



The Oregonian

Mission: To protect and preserve

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GOVERNMENT CAMP -- Jay Ward disappears into a head-high stand of firs in an old clearcut along the Pacific Crest Trail as it climbs north toward U.S. 26 through the Mount Hood National Forest.

Then his cell phone rings and he's gone for several minutes.

Ward, conservation director for the Oregon Natural Resources Council, is leading the group's campaign to get 265,000 acres of public forest land designated as wilderness, removing key recreation and roadless areas from potential timber harvests.

The 1.1 million-acre national forest includes 189,000 acres of designated wilderness, which makes it off limits to timber harvesting.

Logging on public and private land is a major problem for the Pacific Crest Trail as it winds 2,650 miles through California, Oregon and Washington. Its designation as a national scenic trail does nothing officially to protect the land around it. Some 300 miles of the trail go through private land, and government funds to purchase those properties or buy adjacent land have been severely cut since 2000.

Logging in Northern California, Southern Oregon and southern Washington has taken a toll on the trail, forcing advocacy groups and land managers to relocate or re-establish its path through clearcuts. In Washington's Snoqualmie Pass, decades of logging have left hikers walking through a checkerboard of clearcuts. But there, environmentalists, the U.S. Forest Service and the Plum Creek Timber Co. are working together to get the remaining private land into public ownership.

Cosmetic changes

The Mount Hood National Forest clearcut that Ward toured in July was part of the Abbott and Salmon Curves sales, a mid-1990s project designed to improve the appearance of large clearcuts visible from Timberline Lodge and the trail.

The cuts are on a northwest facing slope that hangs over the Salmon River Meadows, a lush area surrounded by large stands of timber at the headwaters of the Salmon River. The Forest Service hoped to feather the edges of the clearcuts to make them appear less square to people looking south from Timberline Lodge.

"The solution to having clearcuts they were embarrassed about was to log more," Ward said.

Timber-cutting plans within the view area helped spur a movement to protect the trail south from its trailhead on U.S. 26 near Frog Lake.

Last year, Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., introduced a plan to set aside an additional 160,000 acres of wilderness in the Mount Hood National Forest. The idea faced opposition from the Bush administration; Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore.; and even some recreation groups who said the expanded wilderness could lead to unexpected consequences for timber harvesting, recreation and forest management plans.

Wyden's bill, different than ONRC's proposal, died in committee at the end of the 108th Congress. Ward believes the idea of adding to the wilderness eventually will take hold.

"Right now the delegation is trying to figure out how to work with each other to protect the mountain," he said. Today, Reps. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., and Greg Walden, R-Ore., finish a four-day backpacking trip around Mount Hood in an effort to find common ground on protection and recreation issues.

Ward believes it's critical for those leaders to understand the importance of legacy.

"We've converted most of the landscape in the last 100 years," Ward said. "It's our time to do something for the people who come after us. They're going to thank us, if they thank us at all, because some of what was here was left to them."

Private-public partnership

In Snoqualmie Pass east of Seattle, Charlie Raines leads the effort to raise money for the Cascade Coalition Partnership, which over the past five years has used \$16 million to purchase land from the Plum Creek Timber Co. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Plum Creek clear-cut much of its land in the Interstate 90 corridor, and the highly visible harvest helped spark a political battle that eventually slowed the cutting.

Now the Forest Service, conservationists and Plum Creek are working together to preserve the land in the area for recreation and wildlife protection. While many of the properties have been logged, Steve Johnson, a Forest Service lands manager, said setting them aside now will benefit wildlife and future generations who hike the Pacific Crest Trail.

"There are a lot of things going on biologically in the corridor" Johnson said. "It's the connection between the north and south Cascades."

So far, the Forest Service has acquired 97,000 acres through land exchanges and \$92 million in public and private purchases. Raines said it will take several more years to buy all the important parcels, some to protect the trail, some to protect habitat.

"We look at what has the most value, what has the most threat," Raines said.

But money is scarce. Funding under the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, derived from offshore oil exploration leases, has been cut by the Bush administration and Congress from a high of \$155 million in 2000 to \$60 million this year. The fund traditionally is used to buy property for national forests, parks and wildlife refuges.

"The ultimate goal along the Pacific Crest Trail is to have a mile- or two-mile-wide corridor that is essentially road-free," Raines said. "Right now, it's not a very pleasant place to walk."

Conservation groups have options to buy more land from Plum Creek. Raines and Johnson said the company has been good about extending the options while the groups raise money.

As he stands at the edge of a clearcut at Windy Pass, an area recently purchased from Plum Creek, Johnson, 59, said the capstone of his 40-year Forest Service career would be preserving land along the trail and in the pass.

"Within 30 years you're going to have a big stand of timber in here," he said.

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