THE OREGONIAN, FRIDAY, MAY 29, 1992

Jobs and owl habitat a win-win situation

By DAVID A. PERRY

Of the remaining area of available and salable timber (trees older than 50 years) on public lands in Western Oregon, 45 percent growth. is in stands between 60 and 150 years old, 36 percent is in stands between 150 and 200 years old, and only 20 percent is in an age range that includes classical old growth (stands older than 210 years).

From the standpoint of biological diversity, there is no question that old-growth forests are the most limiting habitat in the region, and any harvest of pristine old growth makes a bad situation worse.

From the standpoint of timber-related jobs, the large acreages of mid-aged stands (60 to 200 years old) represent a largely untapped resource with the potential to maintain the same level of timber harvest as would be obtained from logging the remaining old-growth stands. I suggest the following strategy:

• Shift all harvest on public lands from old growth to mid-aged stands.

• Quit clear-cutting; and don't substitute region over the past two decades. thinly disguised clear-cutting (such as leaving a few token trees). Instead, aggressively thin mid-aged stands, leaving about one-half of the mature trees standing (generally 50 to 70 trees per acre).

• Grow residual trees (i.e., those left after thinning) to a relatively old age (150-200 years), and concentrate on producing highvalue products.

What does this accomplish?

Let's look first at harvest volumes. Stands currently between 60 and 110 years of age contain roughly 117 billion board feet, which is perhaps 30 percent to 40 percent more than is contained in remaining old growth. Harvesting one-half of that by thinning would maintain a reasonable harvest (4 billion board feet per year) well into the first decade of the next millennium without touching a single stick of pristine old

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Partially harvesting those 160-to-200 year old stands that do not qualify as old growth would provide another 10 to 15 years of harvest at the above rate, by which time large acreages of young plantations will have reached commercial maturity.

IN MY OPINION

Moreover, the available evidence indicates that trees left after thinning mid-aged stands will accelerate growth. Some of these residual trees should never be harvested because of their ecological values, but perhaps as many as two-thirds could be harvested in the future without compromising ecological values

I emphasize what this strategy accomplishes in terms of timber production is to buy us time. Levels of harvest that are sustainable in perpetuity are uncertain at this point, but are almost certainly less than the amount of timber that has been cut in this

From the standpoint of non-timber values, thinning mid-aged stands will accelerate their movement toward at least some of the characteristics of old growth (big trees, multiple canopy layers). Understory trees, such as yews and various hardwoods, would benefit from the additional light and could even be deliberately encouraged by foresters.

When combined with longer rotations and a hands-off approach to current pristine old growth, the effect would be to move the region's forested landscape back toward the diversity and beauty it once held.

Sustainability would also be enhanced by the greater diversity. For example, large, widely spaced conifers mixed with hardwoods are less susceptible to catastrophic fire than the densely stocked young stands we have been producing over the last several decades.

Granted, the profit margin would not be as high under this approach as it would be with continued mining of the remaining old growth. But profits can be made. Both the



Management have made money on sales using the strategy suggested here, and moreover have logged these sales with helicopters to avoid road-building. Some mills are already buying trees from thinnings in stands even younger than 50 years - presumably they are also making a profit.

by silviculturists and ecologists within the region. Many whom I have talked to believe that, biologically, it is workable, although it must be coupled with close monitoring to make sure that we are headed in the direction that we want to be.

arguing and start behaving like a regional community that has a common stake in our future and that of our children. My final suggestion is that we begin a pos-

itive public discussion about what we want that future to look like, and what strategies The question is whether or not it is politi- we are going to employ to get there.