MY OPINION FROM BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR

Forest management at the crossroads

BY CHRIS BRATT

There is a popular adage that says, "If you come to a fork in the road, take it." Actually, we are facing that very dilemma today in our public forests. We have to decide which fork to take. Taking one fork will continue us further into the past conflicts of widely divergent opinions regarding forest land management here in Oregon, and here in the Applegate in particular. But I don't think we want to go down that road again. The other fork offers the opportunity to lead us into more attractive alternatives for solving some of these seemingly intractable forest land issues. I think most of us would like to go in this new direction.

I also think we can safely say that the bureaucratic inaction of our Congress (where are those promised county timber payments?) and failed leadership of the Bush administration these past eight years have favored the resource extraction industries. We need, and hopefully will get in the upcoming November election, a more conservation-minded leadership who will allocate the wherewithal to solve problems and be willing to look at new forest management solutions.

Presently, there are energizing ideas coming from conservationists and federal agencies that can bring people together to hammer out compromises to meet the ecological and social goals necessary for good forest management. This means we need support from all elected officials. At the very least, voting Oregonians should take this opportunity to send a clear message to all prospective candidates for office that extractive industries, such as mining, logging and fishing, must be required to keep ecosystems healthy and functioning. Commodity interests, in order to continue using public lands, must protect our valuable resources and provide community jobs. The timber industry, abetted by our public land management agencies, must never again be able to mistreat our public forests across the landscape as they have in the past.

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Currently, I am encouraged by a new direction in forest management being forged locally by our two federal land management agencies. They are experimenting with innovative methods using public collaboration and forest restoration as their primary goals. These community and restoration-based models are being urged forward by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Forest Service and a number of community organizations.

I recently attended a field tour hosted by the Josephine County Stewardship Group that visited a series of sites in the most westerly part of the Applegate. This area is being proposed for a forest management project by the Forest Service and we were looking at some of the unique ecosystems that are being considered for restoration management.

This collaboration effort centered on forest restoration is called the Butcher Knife-Slate Project. It is taking place on 6,000 acres off Highway 199 west of the hamlet of Wonder. The project is an innovation proposed by the Forest Service to partner with Josephine County and interested community groups representing interests from logging to forest protection to economic development. The issues being examined include transitioning to a small diameter/second-growth timber industry, sustaining economic ventures such as restoration and thinning, forest resiliency to fire, protecting homes from fire, and finding new markets for forest products.

The Butcher Knife-Slate Project also will be experimenting using long-term (10-year) stewardship contracts over this 6,000-acre landscape. Stewardship contracts provide for a more flexible goods-for-service exchange where no money will change hands. Any removed products would be sold or used by the stewardship contractors to offset their labor costs. These contracts trade forest products with some commercial value for revenue needed to fund the restoration components.

The BLM is even further along in their efforts to promote community forestry and forest restoration. They have three similar projects, also in Josephine County. All of their projects are aimed at restoration to improve forest health, reduce potential for catastrophic wildfires, and create more good-paying jobs. Like the Forest Service project, BLM's projects are a collaboration among a diverse group of participants that includes loggers, environmentalists, community groups and the BLM. [For more information on the BLM restoration projects, see Voice of the Wild Siskiyou newsletter, Winter 2008 (www.siskiyou.org) and Medford *Mail Tribune*, June 1, 2008 (www.mailtribune.com/environment).]

The BLM and Forest Service are making a commendable effort by moving their forest management alternatives down this new road. They are advancing a stronger conservation agenda and ethic by proposing these restoration projects. This is the direction in which forest management must continue to travel, and our communities need to support these agency efforts for change. I believe this willingness to find new solutions to past problems associated with over-intensive forest management will help the agencies meet their mandates for a sustainable flow of forest products. It also will improve the ecological condition of the forest and build the necessary trust with the affected communities at the same time.

Don't forget: let your congressional representatives know that projects like these need their support, and be sure to vote for more conservation-minded leaders. If you want to know which ones, give me a ring

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