

April 25, 2018

Peter Daugherty, State Forester
Tom Imeson, Chair
And Members of the Board of Forestry

For the record, I am Polk County Commissioner Craig Pope, President of the Association of Oregon Counties.

Within the range of Marbled Murrelets, four Oregon counties (Columbia, Douglas, Coos and Josephine) own timberlands that are managed under the Oregon Forest Practices Act. These are lands that are separate and distinct from County Forest Trust Lands, though many of these parcels came into county ownership through foreclosure. The revenue generated from harvest on these lands helps pay for important services. Losing the ability to harvest will further erode these counties' ability to serve their citizens.

In Oregon's infancy, counties were statutorily created as an arm of state government, to provide certain support programs to citizens. Property tax has historically been the mechanism that funds county government.

Among the services that Counties provide are sheriff patrol, emergency dispatch, jail operations, criminal prosecution, juvenile justice, search and rescue, mental health, public health, and road and bridge maintenance.

Rural Oregon's citizens benefited until the 1990's from a robust revenue stream that came to counties from timber harvested on federally owned land, through long-standing revenue sharing agreements with the BLM and USFS. As those lands were withdrawn from the harvest base, county budgets in rural Oregon, and the important services that were provided, have contracted significantly.

In 1990, Oregonians voted for Measure 5 and Measure 50, property tax limitations that, among other things, set permanent tax rates for counties, ending the ability to raise property tax rates. Many rural counties had been funding services with timber harvest revenue, and were stuck with very low property tax rates. Since property tax rates cannot be increased, new revenue for county services can only be raised by fees or through passage of 5-year operating levies.

Southwest counties have been particularly hard hit by this double whammy.

Compared to Willamette Valley counties, for example, southwest Oregon counties have significantly lower assessed property values, lower average wages, and higher poverty levels. In southwest Oregon, rates of child, spousal and drug abuse, and enrollment in free and reduced school lunches are amongst the highest in the state.

Additionally, federal lands managers are ramping up use of stewardship and good neighbor authority programs. While these are important tools to reduce fuels on federal lands, counties are cut out of revenue distribution. Understandably, this departure from the traditional revenue sharing relationship is making counties nervous.

Counties want to be at the table as you deliberate toward decisions on the Marbled Murrelet. Oregon's counties are heartened by ORS 527.630 (3) that reads, "To encourage forest practices implementing the policy of ORS 527.610 (the Oregon Forest Practices Act) to 527.770 (good faith compliance with best management practices), it is declared to be in the public interest to vest in the State Board of Forestry exclusive authority to develop and enforce statewide and regional rules pursuant to ORS 527.710 (the duties of the BOF) and to coordinate with other state agencies and local governments which are concerned with the forest environment.

As we move through these discussions, please consider potential impacts to county owned land that is managed under the Forest Practices Act. Please consider the consequences to counties of taking more land out of the harvest base. Diminishing yet another county revenue producer will have very real impacts, especially in southwest Oregon.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,



Craig Pope
Commissioner, Polk County
President, Association of Oregon Counties