

Gov. Kate Brown reveals plan to keep Elliott State Forest public



Conservation groups and supporters rallied outside the Keizer Civic Center Dec. 13, 2016 to oppose the proposed sale of the Elliott State Forest to a coalition that includes a timber company and tribal interests. (Andrew Theen/Staff)



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Oregon Gov. Kate Brown disclosed details Thursday afternoon on how she intends to keep the Elliott State Forest in public hands.

The Democrat released [a 25-page document](#) outlining her proposal, which calls for issuing \$100 million in state bonds to remove a section of the forest in Southwest Oregon from its obligation to provide timber revenue for state schools.

At the same time, the state would work with federal officials on a new Habitat Conservation plan on the remainder of the forest that will allow "sustainable timber harvest" while also protecting endangered and threatened species like the marbled murrelet, coastal coho salmon and Northern spotted owl.

The governor's plan comes ahead of next Tuesday's State Land Board, where the forest's future will once again dominate the agenda. Secretary of State Dennis Richardson and Treasurer Tobias Read are the other two members of the land board. A majority of the board must approve any agenda item.

Elliott State Forest sale: Timber, threatened species and politics collide

The Elliott State Forest could be sold for nearly \$221 million before the end of the year. It's a polarizing proposition.

"Preserving public lands and protecting our natural resources reflects our values as Oregonians," Brown said in a statement provided to The Oregonian/OregonLive.

"Keeping the Elliott State Forest in public hands benefits the Common School Fund, while also protecting the diverse habitats of the forest, and ensuring public access for future generations."

It's not clear how much of the 82,500-acre parcel would be protected from logging altogether under Brown's proposal, but the bonds would protect "high value habitat, including riparian areas, steep slopes, and old growth stands" from commercial logging.

The state's forestry department has been working on the proposal since a February meeting. If approved by state and federal agencies, the habitat conservation plan would be the first for the forest since 1995 and would ensure the state is abiding by the federal endangered species act. A past habitat effort derailed in 2011.

Brown's plan came with letters of support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Services, a boon to the conservation plan's chances of coming to fruition.

Three environmental groups issued a joint statement Thursday afternoon praising Brown for her "leadership and vision."

"The Elliott is an incredible stronghold for wild salmon, imperiled wildlife, clean water, and carbon storage," said Doug Moore, executive director of the Oregon League of Conservation Voters. "It is a place where recreational values can be realized, and it is symbolic of the larger battle at the federal level to privatize public places."

Revenue from the remainder of the forest not included in the \$100 million bond would continue to go toward the Common School Fund.

Brown's plan comes less than a week after the Oregon School Boards Association **threatened to sue the state** if the land board doesn't find a way to generate \$220.8 million for the state education endowment.

An independent property appraisal of the Elliott State Forest pegged the value at \$220.8 million.

Brown's proposal would net \$100 million in the short-term, with future revenues coming from timber harvest on the forest.

Richardson, a Republican, issued a statement earlier Thursday morning supporting the school board's position. "A plan must be consistent with the moral and constitutional requirements to prioritize Oregon schoolchildren by providing at least \$220.8 million for smaller class sizes, more school days, expanding career training, and increasing graduation rates," Richardson said. "This fiduciary duty of the Land Board as Trustees to maximize yields is paramount."

Until earlier this spring, the state had appeared close to selling the forest off altogether. Lone Rock Timber, a Douglas County company, was the only bidder to respond to a statewide call for interested buyers. The company was joined by minority owners, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, which had pledged to keep portions of the forest open to the public despite the ownership transfer.

Brown's plan still leaves the door open to tribes owning the land.

Read, a Democrat, issued his own statement later in the day Thursday, calling the governor's proposal a "sound next step."

But Read, like Richardson, said the school fund should be compensated to the tune of \$220.8 million.

He also introduced a new wrinkle: Have Oregon State University buy the remaining forest.

Read also shared a signed memorandum of understanding with the university that includes a commitment to explore the issue. "By working collaboratively and strategically over the next six years," Read said in a memo outlining the plan, "we will put OSU in a good position to come into possession of a unique asset that can serve as a foundation for their forest research and education, and solidify their ranking as a world-class forestry college."

OSU, as with other public universities, is in a budget crisis. Just yesterday, the Bend Bulletin reported President Ed Ray said the school faced \$20 million in budget cuts this year.

The Corvallis-based school is also asking for millions from the state for capital construction projects. OSU is seeking \$69 million in state bonds to pay for expansion efforts at its Bend campus this year.

Jim Green, executive director of the Oregon School Boards Association, issued a statement saying he was hopeful an agreement could be reached between the three board members and the schools, but there are many uncertainties.

"Our focus is on ensuring that the Elliott doesn't lose value as an asset of the Common School Fund," he said in a statement."

The land board meets in Salem on Tuesday.

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