

U.S. Senator Ron Wyden lays out 'framework' for boosting O&C Lands logging

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U.S. Senator **Ron Wyden**, D-Oregon, spelled out a "legislative framework" today that calls for increased logging and county timber revenues from federally owned **Oregon & California Railroad lands** but penalizes counties with relatively low property taxes.

The **senator's framework** leaves out crucial details, including where and how much logging would be allowed. Wyden said he wants to work with the timber industry, conservation groups, scientific experts and others to nail down the fine points sometime this summer.

He called for higher federal payments to timber-dependent counties, which don't get property taxes from federal land. But he also said the federal funding formula should pay less to counties with low property taxes relative to other "resource-dependent" rural counties.

That's a strong signal to voters in southwest Oregon's Josephine and Curry counties, relatively low-tax counties that **rejected property tax increases Tuesday**. Oregon's Legislature is also **considering proposals to provide services** in some of the hardest-hit counties.

Eighteen counties include O&C land in Oregon, but counties in **southwest Oregon are particularly dependent** on logging revenues from those lands.

They have suffered as federal make-up payments designed to compensate for logging declines have dropped under budget pressures. The logging downturn stems from the 1990 listing of the northern spotted owl under the Endangered Species Act.

Wyden wants O&C lands to be dedicated to either "sustainable timber harvest" or set aside for permanent protection. The two designations should be "roughly equivalent," Wyden said, but he didn't specify a logging amount.

Wyden has been under pressure to move toward a solution from the logging industry and from county officials struggling to provide adequate services.

He's also under pressure from a **proposal by three Oregon representatives** in the Republican-controlled U.S. House -- Democrats **Peter DeFazio** and **Kurt Schrader** and Republican **Greg Walden** -- that would boost O&C logging from less than 200 million board feet a year to roughly 500 million.

Their proposal includes shifting 1.5 million acres of O&C forests to a trust that would be managed under Oregon's Forest Practices Act, which includes far less protection for the northern spotted owl and streamside trees than in federally held timberlands.

Wyden has said that approach has little chance of passing the Democrat-controlled Senate. His framework would keep the lands in federal management.

Wyden said he's open to "modernizing" federal rules to allow steady logging. But that's unlikely to include significant waivers from the federal Endangered Species Act or Clean Water Act, conservation leaders say.

Wyden didn't say what logging volume he's shooting for -- environmental groups say anything over 250 million board feet a year could significantly damage salmon streams and spotted owl habitat.

But he did say he's open to voluntary land swaps, where low-value O&C forests could be traded for high-value forests on private lands.

The O&C lands, the product of a failed railroad deal in the early 20th century, are in a checkerboard pattern that intersperses private timberland with public land held largely by the Bureau of Land Management.

If all works well, forestry bills including management of O&C lands would pass the House and Senate this summer. DeFazio has said his hope is the two sides could work out differences in a conference committee that includes members from both chambers.

-- Scott Learn

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