



Elliott Forest Listening Sessions Summary

Background

As part of the Oregon State University-led exploratory phase to assess the feasibility of transforming the Elliott State Forest into a research forest, the College of Forestry conducted three public listening sessions in the surrounding local communities of North Bend, Reedsport and Roseburg to gather input, ask questions and identify opportunities relating to OSU's process.

The three sessions were conducted with a uniform process and ran from 6:15 until 8:00 p.m., at the North Bend Library, the Umpqua Discovery Center and the Douglas County Extension Annex. Doug Zenn, of Zenn Associates, designed and facilitated the sessions. Representatives from the College of Forestry presented a 15-minute overview of the College, discussing the various programs, accomplishments, and current research forests managed. The presentation was delivered by Geoff Huntington on June 4, Jim Johnson on June 5, and Katy Kavanagh on June 6.

The audience then divided into four groups, each designated to different discussion topics roughly aligned with public values the Land Board has articulated as important to consider in the design and management of a research forest. Those include: Recreation and Public Access; Research and Education; Timber, Economy and Forest Management; and Conservation. Each group discussion was facilitated by an OSU staff member and was structured to capture input from the audience on their perspective regarding the opportunities, issues and concerns associated with addressing the particular public value.

Attendees spent 30 minutes in their first discussion group and were asked to select a different topic area for a second small group discussion that lasted 20 minutes. The second session focused on capturing new comments that were not yet covered or further elaborating upon those already listed in the first round. In the third and final segment of the evening's sessions, the groups dispersed and the attendees had the opportunity to visit all of the topics' stations to review the comments captured and contribute additional ideas; to visually note the topics that they felt were the highest priority for them personally; and ask the OSU facilitators questions, or engage in discussion with other participants.

Participation at all three sessions were as follows: 64 participants in North Bend, 44 in Reedsport, and 36 in Roseburg. The audience represented a wide cross-section of interests, from a strong environmental focus to heavy emphasis on traditional forest management. Many of those who engaged reside on properties neighboring the Elliott Forest, or are routine users of the forest.

Notes from the Facilitated Discussion

Research & Education

The Research & Education sessions generated vigorous discussion of suggested research topics and areas of interest, such as carbon sequestration, alternative logging practices, soil and water health, fire disturbance, and recreation impacts. Many suggested comparative studies; for example, investigating the outcomes under the current Oregon Forest Practices Act compared to outcomes using non-traditional approaches to forest management, such as ecological forestry. At the two locations closest to the forest there was strong interest in utilizing the forest for local education projects, connecting to public schools and the local community college, as well as offering educational tours for the general public and tourists along Highway 101. There was also strong expression of interest in having OSU develop a research campus near the forest and establish a long-term presence in the community. There was a great deal of interest in research projects focused on at-risk species present on the Elliott Forest, and ensuring that the habitats for these species are not further degraded. It was noted by several that presence of these species offers great opportunity to study the relationship between restoration of at-risk populations in relation to active forest management.

Of the concerns expressed, most related to how the research would be funded and opposition to having funding needs for purchase and management of the forest drive harvest volume up beyond what is necessary to protect at-risk species. Some questioned whether how managing a research forest that needs to make debt service payments would be different from having the Elliott Forest provide annual revenue to the Common School Fund. Some also felt that because of the size, complexity, and terrain of the Elliott Forest, management may be too expensive to also allow for the funding of research. A number of commenters expressed the opinion that appropriate harvest revenue may just be sufficient to cover the management costs associated with the forest and not much else. Some participants expressed concern about governance, and who would decide what research agenda would be pursued over time (whether OSU would form a local management committee, or a balanced advisory board for instance).? Other concerns included clearcutting, use of herbicides, potential introduction of genetically modified organisms, and the number and location of reserve areas.

Local Economy, Timber, & Forest Management

This topic area drew a large percentage of participants over the three nights. One of the consistent themes was interest in carbon sequestration and the sale of carbon credits as a source of revenue. Many participants were enthusiastic about this approach, although it was clear that there was a lot of uncertainty and most did not have a clear understanding of what the economic potential of carbon markets might be. There were also many strong opinions expressed to keep the Elliott Forest as a “working forest” that would provide a steady supply of logs to local mills, and be a source of employment in the local economies..

