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Elliott State Forest plan inches forward

Wednesday, December 9, 2020

At the speed of a growing Douglas fir, the Oregon State Land Board has advanced plans for the Elliott State Forest.

The board voted Tuesday to pursue a [proposal](#) to decouple the forest from the Common School Fund and turn it over to Oregon State University for management as a research forest. The board – Gov. Kate Brown, Secretary of State Bev Clarno and State Treasurer Tobias Read – still did not address how the fund would be compensated for the forest's value.

The board scrapped plans to sell the forest in 2017 and set in motion an effort to keep it as [public land](#). The proposal presented Tuesday envisions final approval around the end of 2022.

The forest, in southern Oregon's Coast Range northeast of Coos Bay, was established in 1930 to pay for public education. OSBA has maintained that any forest decisions must honor the board's fiduciary duty to maximize its revenue for public school students.

"It is essential to our students that we provide a stable and adequate revenue stream, now and in the future, and the Common School Fund is one of the ways Oregon pays for the education of our children," said OSBA Deputy Executive Director Mary Paulson. "This decision will impact generations of Oregon students."

Paulson and former Reedsport School Board member Jen Clark are among the 16 current members of an Elliott advisory committee convened by the State Lands Department. It brought together industry, environmental, public agency, tribal and education representatives.

Committee members emphasized Tuesday that disparate and often combative interests compromised to create an agreement they could all support.

Paul Beck of Douglas Timber Operators also brought up education concerns Tuesday.

"There's work to be done," he said. "Schoolchildren and teachers of Oregon need to be made whole. These are Oregon's most precious resource, and we need to increase our investment in them."

The forest was put up for sale because logging limits had wiped out its ability to produce revenue for the Common School Fund. A sale canceled in 2017 had valued the forest at \$221 million. The Legislature issued \$100 million in bonds in 2019 to partially compensate the fund as the state explored options for public ownership. OSBA has maintained the Common School Fund is still owed \$121 million.

The OSU plan envisions using the forest for a mixture of conservation, recreation and research paid for by some logging and possibly other revenue streams such as carbon credits. Its plan, however, requires a \$34.8 million startup, and it estimates about \$2 million a year in ongoing funding. That revenue source has not been identified.

The plan does not address compensating the Common School Fund except to say that OSU can't do it. The State Lands Department envisions a decoupling framework to be ready around the beginning of 2022.

During final discussions, Clarno raised again the forest's purpose, pointing out how the Elliott can only be enjoyed by a few while Common School Fund money goes to areas around the entire state.

"The Elliott was created for the benefit of Oregon's children," she said. "It is shortsighted to say the public benefit is greater than our children's education."

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