

The Elliott Options

Environmental groups call on the Legislature and state treasurer to keep the state forest in public hands

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Advocates for the Elliott State Forest had high hopes in February when Gov. Kate Brown released her plan to keep the state forest in public hands. But that optimism was dashed when newly elected Democratic State Treasurer Tobias Read voted with Republican Secretary of State Dennis Richardson to go ahead with a sale proposal to Lone Rock Resources.

The Elliott is a coastal rainforest and home to the marbled murrelet, a threatened seabird species. It is also tied to the Common School Fund, which provides money for K-12 school children.

The State Land Board, made up of the governor, secretary of state and treasurer, governs Oregon's state forests. The Elliott has been at the center of a years-long battle between those who want to log it for profit and potentially to generate money for the school fund, and those who want to see the forest preserved for wildlife habitat, recreation and carbon sequestration.

Despite losing the SLB vote, Brown directed Oregon's Department of State Lands to continue to explore options to keep the land public. Conservation group Cascadia Wildlands says that direction leaves open the possibility that Oregon Legislature and other parties can craft a viable public option.

Robin Meacher, wildlands campaign director for Cascadia Wildlands, says the group is now targeting the Legislature in hopes it will come up with the bonding money called for in Brown's proposal and also because support from the Legislature sends a signal to the SLB.

Brown's proposal, which came out shortly before the SLB meeting, calls for "working with the tribes to regain ownership of their ancestral lands while protecting the Common School Fund," as well as for \$100 million in state bonding capacity that would "decouple a portion of the forest from the Common School Fund trust land" and put money into the fund.

On the rest of the forest, there would be "sustainable timber harvest while protecting endangered and threatened species" under a Habitat Conservation Plan.

Meacher says Cascadia Wildlands was "very surprised" at Read's vote for the sale proposal and against the governor's plan. She says that "after all this time pushing the governor and the Land Board for a solution, then we get the leadership [from Brown] and then here's an unexpected, monstrous hurdle."

Read tells *EW* he voted on the only proposal that existed — the one from timber company Lone Rock Resources. Read says he is concerned about his fiduciary responsibility and that he was not comfortable rejecting Lone Rock and the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians and the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, which partnered with the timber company, "without a viable alternative."

Cascadia Wildlands together with Oregon Wild, Sierra Club, Audubon Society and more are rallying the Oregon State Legislature to come up with the bond money, but Read says the Legislature likely won't come up with a bonding bill until the end of the session, which would be after the SLB's April 11 meeting.

Meacher says they are calling on citizens to "keep the pressure up on Read because he is a decision maker in this and needs to continually hear it."

She points to the recent decision by the massive Outdoor Retailers to not return to Utah for its twice yearly annual showcase because of that state's stance on putting public lands into private hands.

Oregon U.S. senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, along with representatives Earl Blumenauer and Suzanne Bonamici, invited Outdoor Retailers to see what Oregon has to offer in a Feb. 27 letter.

Read calls the timing of the Outdoor Retailers decision and the decision of the SLB vote to sell public lands “an unfortunate coincidence” but the former legislator says of the Elliott, “We have been wrestling with this issue for several years.”

Meacher says, “It’s a strange dynamic to see a state about to sell off an 80,000 acre public forest throw that hat in the ring.”



About the Author >



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Camilla Mortensen is the editor of *Eugene Weekly*. She has two horses, a cat, an assortment of dogs and lives in a 1975 Airstream trailer. Sometimes all these details collide in unforeseen ways.

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