

A wise, bold decision to retain the Elliott State Forest: Editorial



A scene from within the Elliott State Forest, near Coos Bay, in a file photo. (AP Photo/File)



By **The Oregonian Editorial Board**

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As recently as three months ago, the Elliott State Forest near Coos Bay was about to be sold off to a private logging company partnering with an Oregon tribe. But last week that changed sharply. The State Land Board, for years watching the forest's earnings for Oregon schools plummet, pulled a U-turn and followed Gov. Kate Brown's bald challenge to keep the 82,500-acre money loser in public ownership.

Oregonian editorials

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The action showed foresight and respects the will of a public increasingly weary of natural resource privatization, particularly of distinctive forested settings. The Elliott is such a place, replete with old growth trees and wild species, and prime hunting and recreational grounds. Its capacity for logging, however, is diminished by waterway and species protections.

Brown should take a bow. The action is a victory for her unflinching advocacy and leadership on the board, in which she is joined only by the state treasurer, Tobias Read, and secretary of state, Dennis Richardson. Her commitment was evident to all when she ignored her colleagues' wish in February to sell the Elliott and, before confused onlookers, ordered a state specialist to devise a public ownership plan anyway.

It worked. It didn't hurt that Oregon Senate President Peter Courtney would make clear the Legislature could be engaged for up to \$100 million in bonding to support purchasing a significant portion of the Elliott. And it really made a difference in recent weeks as Read came back with a plan to engage Oregon State University as a potential owner of the Elliott once the state makes its first play of securing partial ownership.

Even though logging revenues have been down for years, the constitution still mandates that the Elliott and other lands held in trust generate adequate revenue for public schools. Selling the Elliott would have gotten the state out from under its legal burden by placing more than \$200 million in sales proceeds into the Common School Fund. Properly invested, that money was projected to generate steady earnings for years ahead.

But doing so would have ignored rising sentiment from hunters, anglers, recreationalists and environment groups wishing to save the Elliott as a public asset that would only grow in value to all citizens as Oregon continues to develop. The forest's capacity to store carbon in a time of climate change, along with other "unseen" ecological values, have moved from the realm of speculations to real attributes worth real money. That is expected to continue.

OSU takes seriously the ownership proposition by Tobias Read but not without caution.

OSU takes seriously the proposition by Read but not without caution. University President Ed Ray, in an interview with The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board last week, was blunt: "We have an obligation always to be willing to step up and hear about what Oregonians want. That's our land grant heritage. But we will not cut elsewhere at OSU to buy this thing."

Yet Ray, joined in the interview by OSU College of Forestry Dean Thomas Maness, was enticed that through a combination of revenue-raising logging in some portions of the Elliott, with yet-to-be-found paying partners, the university might find a way to own the Elliott as a premiere research site into ecosystem and wildlife management. He estimated it would take "four or five years of heavy lifting" to see whether it could work, a proposition he welcomed. "You don't back off or blink just because something looks hard," Ray said.

The next move belongs to the Oregon Legislature. By the end of the current session, it must approve the sale of \$100 million in general obligation bonds, costing taxpayers far more than that once the debt is paid back. Brown has pledged support to make it happen. The money would be used to buy portions of the forest, decoupling it from the Common School Fund, while the Oregon Department of Forestry would then lead in the development of a habitat conservation plan to ensure a balanced approach to designating and managing multiple uses in the Elliott.

It's just the beginning of a process to transform the Elliott from a tool of education funding into a broad-spectrum public asset serving multiple purposes, some yet unseen. But the hardest part is now done: refusing to sell it off.

The land board's decision is wise and prescient. Present and future generations of Oregonians, among them so many school children, will be grateful.

-The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board

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