

BLM will try turning over a new leaf to save old growth

Two years ago last June, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the northern spotted owl as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act and plunged the Pacific Northwest into a bitter political and legal conflict over the future of the region's old-growth forests.

But as the political and legal battles continue to play out in the courts and in Washington, D.C., change is already taking hold back in the Northwest.

COMMON GROUND:

Dispatches From the Forest

In large and small ways, governments, businesses and individuals are coming together to seek consensus in the forest debate.

This is the third in a series of stories in which The Oregonian is spotlighting these signposts of change.

■ Oregon director Dean Bibles has a plan for diversity and wildlife corridors that he calls the most dramatic change since forestry began

By KATHIE DURBIN
of The Oregonian staff

DRAIN — The Four Gates timber sale — 6.2 million board feet of old-growth Douglas fir, grand fir, incense cedar, hemlock and madrone — lies, quite literally, behind four locked steel gates.

No one knows whether the trees in these remote hills northwest of Roseburg will ever be logged.

The answer to that question, and to the future of 2.2 million acres of the world's most productive forest, lies in six forest plans released by the Bureau of Land Management last month.

Oregon BLM Director Dean Bibles says the plans represent "a major conceptual change in forest management, the most dramatic change since forestry started."

He hopes they will usher in a new era, set his often-criticized agency on a

new track. Instead of liquidating virtually all its remaining old-growth forests, the BLM will nurture biological diversity, protect wildlife corridors, preserve some old growth and grow more of it.

Since the late 1940s, the BLM has managed its Western Oregon timberlands according to a single-minded mandate imposed by Congress: to supply logs to Western Oregon mills.

But almost half a century of intensive logging, environmentalists' lawsuits and changes in the way society values forests have caught up with the BLM. The agency that environmentalists love to hate has turned over a new leaf.

Director Cy Jamison learned that well early this year when a federal appeals court said his "Jamison strategy" for protecting the northern spotted owl violated the Endangered Species Act.



ROBERT KAISER

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Outside Eugene, BLM district manager Ron Kaufman tramps a section of forest likely to remain old growth under the "biodiversity blueprint" he helped create.

BLM: Focus is on ecosystems, not just species

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Environmental laws have "changed the ball game," Jamison said on a swing through Oregon last week. "Recreation, fish and wildlife and other resources need to be given equal play."

If the national forests are Oregon's favorite playground, the BLM's Western Oregon timberlands are the lands no one knows. Invisible on road maps, they have few campgrounds or other public amenities. No signs mark their boundaries.

Although these are public lands, access can be difficult, because the roads that reach them cross a checkerboard landscape of heavily logged public lands and even more heavily logged industrial timberlands.

Most of Western Oregon, public and private, now is blanketed with second-growth plantations under 40 years of age.

Past management practices mean BLM lands never will return to pristine wilderness. Table Mountain, Western Oregon's only BLM wilderness area, is a narrow island of old growth in a sea of clear-cuts.

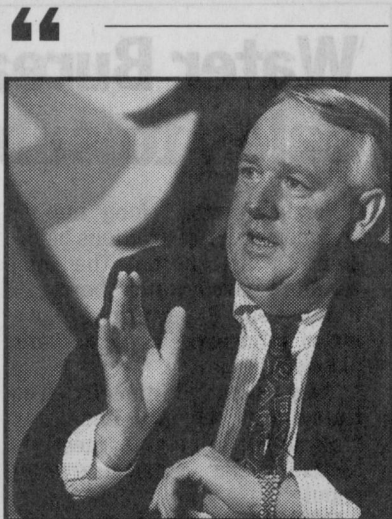
Yet hunters, woodcutters and BLM employees know the special places that remain on these lands: an old-growth grove east of Coos Bay, a golden eagle roost at a meadow's edge, an enormous Douglas fir within the Four Gates sale that will be spared if the sale is ever logged.

Although the BLM lands are scarred with roads and clear-cuts, Bibles believes they can be managed to create an intricate mosaic of ecosystems, while still providing raw material for Oregon mills.

His preferred alternative, he stresses, is not an "owl plan." In fact, some experts doubt whether the alternative he prefers out of six possible choices will satisfy the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which must review each of the six district plans and decide whether its owl protection strategy complies with the Endangered Species Act.

"We looked at building a plan on ecosystems, rather than species by species — deer, elk, spotted owls, tailed frogs," Bibles said.

Grass grows high in the center of the logging road that winds through the hills to the Four Gates timber sale. From the top of the ridge, where cut logs may one day be loaded onto trucks bound for southwestern Oregon mills, the patchwork of clear-cuts, young trees and old growth that blankets the Oregon Coast Range is clearly visible.



Recreation, fish and wildlife and other resources need to be given equal play.

