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Read sees Elliott sale as his responsibility to students

EMILY HOARD The News-Review Mar 15, 2017



Courtesy PHoto

Negotiations are underway for the sale of 82,000 acres of the Elliott State Forest for \$220.8 million.

It was not an easy decision for Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read to go against Gov. Kate Brown on the Elliott State Forest at last month's State Land Board meeting.

But ultimately, his responsibility to Oregon's students led him to support the sale of the public land to Lone Rock Timber Management Company, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians and the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians.

His vote surprised Brown and environmentalists who hope to keep the forest publicly owned.

While Brown's staff has met with members of Read's office to indirectly lobby the treasurer on the issue, conservation groups have rallied outside the capitol to put pressure on Read.

For the treasurer, however, the decision stems from the constitutional requirement for the Elliott to be managed for returns to the Common School Fund.

"That means I have the fiduciary responsibility to provide undivided loyalty to the beneficiaries of the Common School Fund, Oregon's students," Read said.

“As much as I don’t like some of the aspects of the protocol and I’m disappointed with some elements of it, the previous land board embarked on this protocol two years ago, affirmed it on several occasions and received just one proposal that was deemed to be responsive, so I didn’t feel it was consistent with my fiduciary obligations to reject that proposal without a viable alternative,” he said.

At the Land Board meeting, he added three elements to the sale protocol, the first being that the state, through the legislature, may repurchase up to \$25 million worth of critical acreage for conservation and riparian protections.

The second is to incorporate Forest Stewardship Council principles into the timber operations.

“That’s a priority around how the timber harvesting is done to help promote the continued health of the forest and environment,” Read said.

The third amendment was to give rights of first refusal to the five federally recognized tribes in western Oregon to buy back any land that the Elliott Forest LLC, formed by this coalition, might sell in the future.

“I think a lot of people forget that these lands are the ancestral homes of the tribes, and as long as we’re talking about ownership, I think it’s important to acknowledge that role and the opportunity to right some historical wrongs,” Read said.

The fact that the Cow Creek and Confederated Tribes are part of the group is a positive to Read.

“I think it’s important to acknowledge the historical and ancestral role the tribes have played here and the long history they have of managing this land and their own land,” he said.

He said he doesn’t know if the coalition will be able to come to an agreement with his added conditions, but negotiations are underway and there are a lot of details to be worked out.

“The elements I described give us more ability to meet our fiduciary responsibility and adhere better to things people would like to see for the Elliott in maintaining access and conserving the forest so people can continue to have access into the future,” Read said.

However, conservation groups around the state have come out against Read’s decision.

The Oregon League of Conservation Voters issued a statement after the Land Board meeting expressing shock at the Democratic treasurer’s vote. The group described Read’s decision as “unacceptable, and yes, a betrayal of our votes,” and said it was in stark contrast to his record of commitment to protecting Oregon’s public lands, which was one of the reasons OLCV gave him the 2015 Innovator of the Year Award.

“Tobias’ decision did come as a surprise to me,” Alan Bunce, outreach coordinator for Roseburg conservation group Umpqua Watersheds, said. “It may be because Lone Rock Timber and the Cow Creek Tribe really made a publicity campaign telling folks around the state what good neighbors and stewards they are to the land.”

But Bunce said he’s received more negative calls about ecological damage left after Lone Rock’s management practices than any other company.

Jake Gibbs, director of external affairs for Lone Rock, said no one has called the timber company directly to complain about its management practices, and he characterized the statements from Umpqua Watersheds as hearsay.

He said Lone Rock recognizes conservation and public access as important values that it respects and incorporates in its land management.

“We’re committed to meeting the requirements of the protocol of conserving forever 25 percent of the Elliott for older forest characteristics, that we will leave extended stream buffers on important fish streams and reemphasize that public access will be a priority and accessible for folks forever on the property at a minimum of 50 percent,” Gibbs said.

Read said most people who have expressed dissatisfaction with the Elliott sale have talked about public ownership.

“To me public ownership is fairly closely aligned with public interest, and I think that comes down to a couple of things: access and conservation,” Read said. “We wanted to make sure we were doing what we can to stick up for those values.”

He said there are many people who have been talking about alternative options to the sale, and he’s willing to see and consider them.

At the Feb. 14 meeting, Kate Brown discussed her ideas to keep the Elliott under public ownership by using \$100 million in state bonds to free parts of the forest from the Common School Fund requirement and keep them public.

Brown may be bringing other alternative plans to the next State Land Board meeting, which was postponed from April 11 to 10 a.m. May 9 at the Department of State Lands office in Salem.

“She talked about using \$100 million of bonds, but of course the state land board doesn’t get to do that, and it’s not at all clear to me where the remainder of those dollars would come from or how it would work,” Read said.

Read said he appreciates the fact Lone Rock and the tribes have been willing to spend as much effort and time as they have in putting together their plan.

“I imagine it’s a tough thing to do with the rather unusual protocol we’ve established as a state, so I appreciate their persistence and flexibility,” Read said.

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