

February 13, 2009
House Committee on Natural Resources
Testimony in support of HB 1655 – Assisting small forest landowners to keep their
land in active working forestry

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Mr. Chairman and Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 1655.

Washington State faces a great challenge in maintaining its 4.2 million acres of small private non-industrial forests. These lands often occupy critical low-elevation lands at the leading edge of urban sprawl and development. Unfortunately, current regulatory requirements are accelerating the conversion of these forest lands with major consequences for water quality, open space, and fish and wildlife habitat.

It has been clear to me for some time that the Fish-Forestry Agreement was crafted primarily with input from and consideration for impacts on industrial forest lands. I believe that the small forest landowners were disproportionately impacted by the terms of the Fish-Forestry Agreement, which created significant incentives for small forest land owners to dispose of their lands or to convert them to other uses. I would also note that the Fish-Forestry Agreement is not a scientific document but, rather, a negotiated social contract that was developed among stakeholders and regulators, albeit with significant scientific input.

Efforts have been made by a collaborative of small forest land owners in Lewis County to develop an alternative approach to meeting the goals of the Fish-Forestry Agreement, which is known as the Family Forest Habitat Conservation Plan (FFHCP). While not a part of the development of this plan, I have followed both its development and the efforts made to have it considered as an alternative to the directives of the Fish-Forestry Agreement. I consider that the FFHCP is a scientifically credible alternative which provides significant habitat protections for endangered species. Throughout its development the plan has been subjected to independent scientific review and has engaged state and federal agencies' staffs collaboratively.

The state and federal agencies have been unwilling to deal with the FFHCP proposal despite the fact that it was given an independent peer review that was favorable. Hence, the introduction of HB 1655 which will provide an alternative pathway for

development of alternative Plan prescriptions and, potentially, provide significant regulatory relief for the family forest land owners in Washington State.

It is my professional opinion that the FFHCP is superior to current forest practice regulations in many ecological respects. This includes its provisions related to management in riparian areas. In addition to providing appropriate amounts and sizes of wood debris, the plan recognizes – as current regulations do not – that dense riparian forests throughout extensive stream reaches are not optimum for many aspects of aquatic ecosystem function.

In addition, it is my strong professional opinion that providing regulatory relief and stability is imperative if we are to maintain the forest land base that is so important to our society. These values include watershed protection and provision of wildlife habitat, as well as protection and maintenance of high-quality stream habitat. Indeed, as important as it is, this legislation is only one step among those that are needed to create state-level policies that will encourage small private forest landowners to continue their forest stewardship.

We have lost the corporate timberlands to the Real Estate Investment Trusts and Timber Investment Management Organizations. The corporate forestlands are extinct as a part of our long-term forest land base – they will be converted to “higher and better uses” whenever and wherever possible. As a society currently living in a forested region, we cannot let that happen to the remaining private forest lands.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts and would be happy to discuss my perspectives with you further.