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Alternative options proposed for the Elliott State Forest

EMILY HOARD The News-Review 13 hrs ago



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Elliott State Forest

After the state decided to sell the Elliott State Forest in 2015 to meet its commitment to the Common School Fund, Lone Rock Resources and the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians submitted the only bid by the original deadline in November 2016.

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.

Since then, State Lands postponed its decision regarding the sale, and alternative plans to keep the forest publicly owned have been brought forward.

The State Land Board expects to discuss these options during its meeting at 10 a.m. Tuesday at the Department of State Lands in Salem. Board members are Gov. Kate Brown, State Treasurer Tobias Read and Secretary of State Dennis Richardson.

Brown, the only board member to vote against the sale in February, released an updated plan Thursday, outlining her vision to keep the Elliott under public ownership. Her proposal would use up to \$100 million in state bonding to buy out part of the forest with the goal of protecting high value habitat, including steep slopes, riparian areas and old growth.

The rest of the forest would fall under a Habitat Conservation Plan for sustainable timber harvest as well as the protections of native, endangered and threatened species. The public would have access to the entire forest.

“Even in the face of complicated challenges, we must strive to protect the values that Oregonians hold dear,” Brown’s proposal reads. “Those include healthy habitats and forest lands; hunting, fishing, and hiking in the woods; and jobs critical to our rural economies.”

Though Read voted to sell the forest to Lone Rock and Cow Creek in February, he changed his mind near the end of March, instead favoring Brown’s public option.

He released a draft memo of his plan Thursday that builds on Brown’s proposal, adding direction for an opportunity to turn the Elliott into a state research forest managed and owned by Oregon State University.

“I applaud OSU and President Ed Ray for being willing to engage in discussions about the future of the Elliott,” Read said in a statement. “My outline does not commit OSU to purchasing the Elliott, but by working collaboratively and strategically over the next six years, 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.”

Along with the draft memo, he released a Memorandum of Understanding with OSU.

He said this solution could be a compromise that would be “a win for the public, a win for our environment, a win for our university, a win for our timber industry and most importantly – a win for our state’s school children.”

Bob Zybach of Cottage Grove also put out an alternative plan to rename the land the “Elliott State Educational Forest” and keep it state-owned for at least 20 years, with the option to extend.

Zybach calls this the Giesy Plan, after lumberman Wayne Giesy's efforts to spur job growth and forest health on federal timber lands.

Economist Christine Broniak of the Legislative Revenue Office estimated the Giesy Plan would produce more than \$460 million in timber revenue over 20 years.

"This would depend on annual sales of 50 million board feet per year, which is less than actually grows every year on the Elliott and a figure that was routinely being reached 30 years ago, when the trees were much smaller and younger on the forest," Zybach wrote in an email to The News-Review.

Based on a ratio of 10 direct or indirect jobs created per million board feet of timber harvested, Zybach said the plan would create over 500 jobs during the 20 years. The Giesy Plan also accounts for protecting wildlife habitat, streams and public access.

Zybach hopes to present his plan on Tuesday as well.

Richardson initially voted in favor of selling the Elliott, but said in a release Thursday he will consider the presented proposals based on certain criteria.

He stated the proposal he'll vote for must provide at least \$220.8 million for the Common School Fund, protect the environment according to the Forest Stewardship Council principles and the Endangered Species Act and create family-wage jobs through timber harvest.

Other requirements Richardson listed include recreational access, the restoration of lands to tribes and public ownership opportunities. His ideal plan would also be financially sound long-term and preserve the state's reputation for negotiating agreements.

"I agree with the Oregon School Boards Association that we are both morally and constitutionally required to prioritize Oregon's schoolchildren by providing at least \$220.8 million for smaller class sizes, more school days, expanding career training and increasing graduation rates," Richardson wrote. "If the governor or treasurer produces a plan that meets the above criteria and maintains the Elliott as a public asset, I will welcome such a plan."

The Oregon School Boards Association threatened to sue the state for improper management of the Elliott for the Common School Fund.

Representatives of conservation organizations, Cascadia Wildlands, Oregon League of Conservation Voters and Audubon Society of Portland, said in a joint statement they are enthusiastic about Brown's plan.

Representatives of Lone Rock and Cow Creek could not be reached before deadline.

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