.

They would grow their trees longer - at least 50 years upland, and 70 years near streams - before cutting them. There are no such time limits currently; it is generally considered economical to harvest after 40 years.

The foresters would be encouraged - but not required - to leave buffers around nests or dens for dozens of upland species, such as the pileated woodpecker, that aren't otherwise protected.

The foresters would abide by these rules for the length of the plan, even if state rules become stricter.

"You need to have stability," Doug Stinson said. "We have to know if we plant a tree that 60 years from now we'll be able to harvest it."

Peter Goldman, an attorney with the Washington Forest Law Center in Seattle, said the approach is well-intentioned, but wrong-headed.

"The problem here is that forestry cannot compete with development. End of story," Goldman said. "When you have beautiful land along a river, the land is worth 20 times more developed. There's no scientific or policy support for the proposition that if you just lower the environmental protections it'll stay in forestland. We need a much bigger fix."

Goldman suggested the federal and state money the Family Forest Foundation received could have been better spent trying to devise policy-based, rather than science-based, proposals. There are some programs that help small-time foresters, such as by paying them not to log near streams, he noted, but they are inadequate and underfunded.

Steve Stinson, who has a master's degree in silviculture from the University of Washington, stands behind the scientific approach. He says the narrower no-cut buffers, which range from 25 to 40 feet for perennial streams depending on their size, are justified by a new type of modeling they devised to estimate how many branches or logs might naturally fall into a stream, providing habitat for fish.

The insistence on science gives some environmentalists heartburn: If a policy-based exemption to current forestry rules is needed to ease the pressures on family foresters, they say, then fine. But if narrower no-cut buffers are scientifically justified for small landowners in Lewis County - which is in dispute - then they are likely also justified on timberland around the state. And that would give Weyerhaeuser and others a foothold to argue for implementing the narrower buffers on industrial forestland.

Two scientists at the National Marine Fisheries Service rejected the Family Forest Foundation's modeling, saying it came up with biased results. Other scientists also found flaws, but not fatal ones. Steve Stinson said the NMFS criticism was simply wrong and that independent scientific reviews tended to support the plan's approach.

Stinson also insisted that the ecological and geographic conditions on which the plan was based were so specific to Lewis County that it could not serve as a statewide template. He said he hopes NMFS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will submit the plan for public comment, where disputes over the science could be aired. Sen. Patty Murray and other members of Washington's congressional delegation have called on the services to do the same.

Bill Vogel, a Fish and Wildlife biologist, years ago suggested that the Stinsons and Fox devise a countywide plan for family foresters because the services don't have enough staff to write habitat plans for individual landowners. He said the agencies are determining whether the plan is scientifically adequate to be publicly reviewed.

"The science they've put together is a good body of science," Vogel said. "Fish and Wildlife considers these small landowners to be very important. They're in key places in the landscape, so we've tried to understand how they do their business. They've got good stewardship of the land at heart, and it's also about their way of life."

On the Net:

Family Forest Foundation: <http://www.familyforestfoundation.org>

Wash. Forest Law Center: <http://www.wflc.org>

National Marine Fisheries Service: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife: <http://www.fws.gov>