

# Treehuggers and treecutters unite

WESTERN ROUNDUP - [January 21, 2008](#) by Lissa James



Steve Stinson with a 105-year-old Douglas fir tree on his family's property in southwestern Washington. Stinson recently changed a harvest boundary to exclude the tree, which he's climbed in the past. LISSA JAMES

## **Small foresters in Washington get a break that might just keep them in business**

Walking through a 250-acre parcel of his family's land on a snowy December morning, Steve Stinson passes from a stand of young trees into a forest of century-old Douglas fir, their trunks rising from a tangle of bracken fern and salal. Along the trail, Stinson points out several snags pockmarked by the holes of pileated woodpeckers.

The Stinson family property is progressive forestry incarnate: mixed-age forests, plenty of standing dead trees for bird and bug habitat, and 7- to 20-acre clear-cuts replanted with a variety of tree species. Industrial timber companies, farming trees as if they were corn, typically harvest 38-year-old Douglas fir monocrops; the Stinsons don't cut until their trees are 80 years old. The family owns nearly 1,200 acres in southwestern Washington's Lewis County, making it a "small forest landowner" under Washington state law.

Small tree farms like the Stinsons' encompass some of the most environmentally sensitive land in the state: low-lying areas close to streams and rivers. But rising property values and stagnating timber prices often tempt these landowners to sell out, opening their land to the subdivision knife. And small foresters are hampered by environmental restrictions originally designed to help the timber industry navigate the Endangered Species Act.

Now, the threat of forests disappearing under exurbia has brought some traditional adversaries - environmentalists and the small foresters - to the same table. Together, they've succeeded in convincing the state Legislature to tinker with the regulations in a

way that could help keep the foresters on the land. But as the foresters ask for more, the environmentalists are beginning to have doubts.

**The problem surfaced** in 1999, when it became clear that a landmark rule designed to protect endangered salmon habitat would have a significant economic impact on small tree farms. The Forests and Fish Rules, which will regulate logging on private land in Washington until 2055, give the timber industry immunity from lawsuits over damage done by logging to endangered salmon habitat. In exchange, loggers must increase the size of the buffer zones they leave around fish-bearing streams. But because small landowners are more likely to own land in easy-to-access river valleys, the new streamside regulation hit them harder than it did the industrial companies, which mainly own land in the foothills.

Up until last September, small landowners had to file Forest and Fish permit applications every two years. Since few small landowners are well-versed in the scientific side of forestry, they had to hire consultants to fill out the hefty applications. That could cost thousands of dollars, and more if streams, new roads, or threatened or endangered species were involved, says forester Jack Kleinhoff. Now, thanks to the recent push in the Legislature, small landowners only have to apply every 15 years - a seemingly small change that has some wide-ranging repercussions. It gives those landowners one less barrier to staying in business, and regulators hope that taking the long view will help them do a better job managing their forests. "We want people to think, 'Do I want that road for just one harvest, or is it in the proper location to be able to access many harvest locations?'" says Mary McDonald, manager of the state's Small Forest Landowner Office. Rick Dunning, executive director of the Washington Farm Forestry Association, hopes that hundreds of long-term permits will be approved this year.

Small landowners first started working on the long-term permits in 2002, but the plan picked up momentum when the environmentalists got on board. "Our support (for the long-term permits) is what gave them a green light," says Peter Goldman, executive director of the Washington Forest Law Center. The state's environmentalists, says Goldman, "all want to see small forest landowners succeed and be able to conduct viable forestry." That's a big change from 10 years ago, says Rick Dunning, when "environmentalists didn't want us to cut a tree."

**The treaty** between landowners and environmentalists, however, has hit a snag as foresters look for more regulatory leniency. In addition to managing his family's property, Steve Stinson is the executive director of the Family Forest Foundation, which has spent 10 years and nearly \$4 million of private, state and federal funding developing the nation's first multi-species, multi-landowner Habitat Conservation Plan. If approved by the federal government, the plan would allow landowners on 130,000 acres in Lewis County to harvest more trees next to streams, but increase the restrictions on upland logging. So far, says Stinson, the support from the environmental community for the new plan has been "tepid." "The naysayers," he says, "worry this will unravel Forests and Fish."

And it might not do any good, anyway. Becky Kelley, campaign director for the Washington Environmental Council, says it's too simplistic to blame the regulations when land is converted from forestry to development. The average small-forest landowner is in his 60s, looking ahead to retirement, estate taxes and health care bills. "The conversation that doesn't happen," says Kelley, "is, 'Aren't they going to convert anyway? And how can we address these other problems?'"

The cooperation that went into the long-term permits, says Kirk Hanson, regional director for Northwest Certified Forestry, "may have just been a flash in the pan." But the pressure on the area's forests is bound to increase: The population of the Puget Sound region is expected to grow by half again by 2040. Environmentalists and small landowners "will end up on the same page someday," says Rick Dunning, "because we both want the same things."

For a look at what both sides don't want, one need only make the short drive from the Stinson family forest to Chehalis, Wash., where, says Stinson, "they're paving over the floodplain." Indeed, in December, as major floods washed across the region, the Chehalis Wal-Mart made regional news: It ended up 10 feet underwater.

*The author writes from Lilliwaup, Washington, where her family owns a tree farm.*