



# **Ending Federal Timber Payments to Oregon; Economic Collapse of Oregon Rural Counties, A Statewide Concern**

**By Dennis Richardson**

I am Dennis Richardson, a Co-Chair of Oregon's Joint Senate-House Ways & Means Committee, and I write this newsletter on issues of significance for all Oregonians.

If you aren't hungry or worried about your next meal as you read this, be grateful. One of every five Oregonians is now receiving food stamps.

If you aren't checking Craigslist for a job or sending out resumes, be thankful. Almost ten percent of Oregon's workforce is in the unemployment line.

Somber statistics, but the real tragedy, the deepest devastation lies in Oregon's rural counties. And it's about to get worse, much worse.

Notwithstanding the bipartisan coalition of Oregon's federal elected officials who are working to extend federal timber payments, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack predicted extending benefits is not likely to occur. Secretary Vilsack during his recent visit to Oregon stated that the federal program that provided as much as \$253 million a year in payments to rural Oregon counties, the Secure Rural Schools Act, will not survive the Congressional super committee's work to cut \$1.5 trillion from the federal budget deficit.

If you live in an urban area and you still have a job and a home, maybe you don't care that this will likely bankrupt at least two Oregon counties. Maybe you don't have time to worry about rural unemployment rates that have hovered near 20 percent for almost two decades.

But if you do care, then before you leave for work or go out for lunch, take a close-up look at poverty in our state; take a moment to google Curry County or Coos County, or for that matter just view the sweeping satellite image of our state – nearly half of which is blanketed with riches, deep green forests—Oregon's richest natural resource.

And yet these are Oregon's poorest areas, where methamphetamine destroys already broken lives, where hopelessness evicts the young and ambitious, where urban idealism has outspent and outlawed rural initiative. Where generations of hard-working timber families once labored and thrived, depression now is a way of life.

Imagine if you lived in the midst of the natural resources necessary to save yourself and your family, and were ordered to abandon your tools, your dreams, and your community. Consider how demoralizing to be

a fourth generation logger, out of work because of legal challenges to timber sales, who must stand by and watch Oregon's forests in thick, black, carbon-laden smoke, as millions of acres are consumed in raging forest fires. It wasn't intended to be this way.

Rural Oregonians acted in good faith and believed in their elected leaders when they helped negotiate President Clinton's 1994 Northwest Forest Plan, but since then teams of environmental lawyers have blocked the timber sales, closed the mills, and thwarted alternative recreation plans, leaving rural Oregon underemployed and dependent on government hand-outs. How could the urban elected officials who set the agenda for our federal forests turn away from our most plentiful renewable resource? How could they ignore our comparative advantage over other states? Who is responsible for Oregon's rural poverty, high unemployment rate and declining income? How did this happen?

During the 1980s and 90s timber revenues from federal forests in rural Oregon counties plummeted. Well-funded "eco-elites" [If this term offends you, see Note below.] shut down Oregon's timber harvests by obtaining federal court rulings over the endangered species listing of the spotted owl. More than 100 mills closed. Thousands of family wage jobs were eliminated, drying up incomes and businesses in small mill towns across our state. Annual timber harvests now hover at around 10 percent of levels associated with a more thriving Oregon. Ironically, Oregon's population of spotted owls continues to dwindle.

Faced with economic disaster from the loss of timber harvest revenues, rural counties turned to Congress for a solution. Rather than correcting the misuse of the Endangered Species Act, Congress approved the Secure Rural Schools Act, which temporarily supplanted the lost income that once funded rural schools, government, and other essential services. Instead of continuing to fund county services from timber harvest revenues, rural counties were paid hundreds of millions of dollars in federal welfare payments.

The counties were ordered to develop alternative economic plans. Having achieved their goals of making Oregon's rich forests of renewable timber legally off-limits and unavailable to be managed or harvested, Portland's urban eco-elites promptly turned their backs and abandoned the counties to fend for themselves with meager resources.

For the past decade, politicians and the environmentalists have allowed rural Oregon counties to deteriorate and become ever more dependent on government handouts. Now, in the face of massive federal deficits, nobody wants to defend any longer what are essentially welfare payments to counties in 40 states.

Portland and Oregon's other major cities should wake

up. The last federal timber welfare payment checks are being issued, and they will mark the end of the primary source of revenue to some of Oregon's rural counties. There will be consequences felt in Portland, Salem and Eugene from the bankruptcy of Oregon rural counties. As the urban eco-elites watch placidly from the sidelines, they should realize this rural economic meltdown will financially affect their schools, their county services, and their tax rates. State government is already being asked to intervene. What will be the cost and how should we respond?

The solution is clear. Ignoring Oregon's vast timber resources is a failed policy and must be reversed. Democrat leaders now must "man-up" and face their coalition of environmental supporters and say, "No more lawsuits. Our neighbors are suffering; our rural communities are collapsing; our rural counties must be saved. We must moderate our forest policy."

Action is needed now. Words are not enough. The federal government controls 53 percent of Oregon land, and rural counties depended on effective and productive management of those resources. They have been abandoned and betrayed.

The truth stares rural folks in the face day and night. There are no alternatives. There is no replacement economy. There is only the forest—one of the richest, greenest, fastest growing forests in the world.

There is only one solution – it's vast, green, and sustainable. Oregon needs a new forest timber policy. The particulars of a new Oregon timber policy must be hammered out between the state and federal government. It is not working to have the future of Oregon's rural counties controlled three thousand miles away in Washington, D.C.

What should Oregon's new timber policy look like? One proposal is to place control of Oregon's federal forests with the counties in which they are located. In addition, to provide funding to Oregon's revenue-starved timber counties Oregon's Congressional Representatives Peter DeFazio and Greg Walden have proposed offering long-term leases on up to 1 million acres of Oregon's federal timber land that is currently managed by the Federal BLM. A third idea is to have Oregon's federal forests placed in a trust with Oregon assuming management and control of the timber assets.

Regardless of the final terms of the new Oregon timber policy, safeguards must be included that will stop the use of our federal courts as an eco-elitist weapon against responsible timber harvesting.

The time has come to reopen Oregon's forests in a responsible manner. The time has come to reclaim our bounty, our birthright, and rebuild Oregon's natural resource-based economy. The economic future of both rural and urban Oregon depends upon it.

