

Stay the Course: Forestry Board votes to continue current habitat conservation plan

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Work on the habitat conservation plan for Western Oregon's state forests will continue as planned.

The follows a motion to start a new, duplicate process narrowly failed to pass at the latest Oregon Board of Forestry meeting.

Despite the motion's failure, the future of the habitat conservation plan, or HCP, remains murky after downward adjustments to harvest projections late last year have drawn concern from the board and the counties and special districts that rely on timber revenues.

The virtual special meeting on February 15 was called at the request of two board members. They wished to discuss progress on the HCP after harvest projections in the transitional implementation plan set to be rolled out in July have drawn consternation.

ODF's State Forest Division Chief Mike Wilson started the meeting by giving the board an update on a new transitional implementation plan and work on the habitat conservation plan.

While not the final HCP, the transitional implementation plan that is set to be enacted on July 1, is a good predictor of the harvest yields that would be allowed under the HCP. The implementation plan is designed to transition from the old forest management plan to the new one scheduled to be rolled out in conjunction with the HCP in July 2025.

Interim projections presented to the board last summer predicted harvest levels around 225 million board feet annually, down slightly from the 247 million board feet averaged between 2000 and 2021.

However, projections released in January following model solution review last fall that are being used in the transitional implementation plan cut harvest projections drastically further, to between 165 and 182.5 million board feet annually.

Wilson said that the cuts came based on more detailed consideration of the conditions in specific groves, mentioning Swiss needle cast and off-site seed as examples of limiting factors in Tillamook State Forest.

Wilson stressed that the harvest projections from the implementation plan were not the final projections for the HCP. He said that those final projections would be presented to the board with a variety of conservation and harvest options at their June meeting.

Board Member Joe Justice followed the presentation by saying that he believed the newest harvest estimates did not achieve a balance between conservation and financial viability, the dual goals the board had set for the HCP.

Justice said that he believed that a harvest closer to the 225 million board feet presented last summer was more equitable for rural communities and counties. Justice asked Wilson if he thought the revised projections due in June would project a harvest level close to that and Wilson said that he did not.

Considering the latest estimates as well as the 70-year term of the plan, Justice said that he was proposing a motion for ODF staff to begin work on a second HCP draft that would allow larger harvests.

When asked, Wilson said that doing so would set the HCP development process back at least two years. The draft of the plan is already with federal regulators for review under the National Environmental Policy Act, so it is too late to amend that document.

Wilson said that the agency also lacked the staff to begin work on a second HCP concurrently with the ongoing work on the already-submitted draft.

The board members discussed the proposed motion, with two groups coalescing as the meeting went on.

While both agreed that the projections were alarmingly low, one favored allowing the process to run its course before essentially restarting the process. They argued that the decision should wait until after the board receives updated projections in June and a final draft of the plan in September.

The other group argued that the already released figures represented too drastic a change from what they had discussed previously, making a new process inevitable.

Justice's motion failed by a vote of 4-3 during the Feb. 15 meeting. Board Members Justice, Liz Agpaoa and Karla Chambers voted aye, while Board Chair Jim Kelly and Board Members Ben Deumling, Chandra Ferrari and Brenda McComb voted nay.