

At loggerheads

# A tussle in Oregon raises concerns about handing land to states

*What happens when trust forests no longer make money*



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DEEP in Oregon's Elliott State Forest, past groves of 200-foot Douglas firs and bigleaf maple trees dripping with emerald green Spanish moss, Joe Metzler pulls over his Toyota truck and peeks over a precipitous slope covered in tree stumps for

signs of elk. Mr Metzler, a retired coastguard rescue swimmer who looks a good deal younger than his 49 years, frequently hunts in the area. To make a clean kill with his bow and arrow, he sometimes camps out in the forest for a week. Then comes the really tough part: hauling 300lb of meat to his car, which is sometimes parked miles away. “It is not old man’s hunting,” he says gleefully.

Soon Oregon may sell 82,500 acres, or most of what remains of the dense forest, to a timber company and a Native American tribe. The proposal would allow public access on half the land. But sportsmen, who can currently roam the forest mostly as they please, worry it will be hard to reach or unsuitable for hunting.

Environmentalists fret protections for threatened species would be relaxed.

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The Elliott State Forest is not directly owned by the state; it is state trust land, which is required by Oregon’s constitution to produce profit for public schools. The Elliott does that through logging. State trust lands are common in the American West. They trace their roots to 1803, when Ohio joined the union and was given a grant of land to support public education. The practice was replicated throughout the

process of state accession, and today there are approximately 46m acres of such lands, 85% of which lie west of the Rocky Mountains.

Recently the Elliott State Forest has struggled to meet its financial responsibilities. A series of environmental lawsuits to protect threatened species such as Coho salmon, a Pacific fish, and marbled murrelet, a small sea bird, led to injunctions that crushed logging. Between 2012 and 2013 net revenues from timber in the forest plunged from \$5.8m to -\$3.3m. Oregon has since dithered between selling the forest and finding another way to compensate the trust.

The potential sale comes at a moment of great angst about public lands and increased scrutiny of state stewardship. At the Republican National Convention last year, the party's platform included a provision for the transfer of federal lands to the states. In January, prodded by Rob Bishop, a Republican congressman from Utah, Congress changed a key budget rule that will make it easier for such a transfer to take place. But not everyone wants it. States have far leaner budgets for land management than the federal government does. The fear that they will emphasise profit over access and conservation—or, worse, need to sell the lands they gain—has created eclectic political alliances. Nowhere is this clearer than in Oregon, where the potential sale of the Elliott State Forest has led conservative hunters and anglers to join tree-hugging environmentalists and Kate Brown, the Democratic governor, to oppose the sale.

Several states have been successful at managing trust lands. Some of Arizona's are close to Maricopa County, home to more than 60% of the state's population; they make money by leasing and developing those lands. New Mexico's trust lands are flush with oil; by exploiting them, the state raked in almost \$500m in 2016. A report published in 2015 by the Property and Environment Research Centre, a think-tank, found that between 2009 and 2013 state trust lands in Montana, Arizona, Idaho and New Mexico returned \$14.51 on every dollar spent, compared with 73 cents on every dollar spent by the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, the main stewards of federal land, which are not required to make a profit. But if state trust lands start to struggle financially, "it's perilous. Things can go from bad to sale really quickly," says Dean Finnerty, who works as a hunting and fishing guide in the Elliott State Forest.

There is a precedent for such worries. According to the Wilderness Society, a conservation group, Idaho has shed 41% of its lands since statehood; 100,000 acres have been offloaded since 2000. Oregon has sold all but 780,000 acres of its original 3.4m. Selling 82,500 more would not only upset those who love the Elliott, but fuel a wider worry about what happens when public lands are handed to states.

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