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Elliott State Forest to stay publicly owned

EMILY HOARD The News-Review 3 hrs ago



COURTESY OF JOE METZLER

The State Lands Board will discuss options for the Elliott State Forest at its upcoming meeting.

The State Land Board unanimously voted to keep the Elliott State Forest under public ownership Tuesday.

Board members Gov. Kate Brown, Treasurer Tobias Read and Secretary of State Dennis Richardson decided to terminate the protocol the Department of State Lands had been following to sell the 82,500 acres to the only group that proposed to buy it.

This group, Douglas County-based Lone Rock Timber Management and The Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, with support of The Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians and The Conservation Fund, had offered to buy the land for \$220.8 million to free the state from its commitment to the Common School Fund.

“We all believe very strongly we have a fiduciary responsibility to invest in our schools for the future, for our children, our grandchildren or as tribes in Oregon say, for the next seven generations,” Brown said. She added it’s clear the state needs to change the way it manages the

forest to provide for the Common School Fund while protecting wildlife habitat and producing jobs for timber harvest.

Brown thanked the partners proposing to buy the forest, but said she believes public ownership is the best option for the long run.

“Regrettably, many in our tribe have grown conditioned to the disappointment of government treatment of native people,” Michael Rondeau, CEO of the Cow Creek Tribe, said in his public testimony before the board. “Many have also become conditioned to the dominance of urban areas driving politics and policies without the consideration of the impacts or needs of rural parts of the state.”

He said the tribe will continue to work through the disappointment and frustration with the process, and said the group’s time and limited resources had been dedicated to what it believed was the state’s intent for the last two years.

“Going forward, I do hope that we can rebuild trust in a government-to-government relationship, not only on potential forest management and land policy, but across the intersection of the tribal relationship and our governance rights as a sovereign nation with the state of Oregon,” Rondeau said.

Toby Luther, president and CEO of Lone Rock, said the coalition reflected a groundbreaking partnership between local tribes, a family-owned forest management company and conservation interests, and their proposal showed an approach that would protect public benefits including permanently protecting older forests, healthy streams and watersheds, recreational access and economic opportunity for rural Oregon.

“It is evident now that there was never a will to execute this formally adopted protocol and that thorough evaluation of our proposal against the approved protocol was never the governor’s intent. We worked diligently and in good faith, spending time and money on our proposal,” Luther said. “We naively believed the governor stood by her word and this rigorous public process. We are very disappointed.”

Conservation groups like Cascadia Wildlands, however, celebrated the decision to keep the forest publicly owned.

“There was a tidal wave of Oregonian support to keep the Elliott public that couldn’t be held back,” said Josh Laughlin, executive director of Cascadia Wildlands. “The Land Board’s decisive action today was visionary, and we look forward to working in the months ahead to create a lasting forest plan that benefits clean water, imperiled salmon and wildlife habitat and future generations of Oregonians.”

Laughlin added this decision comes at a time when there is tremendous pressure to privatize public lands around the country, and it’s a reminder that the state does not have to choose between supporting its school children and the environment.

During the meeting, each board member presented ideas for how to keep the forest publicly owned, and about 35 people gave public testimony.

Brown’s plan would use \$100 million in state bonding to buy out sensitive areas for conservation, and establish an updated Habitat Conservation Plan to protect threatened and endangered species.

Read’s plan would build upon Brown’s public option while adding the opportunity for Oregon State University to eventually buy the Elliott for \$121 million to manage it as a state research forest.

The work-ability of the land and use of timber harvest revenue would be a big factor in the university’s ability to manage the forest, according to OSU President Ed Ray.

“If we don’t learn how to manage with these listed species, we’re going to see disaster there,” said Thomas Maness, dean of OSU’s College of Forestry. Maness said the Elliott would give the school an opportunity to research threatened species like marbled murrelets, coho salmon and spotted owls.

Richardson proposed to exchange part of the Elliott for other federal lands in Oregon that do not have sensitive habitats for endangered species. These lands would be managed for sustainable timber harvest with revenues going toward the Common School Fund, while the Elliott would be protected under public ownership.

“Rather than borrow \$100 million, let’s look at parts of the forest that can be traded for other public forests,” Richardson said at the meeting.

Wayne Giesy and Bob Zybach proposed the Giesy Plan to turn the Elliott into an educational forest to keep it publicly owned for 20 years.

“The forest would be set up for research for anybody, not just Oregon State, and they wouldn’t have to spend \$120 million to do it,” Zybach said.

The State Land Board directed the Department of State Lands to continue forward with a public option while considering Read’s plan to partner with Oregon State University and exploring ways to work with sovereign tribal governments for ownership opportunities.

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