

Everything you need to know about the Elliott State Forest's future



The Elliott State Forest, Oregon's oldest state forest, will stay in public hands. But major questions still remain about what becomes of the land instead. *(Courtesy of Department of State Lands)*



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An existential question was resolved this week: The Elliott State Forest, the 82,500-acre tract in Coos and Douglas counties, won't be sold to a timber company. It will stay public.

But what happens instead with the forest remains a loose collection of big ideas.

Gov. Kate Brown wants to borrow \$100 million to lift restrictions requiring the most sensitive parts of the land to produce revenue for schools and to create a blueprint outlining what areas could be logged.

Treasurer Tobias Read wants Oregon State University to pick up the rest of the tab (\$120 million) and use the forest for research.

Secretary of State Dennis Richardson says the state shouldn't borrow a dime and instead should swap the Elliott for federal land.

Here's what you need to know about the next steps.

1. The state would essentially buy land from itself. (Which isn't that weird.)

It sounds like an unusual arrangement: Oregon taxpayers buying public land that the state already owns.

But it's not unprecedented.

Washington state, which has similar trust lands, has invested for decades in decoupling them from their school funding obligations. Since 1989, Washington has spent nearly \$900 million to create state parks, conservation areas and preserves from more than 123,000 acres of trust lands the state deemed too important to log.

Oregon has no such program. The state Legislature is currently debating whether to create one.

2. Brown's \$100 million plan will cost far more than \$100 million.

Borrowing money isn't free.

If the Legislature approves a plan to issue \$100 million in bonds to decouple part of the Elliott from its school funding obligations, taxpayers would end up paying between \$180 million and \$195 million, according to estimates from Brown's office.

That price tag drew criticism from Richardson, who said taxpayers' money would be better spent equipping schools for earthquakes.

"I do not support a plan that relies on borrowing \$100 million to buy a forest we already own," he said in a statement.

But with Read backing Brown and legislators pledging to help, it's not clear that Richardson's opinion will matter.

3. No one knows how much land the \$100 million would protect.

The governor has called for the \$100 million to be invested in the state's school fund to replace timber earnings from the Elliott State Forest's most sensitive land. It would end the state's mandate to make money for schools from the forest's steep slopes, old growth and riparian areas.

Brown has not yet said how many acres would be protected with the money. A spokesman said it was too early to give a rough estimate.

4. Brown's plan has a good chance of succeeding.

A key part of Brown's strategy is what's called a habitat conservation plan. That's a blueprint to say what could be logged and where threatened species – the marbled murrelet seabird, the northern spotted owl and coastal coho salmon – should be protected.

In 2011, after years of work, Oregon abandoned its most recent effort to get an Elliott blueprint approved by the federal government.

The problem? Oregon proposed such aggressive logging on the Elliott that federal biologists didn't think the coho would be protected. Cutting would've been allowed far too close to salmon-bearing streams, said Michael Milstein, a spokesman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which would have to approve the plan.

The governor's new plan envisions less cutting – roughly 20 million board feet a year – than earlier plans.

"We're optimistic this time around," Milstein said.

Having a \$100 million investment to protect sensitive areas, "pays for the protections necessary to unequivocally provide for the species from our perspective," said Paul Henson, Oregon state supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which would also need to approve the plan.

5. Richardson's idea is dead on arrival.

Richardson said his land transfer idea would be modeled on similar efforts in California, Minnesota and Utah.

It would hand over control of the Elliott to the federal government in exchange for less controversial land that could be logged.

But his concept doesn't have Brown or Read's support. Neither have signaled any willingness to give the Elliott to the federal government.

6. Oregon State University is a wild card, if perhaps a long shot.

Read proposed having Oregon State University invest \$120 million to decouple the rest of the Elliott from its school funding obligations.

University President Ed Ray told The Oregonian/OregonLive the school is "all-in on trying to be helpful to the state."

"We are committed to doing our honest best to help the state figure out what's the best way to go forward," Ray said. "What that ultimately turns into, we don't know."

Read's plan, which hasn't been adopted, would give the school until 2023 to decide whether to buy the Elliott.

7. For \$120 million, the Elliott would be one expensive research project.

If Oregon State bought the Elliott, the university would have to find either a very generous donor or a way to use logging revenues from the land to pay for it. Ray said the school does not have the money – it's currently looking for funding to expand its campus in Bend.

Before Oregon State would invest, Ray said the habitat blueprint would need to be approved. That would determine how much timber could be cut (and how much logging revenue the land would produce annually).

Thomas Maness, dean of Oregon State's forestry school, enthusiastically backed the idea. He told Brown, Read and Richardson the Elliott would provide Oregon State with a place to conduct long-term research to understand how active timber harvesting affects the coho, spotted owl and marbled murrelet.

"We've learned nothing about managing with spotted owls," he told the leaders at a Tuesday meeting in Salem.

Yet Eric Forsman, a retired Oregon State ecology professor who spent decades researching the spotted owl, dispelled the dean's assertion. He told The Oregonian/OregonLive there's a wide body of research on how timber harvests affect owls.

"We probably know more about how management affects the spotted owl than any other species of owl in the world," he said. Conducting research on how logging impacts the spotted owl is a huge challenge, he said, because the barred owl is pushing spotted owls out of their habitat.

"Unless you can remove the barred owl, you're kidding yourself if you think you can do a research project and think it won't be confused by the barred owl," Forsman said.

Maness later clarified his public remarks in an interview.

He acknowledged the breadth of scientific research and said the kinds of questions that the Elliott could answer include how restorative logging could aid the owl's recovery.

"We haven't learned what to do to help them other than to shoot barred owls," Maness said. "What can we do that's good for them? How can we help them? That's what we want to figure out."

Owning the land would allow the school to deploy long-term monitors that could gather data for decades, something that wouldn't be feasible elsewhere, Maness said.

Oregon State already owns 15,000 acres of timberland, but it includes no old growth. The Elliott does.

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