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Editorials on Elliott State Forest illustrate rural/urban divide

The News-Review Editorial Board 19 hrs ago

The News-Review frequently runs editorials by other newspapers, in addition to our own, on our opinion pages. Sometimes the views expressed by the editors at other newspapers accord with our own. Other times, though, it seems we're viewing the world through very different lenses.

Nowhere has the urban/rural divide been clearer than in the editorials we, and the Portland Oregonian, produced after the State Land Board backed out of the Elliott State Forest sale.

The forest was originally set aside for timber management, with money from the harvests going into the Common School Fund. That purpose has since become controversial, pitting the needs of our cash-poor schools and our kids against the wishes of the environmental community. In recent years, the timber has remained standing as environmental and other concerns have risen to the forefront and crowded out the forest's original purpose.

The State Land Board, composed of three state officials, one of whom is the governor, voted in 2015 to sell the forest. Roseburg's Lone Rock Timber Management, and the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians worked together on a proposal to buy it. Their plan involved paying the state \$220.8 million for the forest, setting aside 25 percent as protected old-growth forest.

But Gov. Kate Brown backed away from the sale, putting forward instead her own plan to keep the forest in public ownership, and sell \$100 million in bonds to buy out some areas for conservation. One at a time, the two newer members of the land board fell in line with the plan to keep the Elliott public and reject the sale.

On Sunday, we ran an editorial from the Oregonian in which it praised Brown's proposal in glowing terms. The governor "showed foresight," made a "bold challenge," and her proposal represented "unflinching advocacy."

"Brown should take a bow," the editorial said.

The editorial even went so far as to claim that future generations, "among them so many school children, will be grateful" the forest remains in public ownership.

That's laying it on pretty thick we think. But then again, we used very different words to describe the land board's actions. In our editorial a couple weeks ago, we called the governor's plan "a real head-scratcher," one that "increases the state's budget problems" through the obligation to pay back those bonds with interest. We said turning down Lone Rock's offer would be "throwing away money."

Brown may have officially "won the battle," we said, but "it's our kids who lost."

Back in December, we wrote that we were encouraged by Lone Rock's proposal and we hoped it would serve as "a model for future efforts on government-owned timberlands."

The fundamental differences in these editorial stances illustrates a broad chasm between how ruralites and urbanites view the forests. Urbanites tend to see all forests as wilderness, tourism destinations and carbon sinks. They get their jobs in the cities, and don't have any real understanding of natural resource-based economies. Sometimes it seems to us they have little empathy for the people whose livelihoods depend on them.

While we, too, recreate in forests and value our environments, down here we draw distinctions between timberlands and forestlands. Some land has been set aside, and long used, to grow timber as a crop, generating jobs, cash, and funding for essential government services. Down here, we call those timberlands. They include places like privately owned timberlands, O&C timberlands and the Elliott. The harvesting of their crops pays our bills, buys us libraries and sheriff's patrols and pours into the coffers of our schools.

It's hard to get that across to our urban neighbors to the north. It seems the glasses we're wearing are just tinted a different shade of green.

The Douglas County-based timber company and tribe's proposal met the Department of State Lands' requirements of purchasing the entire 82,500 acres of the Elliott to be managed for timber harvest, creating 40 full-time jobs for 10 years, leaving at least 41,250 acres for public recreational access and 20,625 acres of habitat to be protected from harvest.