
Seneca Jones bids on Elliott State Forest land, says 'cowardly' environmental groups can't bully it

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Gallery: Elliott State Forest



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Oregon's antagonistic timber wars are far from over.

Seneca Jones Timber Co. on Wednesday announced it bid on land for sale in the Elliott State Forest to deliberately challenge environmental groups that warned they would sue to block the state from divesting forestland potentially housing the threatened marbled murrelet seabird.

Kathy Jones, Seneca Jones' co-owner, said her company didn't bid on the land because her mill needs lumber but because she and her two sisters refused to be bullied by "eco-radical" environmental groups and believed no other timber companies made an offer.

"It was just like: No, we're not going to lay down for this," Jones said. "We're taking a stand. It's very much a personal decision. We just decided we were going to do this based on principle and bring it to the public's attention."

Like the spotted owl before it, the murrelet has become a cornerstone species for environmental groups seeking to curtail logging in Oregon. The bird's population in Washington, Oregon and California has steadily declined over the last decade.

In an effort to protect the bird, environmental groups have threatened to sue companies that bid on land in the Elliott, which sits in the Coast Range in Coos and Douglas counties. **In one letter**, Cascadia Forest Defenders, an environmental group whose activists rappelled off the state Capitol in a September protest about the Elliott, warned timber companies:

"We will not respect new property lines, signs and gates. We will not respect a company that further degrades the integrity of Oregon's fragmented coast. Do not bid on these sales. If you become the owner of the Elliott, you will have activists up your trees and lawsuits on your desk. We will be at your office and in your mills."

Jones said her company would not be intimidated by what she called "cowardly" threats.

"They're elitist environmentalists, they're sent from Washington D.C., they're not about doing anything reasonable," she said. "The hypocrisy is without limit. And we're sick and tired of it in the state."

Jason Gonzales, a spokesman for Cascadia Forest Defenders, said Jones' attacks were an attempt to avoid serious conversation about the future of Oregon forestland.

"They'd rather just call names and say rude things," Gonzales said. "We don't look at these Elliott parcel sales as an isolated incident. There's a statewide trend of public land being privatized. It's a large-scale assault on public lands."

At its heart, the situation reveals the conflict posed by cutting down trees to fund state schools.

The State Land Board oversees some 700,000 acres statewide and has a constitutional responsibility to maximize revenue from the land to fund K-12 education. But because **logging was halted** in the 93,000-acre Elliott State Forest by environmental lawsuits, land management there will cost the state about \$3 million this year.

The land sale would fill that gap for just a year, raising questions about the state forest's future. State officials have said they consider the sale as a test case to determine the forest's value for larger sales or land swaps.

The sale has had hiccups.

Parcels saw their value drop after state and volunteer biologists discovered murrelets nesting there during summer surveys. Timber once worth an estimated \$22.1 million dropped to \$3.6 million, according to state appraisals. Stands occupied by the small seabird can't be logged and aren't worth as much.

While worth less on paper, a state contractor's appraisal theorized the reduced value may allow small timber companies **to buy the land cheap** and log it anyway, skirting laws to reap the original, higher value.

Five bids were submitted on three parcels for sale, said Julie Curtis, spokeswoman for the Department of State Lands. **Bids were welcomed** through March 28. No decision will be made about the bids for several days, Curtis said.

Jones said she didn't know how much her company might log of the 788-acre parcel it pursued. That land hasn't been surveyed for murrelets, which have been found living within two miles of the land.

Jones criticized Gov. John Kitzhaber and state Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum's office, saying they'd poorly defended the lawsuit that ultimately curtailed logging in the Elliott.

"It's just insanity," Jones said. "If we had strong leadership in this state, and the proper attorneys in place to fight this last lawsuit, we would've won this case. We would maintain our lands for the schools – to absolutely no effect on the marbled murrelet."

-- Rob Davis

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