



Doug Sutherland

Guest columnist

## **Sustainable and responsible stewardship of state forestlands**

**By Doug Sutherland**

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Washington's forests are disappearing.

Recent University of Washington studies cited in "The Future of Washington Forests Report" estimate that 17 percent of Western Washington's nonfederal forestlands were converted to other uses from 1988 through 2004. These casualties included 5 percent that were converted to residential or urban use.

Current attempts to prevent further losses like these include offering economic incentives directly to landowners, or purchasing rights from the landowner to develop a parcel of forestland. Both innovations are beginning to show good results, but the mainstay of efforts to keep forests green is sustainable forest management, based on a robust yet balanced regulatory program.

When Washington's Forest Practices Act was first passed in the 1970s, its purpose was to protect habitat for wildlife and fish as part of the practice of forestry. It was also intended to maintain a viable forest-products industry in our state. In this way, our state's forestry regulations are doubly protective. Not only do they prevent environmental damage from irresponsible logging operations, but they also encourage forest landowners to remain in forestry.

Just over a year ago, on June 5, Gov. Chris Gregoire and I signed the documents completing Washington state's Forest Practices Habitat Conservation Plan, or HCP. Based on the state Forest Practices Act, and sometimes referred to by its nickname, Forests and Fish, it is an agreement with the federal government for protection of

Washington's streams and forests. The HCP protects habitat for more than 70 aquatic species, many of them threatened or endangered, including salmon.

This statewide plan uses a landscape approach to regulatory environmental protection. It covers 60,000 miles of streams running through 9.3 million acres of state and private forestland here in Washington.

This HCP is founded on science and it establishes the greatest level of protection for forested streams in the United States. Its requirements actually exceed the environmental protections in our state's regulations that govern forestry, already the most strict of their kind anywhere in the nation. These rules demand that logging be done in a responsible manner to protect streams, rivers, wildlife and wild salmon, and to prevent rather than cause erosion. When landowners and operators violate or disregard these rules, they are ordered to correct their actions or else stop their logging and perhaps pay stiff penalties.

The state's forest practices rules together with our Forest Practices HCP form a science-based landscape approach to regulation of forestry statewide. This regulatory system and the modern forestry it governs cannot accurately be called harmful or referred to as the logging practices of yesterday.

Another deterrent to further loss of forestlands is enhanced public awareness of sustainable forest management. One means for improving the public's understanding of forest management is through green forest certification under any of the numerous systems available today. Green certification is not regulatory — it is entirely voluntary, and merely recognizes the responsible practices that landowners use when managing forestlands.

Two years ago, the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) secured green certification under the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) protocols for the state forests managed by the agency. Yet, DNR provoked a stir by recently announcing our intention to pursue dual forest certification under both the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and SFI for 149,000 acres of Puget Sound area state forests. Given that some timber suppliers and mills work with FSC-certified wood, and that DNR may be a reliable source for them, DNR foresees long-term potential for an increased purchaser base as a result of FSC certification.

With 2.1 million acres of DNR-managed forestlands already certified by SFI, an additional benefit of certification under both systems is third-party confirmation and public reassurance that our stewardship of these forestlands is sustainable and environmentally responsible.

The combination of regulations, green certification and sustainable management of Washington's forests helps keep these working forests green, discouraging additional conversion to housing and other developments.

At DNR, we will continue to practice sustainable forest management as stewards of the state lands entrusted to us. We also continue to enforce the state's forestry regulations vigorously but fairly. And, we welcome and look forward to the FSC certification review in the near term.

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