Cy Jamison,
BLM director

Last May, the Cabinet-level panel known as the God Squad exempted Four Gates and 12 other BLM timber sales from Endangered Species Act provisions designed to protect habitat for the northern spotted owl. The political move had no practical effect, however, because those sales and all others affecting owl habitat already were blocked by two federal court injunctions.

If the forest management blueprint Bibles prefers becomes final and passes legal and scientific scrutiny, the injunctions will be lifted and the BLM will be able to resume offering timber sales — perhaps including the 13 sales exempted by the God Squad. If not, the locks on the steel gates guarding these old-growth forests will rust and the grass in the road will grow higher.

But the new blueprint carries a price for the timber industry and for Western Oregon counties that pocket 50 percent of the receipts from BLM timber sales: It will reduce by half the maximum amount of timber the agency sold in the boom years of the 1980s.

The new plan would:

- Set aside one-quarter of the BLM's 2.2 million acres — just over a half-million acres — as special management areas where no regular timber harvests will be scheduled. About one-fifth of that land is

now old growth.

- Manage 26 percent of the land, including 133,000 acres of old growth, to maintain a mosaic of ancient forests across the landscape over the long term to provide habitat for owls and other old-growth species. No old growth on these lands will be logged for 80 years. When logging resumes, it will occur on a 200- to 300-year rotation.

- Manage 8 percent of the land, including 36,000 acres of old growth, as linking corridors for wildlife. Half these lands will be logged only every 150 years. The rest will be available for logging.

That leaves 41 percent of the land still devoted to timber production. But the BLM will manage these lands with a difference: Loggers will be required to leave a specific number of standing trees on each unit, more in the southern, drier lands where tree regeneration is slow.

In 1989, before taking over as Oregon BLM director, Bibles took part in a series of meetings on global biodiversity sponsored by the non-profit Keystone Center, a Colorado public policy organization.

The BLM's forest planning process for the 1990s was well under way, but in 1990 he directed his staff to develop a "biodiversity alternative," as well as one implementing the Jack Ward Thomas owl conservation plan. The agency called in experts in computerized mapping and geographical information systems to translate data into pictures representing the actual landscape.

"It was an opportunity to see if we could move from the conceptual approach to a system where you could make decisions on the ground," Bibles said.

David Perry, a professor of forest ecosystems at Oregon State University, helped write a "biodiversity blueprint" for the BLM.

"Early on in this process, I think there was a little bit of future shock involved in what maintaining biological diversity actually meant," Perry said. But the shock that some agency officials felt when they realized how much less timber would be cut soon passed. Many BLM staffers were excited about the new concept.

Lowell Hayes, manager of the Drain Resource Area, said many of the ideas in the BLM's preferred alternative came from front-line managers like himself.

"The area managers came up with what we felt was a logical, practical way to go," Hayes said.

The BLM may be breaking new ground, but early reactions from environmentalists and the timber in-

dustry suggest the BLM plans will satisfy neither.

Roy Keene of the Public Forestry Foundation says the proposed changes are too little, too late. "In order to maintain some watershed and ecosystem values, they have to slow down (logging) or there won't be anything left," he said.

On the other hand, James Geisinger, president of the Northwest Forestry Association, believes the BLM has gone too far.

"A 50 percent reduction in timber supply will cause very dramatic impacts on the communities that have traditionally depended on these lands for a source of timber," he said. "If the BLM thinks that offering half its traditional sale program is going to make the lawsuits go away, that's not going to happen."

In fact, Geisinger predicted the timber industry would likely sue the BLM, asserting its new plans violate the 1937 O & C Act, which turned Oregon & California Railroad lands over to the government, created the BLM and directed it to supply timber to Oregon mills.

Bibles expects lawsuits but thinks the agency is on firm ground.

"We deal with a lot of laws. The O & C Act requires permanent management of forest lands for sustained timber production and economic stability. Certainly this is not going to be at a level it has been in the past, but if we can forecast out 30, 40, 50 years for long-term sustainability and stewardship, my premise is we're meeting the spirit of the O & C Act."

The new BLM plans propose a strategy different from the one set forth in the Jack Ward Thomas plan for protecting the northern spotted owl. Taken together, the preferred alternatives in the six plans allow the sale of almost 600 million board feet of timber annually. The agency calculated earlier that following the Thomas plan would allow yearly sales of only 443 million board feet.

Ron Sadler, a BLM retired forester who served as chief of forestry in the agency's Oregon office from 1977 to 1984, has done a preliminary analysis of the Medford district plan, the Ashland-based environmental group Headwaters.

He believes the plans pose many risks with the three, especially over the new servicer. Over that time, he said, it is prudent for the BLM to parcel its old growth, because the agency's new ecosystem management is entirely untested, and the forests will provide habitat until then.

OSU's David... the BLM... \$165,000... may

growth that's ecologically superior to the old growth set aside in the Thomas plan. The BLM plan also allows limited thinning and salvage logging in owl reserves, lessening the likelihood that owl habitat will be wiped out by a major forest fire.