



1000 Friends of Oregon

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Questions and Answers about Oregon's Land Use Program:

Conserving Forest Land

Q: *Why should we protect private forest land? Doesn't our wood supply come from the National Forests?*

A: *More than four-fifths of Oregon's timber supply now comes from private forest lands, employing a large share of the 58,500 people who work in the wood products industry.*

In 1999, over 80% of the state's timber supply came from private lands. Oregon's private timberlands are generally much more productive than public lands, where most timber harvests have been sharply curtailed.¹

Despite the decline in public lands logging, Oregon remains the nation's leading lumber producer. In 1999, Oregon's forest industries produced 3.5 billion board feet of lumber, or approximately 16% of the nation's production, and 3.4 billion square feet of structural panel board (plywood, oriented strand board, etc.), approximately 13 % of the nation's production.

Q: *Have we been losing private forest land?*

A: *Yes. Oregon loses an average of 7,000 acres of forestland every year -- a rate four times higher than the rate from 1982 to 1992.*

Between 1982 and 1992, 17,000 acres of private forest land shifted from forest use to other uses. Between 1992 and 1997, an additional 35,000 acres were lost, four times the rate of loss of the previous ten years.²

Q: *Are houses allowed in Oregon's forest zones?*

A: *Yes. Houses can be built for most owners who bought their property before zoning laws were adopted ("lot of record dwellings"), when the property is in an area with some existing development ("template dwellings") and when the owner manages a commercial-scale woodlot.*

House Bill 3661, passed by the 1993 Legislature, allowed many more houses in forest zones, especially with its "template dwelling"

approval. In many areas of the state, virtually every forest parcel can qualify for a house. Forest dwelling approvals have increased substantially in many parts of Oregon since 1995.

Between 1990 and 1997, an average of 800 houses were built in the state's forest zones each year. From September 1996 to August 1997 counties approved 437 dwellings in forest zones.³

Q: *What's wrong with building houses in the woods?*

A: *Building houses and other development in the forest reduces the land supply for timber production and creates problems for timber management, threatening Oregon's timber economy. Development also causes significant fire problems, endangering people and timber stands.*

Numerous small homesite acreages add up to a substantial decrease in the amount of land available for forestry, and increase the costs of forest management on adjacent lands. Timber producers throughout the United States are voicing more and more concern about this problem.

With more houses in the woods, firefighting efforts focus on protecting houses, at the expense of timber stands and other economic assets.

A 1993 Oregon Department of Forestry study on wildfires found that residential development on forest land significantly increases the risk of wildfire and significantly increases the cost of wildfire control.⁴ This problem of fire control and suppression in the "urban-forest interface" is now a leading concern of federal and state policy makers in every western state.

A good example of the problem is the Hull Mountain fire in Jackson County. That fire burned 8,000 acres, destroyed 120 houses, threatened hundreds more, and cost \$8 million to control. \$75 million in marketable timber was destroyed during the 1987 fire season in Oregon, while state fires suppression costs exceeded \$42 million.⁵ The increased costs of fire control are shared by forest land owners and taxpayers, with the forest land owners bearing the largest share.

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Q: *Isn't there a lot of unproductive land zoned for timber production?*

A: *No, this supposedly "mis-zoned" land is actually highly productive compared to all other forest lands in the United States.*

Arguments are made during every legislative session that "less productive" forest land, for example, land capable of producing less than 120 cubic feet of timber per acre per year is "mis-zoned" as forestland, and should be available for development. Labeling this land mis-zoned or "secondary" would mean rezoning approximately 30% of western Oregon's timberlands for development. In eastern Oregon, close to 99% of the region's timber land would be available for such development.

U.S. forest lands produce, on average, 45 cubic feet of timber per acre per year. This is higher than most other important timber producing nations.⁶ "Prime" timberland is defined nationally as land capable of producing 85 cubic feet of timber per acre per year.⁷

Q: *Why don't our land use laws recognize regional differences in timber production and forest quality?*

A: *They do. Forest land use laws plainly distinguish between eastern and western Oregon (ORS 215.720; 215.740), and distinguish among particular forest regions according to soils productivity.*

State law explicitly recognizes differences when protecting forest land or allowing development. For example, ownerships in western Oregon may be much smaller than in eastern Oregon, but still be considered commercial-scale for siting a house.

More importantly, forest soil productivity corresponds almost exactly to the boundaries of Oregon's distinct forest regions (e.g., coastal, southern Oregon, Willamette Valley foothills). Oregon's forest land use laws provide greater conservation or allow more development strictly according to soils productivity. For example, land with less productive soils can qualify easily for a "template dwelling", even though the land may be surrounded by very little parcelization or development.

Additional fact sheets on other land use planning issues are available from 1000 Friends.

For more information, visit www.friends.org.

Sources:

¹ Bourhill, B. History of Oregon's Timber Harvests and/or Lumber Production. Salem, OR; Oregon Department of Forestry. 1998.

² Natural Resource Conservation Service, 1997 Natural Resources Inventory, December 2000.

³ Department of Land Conservation and Development, Forest Use Reports.

⁴ "Wildfire Prevention and Control in Areas of Residential Forest Land Development: An Analysis of Fire Data (Oregon Department of Forestry Technical Bulletin, March, 1993).

⁵ "An Action Plan for Protecting Rural/Forest Lands from Wildfire," Wildfire Planning Task Force [various agencies], November, 1988.

⁶ American Forest Institute, "Green America Wood for the World: America's Role." 1981.

⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary's Memorandum 9500-2. March 10, 1982.