There were mixed opinions expressed about the potential approaches to forest management. Some participants expressed strong opinions opposed to an industrial model and reliance on

clearcutting and rotation age to boost revenue, while others embraced this as the most efficient and economical approach. Many participants were in favor of exploring alternative approaches to management, wanting to try novel systems, or rely on partial cutting, thinning, variable retention harvesting, etc. Some expressed an interest in further developing non-timber forest products and wildcrafting, as a revenue source.

Many were concerned about the impacts of harvesting on wildlife habitat, water quantity and quality, and soil health. In all, 46 concerns or issues were raised by participants, with some strongly opposed to utilizing clearcutting even in the context of research -- often citing the nearby privately owned forests as providing more than enough opportunity to study clearcutting practices. Other concerns expressed included soil erosion, roads, pesticide use, and funding. As with other groups, a substantial number of participants in the topic area expressed concern about the need to harvest to generate research funding. One person indicated that if the research is intended to benefit the citizens of the state, the state should provide the research funding in a separate line in the state budget, and not rely on harvest revenue. Finally, there were concerns expressed about the ability of a research forest to supply a reliable year-to-year flow of logs to local mills.

Recreation & Access

There was widespread interest in the array of opportunities to support recreation on the Elliott. Among the areas highlighted by participants were fishing, foraging, kayaking, birding, and hunting as well potential for developing infrastructure and/or management to support activities like camping, mountain biking, motorized trail biking, photography, hiking, horse riding and more. Many participants saw opportunity for creating partnerships with businesses, schools, recreational organizations, as well as increased tourism and potential employment and volunteer positions.

The predominant concern brought up in this topic area was ensuring continued access for the public. There was uncertainty of how and which recreational opportunities could be created, and how they would be supported financially in relation to OSU's first management priority for research. Although not uniform, a general sentiment was expressed by many that public access did not have to include access to all places at all times if research and management constraints required otherwise, but it was clear that management planning will need to clearly address this issue.

Also raised by some were concerns regarding how University ownership of the forest would affect private landowning neighbors, and potentially change their ability to use or access the public forest. Fire danger was raised in a variety of aspects, predominantly noting an increased fire risk coming along with increased recreational use in the forest. In general, safety was a concern and the acknowledgement that with increased visitation there would be a need for infrastructural development, well-marked roads, public communications, adequate zoning for mixed recreational opportunities, surveillance and enforcement on the forest with a level of attention not currently present. The roads were also a high priority topic – both because of their current and potential use for recreation, and because of concerns regarding the current presence of degrading and dangerous roads.

Conservation

A prominent comment raised at all sessions regarding opportunities for conservation in an Elliott State Research Forest centered on the presence of multiple at-risk species listed under the federal Endangered Species Act, , and the need to protect these populations and their habitats now and into the future. Additionally, there were a number of comments expressing a variety of habitat issues including a desire to create and maintain adequate habitat for deer and elk with early successional forest, studying the recent return of wolves to the coast range and helping them remain there, and seizing the opportunity to create and promote the Elliott as being a “biodiversity bank.” Another high priority was the preservation of the oldest trees in the Elliott, particularly stands in the Silver Creek Heritage Grove, and researching carbon sequestration.

A large number of the attendees were interested in OSU taking an active management strategy that was rooted in ecological values, demonstrating how to maintain natural ecosystem functions with the presence of sustainable, minimally impacting timber harvest to create a resilient landscape against climate change and natural disturbances (fire, landslides, storms, etc). Many suggested that OSU could go beyond the established minimum requirements for Endangered Species Act and Oregon Forest Practices Act and demonstrate how to repair intensively managed “plantation” forestlands back to natural systems, ensuring that conservation remained the first priority, above economic output.

Top concerns encompassed across all three sessions included potential loss of old growth trees, environmental impacts of the extensive existing road system, future degradation of habitat and water quality, and fire susceptibility of the forest and surrounding communities. Along with these,, concerns were expressed about whether funding sources for research might “slant” the type of research OSU would conduct, and whether OSU will establish transparency and long-term reliability for management decisions over time in support of conservation values that might be at odds with pressures to harvest.

Conclusions

Oregon State University committed to continuing outreach efforts related to the potential for establishing an Elliott State Research Forest. Additional interviews will be conducted throughout the summer of 2019, and follow-up outreach events are being planned in partnership with the Department of State Lands for the fall of 2019. Additional information about the process, outreach efforts, and updates on the planning process can be found at the University’s website here: <https://www.forestry.oregonstate.edu/elliott-forest>