

A fork in the forest road by The Editorial Board

Tuesday September 08, 2009, 6:52 PM

Through hard, hard experience, the Pacific Northwest has learned what it means to put one value, logging, above all others on public forests. The region is living with the results: bitter, paralyzing disputes, lawsuits, sick, fire-prone forests.

On Wednesday, when the Oregon Board of Forestry meets for an all-day meeting in Silverton, it is imperative that the board not set into motion a process that ultimately will put the timber cut above other public values on the vast Tillamook and Clatsop state forests.

The state board is at a critical juncture in its management of the state forests, and there's reason to worry that the board is going to go the wrong way. At its last major meeting in June, the board not only voted to boost the cut on state forests, but also broke from its consensus-style management and decided to rewrite its definition of the "greatest permanent value" of the state forests.

When it meets today at the Oregon Garden Hotel, the board is expected to approve a process that leads to a new definition, one that elevates timber above other values, and justifies more logging and less habitat protection on the forests.

We have consistently supported a strong and sustainable level of logging on the state forests. But it's risky and unnecessary to change to the state's guiding philosophy on the Tillamook and Clatsop, the sweeping forests that now cover much of the northern Coast Range after recovering from devastating fires in the 1930s. The board's current definition of greatest permanent value is the right one: "Healthy, production and sustainable forest ecosystems that over time and across the landscape provide a full range of social, economic and environmental benefits to the people of Oregon."

What, exactly, is wrong with that definition? It recognizes what the Tillamook and Clatsop are today -- not only a critical supplier of logs and logging revenue to coastal counties, but a precious source of clean water, one of the state's few remaining strongholds for wild salmon, a convenient recreation area for tens of thousands of Oregonians.

It is true, as we noted before, that the state's plan for managing the Tillamook and Clatsop promised far more than it could deliver. It's also true that the state board had little choice but to make adjustments in the plan to boost the cut, even at the costs of promised habitat protections for fish, wildlife and recreation. The political pressure to up the cut was growing, and the board, to its credit, at least resisted a proposal in the Legislature to require that the state forests be managed as industrial timberlands.

Yet if the state board rewrites its definition of greatest permanent value in a way that elevates the economic output of the forests above other values, the result could be more or less the same as if the forests were considered industrial timberlands.

Marvin Brown, the state forester, keeps saying that there is no reason for concern and that board has no intention of moving away from its broad definition of forest values. But here is a state board dominated by timber interests and labor representatives, feeling pressure from coastal counties desperate for jobs and county revenue, preparing to set in motion not only more logging, but also a redefinition of the highest value of public forests. That's not where Oregon should go.