



OregonLive.com

Everything Oregon

The right time for forest restoration

By Guest Columnist

March 10, 2010, 9:00AM

By John Shelk and Andy Kerr

One of us runs a timber company. One of us is an environmentalist.

And we agree.

Fifteen years ago when Andy was hung in effigy in Oregon logging towns and protesters climbed into trees to stop John's contractors from cutting down trees, agreement was the furthest thing from our minds.

Today, things are different. Society has changed, and so have Oregon's forests. The scientific understanding of older forests and the species that rely on them has evolved, as has the understanding of the role the timber industry can play in forest restoration.

More than ever, there is significant agreement over how the millions of acres of drier forests in eastern Oregon should be managed. That's why we both support new legislation from Sen. Ron Wyden that would codify the common ground that exists between conservationists and the timber industry.

We didn't achieve compromise simply because we were tired of fighting. Rather, the eastern Oregon forest legislation gets our support because it recognizes that we have compatible, if not the same, interests.

From decades of back-and-forth litigation and shifting land management policies determined by whoever occupied the White House, we've learned that small victories for either side in the forest wars were often short-lived.

More than anything, if Congress passes the Eastern Oregon Forest Restoration, Old Growth Protection, and Jobs Act, it would give clear direction to the U.S. Forest Service on how to manage our forests for the long term.

Science is the foundation of this legislation. The best available research tells us that certain dry forests desperately need restoration following years of neglect. Sometimes, restoring forest health will mean reintroducing fire and allowing natural processes to dominate. At other times, mechanical treatments will be necessary to remove unnaturally overstocked trees. A scientific advisory panel will ensure that future contentious issues are informed by research and not rhetoric.

Recognizing the unique ecology of dry eastern forests and establishing special rules of engagement for them will mark a dramatic improvement in national forest management.

This legislation will have tangible benefits for the environment, including: protecting and restoring old-growth forests, repairing old roads and placing restrictions on the construction of new ones, and safeguarding streams. Planning on a large scale to ensure these environmental benefits are achieved will allow greater certainty for eastern Oregon timber operators and lead to a more consistent supply of wood to struggling mills.

Some have criticized Wyden's bill for going too far and for not going far enough. It's not a bill that either of us would have written on our own. No legislation -- especially legislation that can be enacted -- is perfect. Nonetheless, it would be a significant step forward.

While the legislation is not universally acclaimed, the coalition of conservation and timber interests that support the bill when a Senate subcommittee hears testimony today speaks to how far we've come.

Andy can support this legislation because it offers greater protections for eastern Oregon forests and watersheds than ever before, and ensures that science will inform decision making. John can support the Wyden bill because it will put people to work in the forest and mills, supporting rural economies and restoring the forests around us. Actually, each of us can also endorse the other's reasons for wanting this legislation to become the law of the land.

We hope Oregonians and the rest of our elected leaders can join us in making this compromise approach work.

Andy Kerr, former executive director of Oregon Wild, operates The Larch Co. John Shelk is part-owner and operates the Ochoco Lumber Co. in Prineville.