

ODF Clearcuts Legacy Forests: Another Spring To Be Silenced

Anna Kaufman and Avi Goldshmidt

North Coast Communities for Watershed Protection (NCCWP) requests your consideration and immediate action to help safeguard drinking water and residents' health in neighborhoods east of Astoria. Written comments are needed by Friday, May 17, regarding ongoing and upcoming Oregon Department of Forestry timber harvests in Clatsop County. Anybody may submit a comment to ODF; you do not need to be a resident of Clatsop County.

When Vicki and Trask Bergerson bought their home near John Day River, they felt secure bordering state forestland managed by the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF). However, they recently learned of a proposed clearcut abutting their property line. So, on May 5th, the Bergersons guided a small group of concerned Clatsop County citizens on their property to see the planned “Mothball Hill” timber harvest, drafted in the ODF’s Annual Operations Plan (AOP).



At the beginning of each calendar year, the state drafts AOPs outlining upcoming timber harvests on state land. ODF-managed land is divided into districts, and each district creates a distinct plan that is submitted to the Board of Forestry. The Astoria District encompasses the 136,000+ acres of Clatsop State Forest. For 2025, the draft AOP proposes to cut 50.9 million board feet of timber and spray 2,100 acres with pesticides within Clatsop County.

After the draft is submitted to the board around April, a 45-day public comment period commences, during which time citizens may offer recommendations. Last year, the state only received 29 public comments. In July, once the plan is approved, harvests are auctioned to private companies and contractors. This is where ODF gets most of its revenue, two-thirds of which is returned to the county. Once the contracts are let, the trees no longer belong to the state.

According to Astoria ODF officials, the AOPs attempt to meet the agency's legal obligation to manage state forests for social, economic, and environmental outcomes. This concept is commonly referred to as Greatest Permanent Value. State forests provide outdoor recreation, education and interpretation opportunities, essential wildlife habitat, and clean water. They also produce timber harvest volume that produces jobs and revenue that funds vital services in rural counties, local districts, and schools throughout the state.

However, there are a growing number of residents within this historically timber-dependent county who are concerned by the amount of harvesting and related pesticide applications. Darren Orange, a local artist and business owner whose property borders one of the proposed clearcuts in the John Day Estuary, was shocked to find out about the proposed "Mothball Hill" harvest in the 2025 Astoria District AOP. According to his letter to the ODF, "this proposed clearcut will impact a previously unmanaged biodiverse forest with trees and mycorrhizal networks well over 100 years old. The geographical location is extremely steep, and the boundaries for cutting would push into the Columbia River at its northernmost point. Slide potential is high, threatening the railroad and homes, both on private drive Phil Rd., Highway 30, and Deer Valley Rd."

Orange's partner, Farrah King, is also devastated by the proposed ODF clearcut. An apiarist who shares educational content about natural beekeeping practices, she is concerned not only about damage to the forested ecosystem and their home, but also about the ways in which it will impact her livelihood. King says, "[The Mothball Hill Harvest] undoubtedly would also impact my apiary and native pollinators (bees, flies, bats, birds, etc) alike that dwell within the unique ecosystem of this region."

In the Brownsmead area, homeowner Denise Moore learned of proposed clearcuts immediately adjacent to her land from neighbors. According to Moore, "Gnat Creek is across from the proposed ["Davis Ridge"] harvest and near our property line. A culvert that feeds into Gnat Creek drains from the area we use during the wet months. There is a full, heavy flow of water that is down below the trees to the southwest of the property line. Our family has used this water on our gardens and for livestock. This has been used for over 100 years by the previous owners of this property and maintained by our family."

If the proposed “Davis Ridge” and “Slough Hill (alternate)” clearcuts are approved by ODF, stands of up to 83-year old trees will be cut down for state revenue. Jim Furnish, former US Forestry Deputy Chief, wrote in his 3/19/24 opinion piece for the Astorian that “trees generally 80 years old and older should be safeguarded for clean water, fish and wildlife, and for their outsized role in capturing and safely storing the pollution that is causing climate change.”

As we move deeper into the climate crisis, the concerns of Clatsop County residents like Bergerson, Orange, King, and Moore become more relevant to the well-being of all community members — not only those immediately neighboring these proposed timber sales. The timber industry is Oregon’s largest, single source of climate pollution, adding 35 million tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere per year. This is about 1/3 of Oregon’s total greenhouse gas emissions (Segerstrom, 2018).

Arguments that public schools would suffer from the loss of timber revenue are inaccurate, as the revenue produced by logging on state lands could be replaced by the re-installation of a severance tax on the timber industry. According to ProPublica, at least \$3 billion in county tax revenue has been lost in the past three decades due to the repeal of the Oregon severance tax in the 1990’s (Younes 2020).

Natural Resource Economist Ernie Niemi explains that the social and economic advantages of reducing CO2 emissions, alongside the benefits of maintaining forest biodiversity, would outweigh losses from foregone timber revenues by at least 20-to-1. Relatedly, Orange’s concerns of aerial spray, blow down due to compromised forest integrity, vulnerability to slides, aesthetic harm to private property value, reductions in tourism, boating, commercial and recreational fishing represent a far greater cost than the short-sighted \$1.1 million dollar profit that the “Mothball Hill” timber harvest would provide to the state.

North Coast Communities for Watershed Protection, a community-run grassroots group committed to ending clearcuts, slash burning, and pesticide spraying in drinking watersheds, has been at the forefront of notifying local landowners and community members of the proposed clearcuts. An event on April 24th at Fort George Brewery organized by NCCWP showed residents how to access the AOP and take advantage of the public comment period. Through this event, local landowners and neighbors discovered the proposed clearcuts that would affect their lands.

None of the property owners were notified by ODF that clearcuts and spraying would be occurring adjacent to their properties, despite the 45-day public comment period that ends on May 17th.

A public comment period is open until 5 p.m. on May 17, 2024.

ODF is offering several convenient avenues to comment on Annual Operating Plans:

- Comments can be emailed to odf.sfcomments@odf.oregon.gov
- Comments can also be mailed to ODF Public Affairs, 2600 State St., Salem, OR 97310
- Online comments are also received through ODF's comments page (<https://www.oregon.gov/odf/recreation/pages/comment.aspx>)

