

April 9, 2013

The Honorable Ron Wyden
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Wyden:

Oregon's county commissioners and judges appreciate the concern you've expressed in response to frustrations we shared with you over the lack of forest management in Oregon's federal forests. While we greatly appreciate the financial assistance you have secured over the years through the Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self-Determination Act, your understanding of the need for responsible forest management is paramount to restoring the health of our forests and local communities.

We are faced with two dire problems in the vast stretches of Oregon dominated by national and O&C forests:

1. The forests are sickly, crowded, dead, dying, and burning up; and
2. Surrounding and dependent communities are in deep economic dysfunction.

Both problems can be addressed through active management of our federal forests.

Your efforts to keep forest products companies in eastern Oregon operating and to begin landscape management in the region are commendable. The work on the Malheur National Forest is a good starting point, but there is much more to do on all eastside forests. In spite of the fact that this is federal land, we are working at the state level with Governor Kitzhaber to sustain, with state resources, the active management that has begun. It is our goal to help the Forest Service treat 250,000 acres per year. Considered to be a long reach, even that level of management will not return the federal forests in Oregon to full health. **The Nature Conservancy tells us that hands-on management is needed on 500,000 acres per year over the next 25 years in Oregon alone simply to normalize the ecosystems.** When fires burn in eastern Oregon now they burn hot, fast, and furious. The result is a landscape that is barren and scarred for many years to come. Wildlife and fish perish, and rivers and streams are damaged. Additionally, the amount of carbon dioxide emitted from these fires is massive. The environmental damage due to a lack of responsible forest management is catastrophic.

Rural communities have been economically devastated by loss of work in federal forests. You've heard all the statistics on job losses and mill closures; you don't need to hear them again. It's not easy to diversify an economy when the federal government owns the vast majority of land in the county. Part-time, minimum-wage jobs in tourism and service industries do not, and cannot, replace full-time family-wage jobs in the forest products industry. The result of the lack of harvest has devastated communities and families. Counties with timber-dependent communities are seeing a decline in population as the younger generation leaves to look for a

future elsewhere. This places an enormous financial burden on the fixed-income retirees and school systems that remain. And we suffer the well-documented social and financial impacts associated with unemployment – drug and alcohol abuse, domestic abuse, vandalism, and the increased burden on government services.

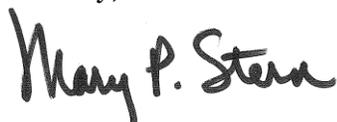
In short, we cannot accept this level of environmental and social damage when the answer is so simple: responsible, rehabilitative management of federal forest lands. Our efforts in Oregon to work with the Governor’s Office to provide state funds for federal action and support for collaborative efforts have met with some success, but results are too slow in coming and may – in any event – not be enough to avoid catastrophic consequences.

You are right in your call for a “third way” in a number of policy matters. This is especially true in federal forest management. We in Oregon have moved well beyond the “jobs v. owls” battle cries of the 80s. Thirty years of gridlock has taught us much. We see your third way as a move **away from orthodoxy: the orthodoxy of tree farming federal forests with vast clearcuts; and the orthodoxy of environmental laws unchanged from the 1970s.** We know more about the environment and our own behavior than 30 years ago. We know that the public will revoke its permission to manage federal forest lands if the lands are treated merely as a cash crop. And we know that the broad set of well-intended environmental laws adopted nearly 40 years ago is strangling appropriate management of public forests today. In other words, these laws have unintentionally begun a slow death to the ecosystems they were adopted to protect.

Oregon needs you, in your powerful chairmanship, to break a trail; that is, a real, significant, on-the-ground third way. We need you to lead Congress in an examination, after over thirty years of real world experience, of federal forest planning and management laws. We need laws that are up to date, which will protect the environment while acknowledging that humans have always been a part of the ecosystem. **We need contemporary laws that permit the right actions to be done in a timely way to regain and maintain vibrant, healthy, productive federal forests.** This includes streamlining NEPA to provide certainty of responsible forest management activities, the removal of the eastside screens that serve to limit responsible forest management and provisions for fire salvage to recover value and restore the landscape in a timely manner.

You are in the ideal position to make this happen. Thank you very much for committing to engage Oregon’s counties from the beginning in the development of your new legislation.

Sincerely,



Mary P. Stern, President
Commissioner, Yamhill County, Oregon