

BOB DOPPELT

Timber management suit reflects bad policy

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Scientists say we live in the “Anthropocene era,” a new geologic period in which human activities, not natural processes, determine the fate of life on Earth. This is unprecedented, yet many fail to understand the implications. The pending lawsuit announced by Lane County over the management of public forest lands that once belonged to the Oregon & California Railroad illustrates the problem.

Humans’ greatest effect on the environment is that we have altered the composition of the atmosphere. By burning coal, oil and natural gas we have added more than 365 billion metric tons of carbon to the atmosphere. Through forest loss and degradation, we have added over another 180 billion tons of carbon.

The result is a planet that is 1.6 degrees warmer than pre-industrial levels. Another 0.8-degree increase, perhaps in just a few decades, is certain due to emissions already in the atmosphere.

Any increase beyond 2.4 degrees becomes extremely dangerous. It is imperative to do everything possible now to keep carbon out of the atmosphere.

Many institutions have not yet come to grips with this urgent need. That seems to be the case with the pending lawsuit over the Bureau of Land Management’s western forest management plan announced by the Association of O&C Counties. The Lane County Board of Commissioners recently voted 3-1 to spend \$84,000 to join the suit.

The suit is being prepared in case the final BLM plan fails to set timber harvest levels high enough to meet the commissioners' approval. Commissioner Faye Stewart told me that the O&C Lands Act of 1937 requires a minimum yearly timber harvest level of 500 million board feet.

If the BLM plan fails to provide that, he believes it violates the O&C Act. A lower harvest level would also mean fewer timber dollars for county services and fewer rural timber jobs.

As Stewart acknowledged, the courts have already declared that the O&C Act does not supersede federal laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act, which have driven timber levels lower.

But the bigger issue is the effect of higher cut levels on our climate, which the commissioners don't seem to comprehend. I asked a forest carbon researcher, Dr. Beverly Law, professor in the College of Forestry at Oregon State University, about this. She started by emphasizing that Northwest forests are "one of the areas of the world where carbon is king."

"We track carbon flows," Law said, and cutting older trees releases a huge amount of carbon. "When older trees are cut, between 75 and 85 percent of the carbon is released into the atmosphere. Some is lost in harvesting and transporting timber to mills, 30 to 50 percent more is lost in the manufacturing process, and more is lost in waste generated in construction and other steps in the value chain."

She concluded, "Those who claim otherwise fail to understand the laws of thermodynamics."

I asked Law to respond to Stewart's statement to me that more carbon can be sequestered by cutting existing forests and planting new ones.

"There is a common confusion," she said. "Young trees might grow faster, assuming they don't die, but old trees hold tons more carbon that is lost when they are cut. And older trees continue to sequester carbon throughout their lifetime, which can be centuries."

Law also said extensively thinning forests on the west side of the Cascades to reduce wildfire risks "is not justified scientifically" because "research shows

there is no significant increase in areas burned in the Pacific Northwest, nor a significant increase in high fire severity.” She added, “It is wrong to think that most of the carbon in a forest is released into the atmosphere when it burns. Usually, less than 5 percent is released. The smoke people see billowing from a wildfire is mostly moisture, not carbon.”

Research by my colleague Ernie Niemi, principal economist with Natural Resource Economics Inc., found a “social cost” of carbon — the damage to the climate, people and the economy. For every \$1,000 of value generated from cutting carbon-dense forests today, up to 28 times more jobs and livelihoods are harmed due to the carbon that is released.

“Cutting these forests now contributes to ‘climate misery’ for millions of people,” Niemi said.

Lane County needs revenue and rural communities need jobs, but higher timber volumes are not the solution. The commissioners seem intent on spending public money chasing a vision of the past that conflicts with the realities of the living in the Anthropocene.

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