

I. Introduction

Oregon is the tenth largest of the United States, encompassing 97,060 square miles (Keisling 1999). Elevations range from sea level at the coast to the high peaks of the Cascade Mountains, the tallest being Mt. Hood at 11,245 feet elevation. Some of the wettest and driest places in the United States are found in Oregon; several sites in the eastern part of the state receive less than 8 inches of precipitation annually, while over 120 inches falls in parts of the Coast Range. All four of the world's major biomes occur in Oregon--arctic alpine, desert, grassland, and forest.

Renowned especially for its forests, which cover almost half the state, Oregon is home to such outstanding species as Douglas-fir, Sitka spruce, western hemlock, Pacific silver fir, white fir, noble fir, western red cedar, madrone, big leaf maple, black cottonwood, as well as extensive fire-maintained ponderosa pine and Oregon white oak savannas and woodlands. Port-Orford-cedar, Brewer spruce, sugar pine, Jeffrey pine, Baker cypress, and limber pine are some of the rarer conifers which account for much of Oregon's forest diversity.

Due to the widely varying combinations of climate and topography, Oregon's forests are more ecologically diverse than all other states but California. Oregon's forests are also among the tallest and most productive in the world, and for decades Oregon has led the nation in lumber production, which has always been a central part of the state's identity. In the past decade, the famed old-growth or "ancient" forests in Oregon and the other Pacific Northwest states, some of which are more than 250 years old and contain trees up to 100 meters high, catalyzed one of the country's most emotional political battles. In 1990 the U.S. government listed the northern spotted owl as a threatened species and instituted a plan to limit timber harvest in large areas of federal forests in the Northwest to ensure its protection. This plan dramatically changed the management of Oregon's federal forest lands, and impacted private forest lands throughout western Oregon.

With their remarkable wealth of diversity, Oregon's forests provide the state with uncommon natural beauty, wildlife habitat, soil and watershed protection, recreational opportunities, and valuable timber and non-timber products. These natural resources have influenced the settlement of Oregon from the time of its first human habitation. However, with continued population growth, development and other conversion to other non-forest use pose increasing threats to many of these forested areas and their natural, economic, and social resources ? crucial components of Oregon's heritage. Although many local governments and landowners wish to retain the traditional landscape and uses of their forests, sometimes outside pressures make it economically difficult for them to keep their land in forest use.

Like other Cooperative Forestry programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service, the Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is a federal program that works in partnership with states. The FLP recognizes that the majority of the nation's productive forestlands are in private ownership and is designed to support state and local efforts to protect threatened forestlands from conversion to non-forest use. In addition, the FLP promotes good stewardship and long-term sustainable management of privately held forested areas. Forest Legacy is strictly a voluntary program.

This Assessment of Need (AON) is the result of a comprehensive assessment of Oregon's private forest lands. The assessment was developed in a public forum in cooperation with the Oregon State Stewardship Coordinating Committee (SSCC). The purpose of this Assessment

of Need is to develop a Forest Legacy Program for Oregon that provides landowners an opportunity to protect valuable forest resources while retaining ownership of the land. Oregon's Forest Legacy Program also needs to facilitate long-term resource management partnerships between local, state, tribal and federal governments as well as non-governmental organizations.

The Assessment of Need evaluates private forestlands with respect to threats of conversion to non-forest uses, describes the need for the program, and outlines how the Forest Legacy Program will be managed in Oregon. The AON looks at forest conversions likely to occur within the next 10 years. For the Forest Legacy Program in Oregon, the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) has elected the state grant option. This means that all Forest Legacy acquisitions, whether of easements or fee title, shall be transacted by the state, with title vested either in the state or some other unit of state or local government. In this assessment, the state has outlined some primary goals and objectives for the Forest Legacy Program. The goals are to:

- ✍ Conserve private forest lands in areas where forests may be lost to non-forest uses.
- ✍ Sustain forest resources such as river flows and clean water, fish and wildlife habitat, carbon stores, soil productivity, commercial and non-commercial timber, scenic quality, recreational opportunity, and biodiversity.
- ✍ Strengthen communities and facilitate state, local and private partnerships in forest conservation.

The primary objectives are:

- 1) Protect significant site-specific ecological, social and/or economic forest related benefits.
- 2) Reinforce and expand upon existing networks of conserved forest land.
- 3) Encourage private landowners to work with communities, agencies, businesses and non-governmental organizations so as to strengthen their management of forest resources.
- 4) Secure additional conservation investments in private forest land.
- 5) Protect forested properties that face immediate threats to conversion to non-forest use.
- 6) Focus efforts where large areas of private forest land face the possibility of conversion to non-forest use within the next 10 years and where the consequences in terms of overall losses to important ecological, social and economic forest related benefits are great.

Oregon was able to develop this AON because the state has just completed three major, statewide environmental assessments. These include 1) the Oregon Gap Analysis Project, funded by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to look at how well habitats and species are protected in Oregon, 2) the Oregon Biodiversity Project, a cooperative private assessment coordinated by the Defenders of Wildlife, identifying conservation needs, incentives and opportunities in Oregon, and 3) the State of the Environment Report, a comprehensive analysis of the environment requested by Governor John Kitzhaber and headed by Dr. Paul Risser, Oregon State University President. The Oregon Department of Forestry chose the Oregon Natural Heritage Program (ORNHP) to develop this AON because of their involvement in the previous assessments and their access to statewide data on forests, habitats, endangered species, protected lands, and other necessary information. The data used in the assessment is described in more detail and summarized in Appendix B.