

Prior to European settlement frequent fires burned across the Willamette Valley and surrounding foothills. These fires maintained open stands of oak, ponderosa pine, and Douglas-fir as well as seasonally wet and dry prairies. After a significant wind, ice storm, or other disturbance event fire cleared out the debris and undergrowth and provided a seed bed that enabled conifers to regenerate and thrive.

Areas that are logged and are not properly reforested, or areas of untended farmland, now suffer a different fate. Following a disturbance, non-native grasses quickly invade the site. These grasses utilize available soil moisture in our dry summer months and prevent conifer tree seedlings from becoming established. Exotic invaders such as English hawthorn, Himalayan blackberries, and Scotch broom then move in making these sites unproductive both to society and wildlife for decades. The problem is further exacerbated by those who move to the country to live on their two, five, or forty acre plots but do not understand that the beautiful blooms of the hawthorn and broom are not natural. Our valley ecosystem is clearly out of sync and is no longer capable of restoring itself. It is the responsibility of us as tree-farmers to restore our land and to teach our neighbors that rehabilitation of the landscape on even the smallest acreages is significant.

Despite our forest protection laws many areas cleared in the 1960's or earlier are brushed over and unproductive; small parcels are still logged with no plans for management; and farmland parcels are still being abandoned. To the rescue comes the tree farmer. We typically buy land that has just been logged or has a history of abuse because we cannot afford to buy any significant quantity of merchantable saw-timber. First the area must be cleared of brush in a process called site-preparation. While doing this we leave significant snags, downed wood, and riparian corridors for wildlife. After planting appropriate tree species we control grasses and weeds around each seedling until the trees are "free to grow", hopefully within five years. With our best effort we are not always successful but try to learn from our mistakes. With deer browsing the leaders and meadow voles girdling the stems we are often happy to meet the "free to grow" requirement in ten years. Then the drought hits and it's time to thin. Whether our primary interest is timber production or wildlife, our rehabilitated timber stands become our legacy.

In 1992 my brother Ed bought over 600 acres in the Coburg hills that had been recently logged and abused. Ed soon received a repair order from the Oregon Department of Forestry that required immediate reforestation of more than 400 acres. After spending significantly more for site preparation and planting than for the property the tree farm was restocked and free to grow. My wife and I joined the operation by purchasing 380 acres adjacent to Ed's in 2004. The combined Oak Basin tree farm now has 937 acres with a third of the acreage capable of growing fir, another third planted to more drought hardy ponderosa pine and incense cedar, and the remainder in oak woodlands and meadows.

In addition to reforestation we spend more than twenty thousand dollars per year controlling noxious weeds, pre-commercial thinning and pruning stands, and paying fixed costs including taxes. We have restored and maintain over 200 acres of oak woodland and cooperatively manage habitat for the endangered Fender's Blue butterfly. Our cooperators include the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which adjoins us, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

As a result of nearly 30 years of work we have 200 acres of Douglas fir plantations that are ready for their first commercial thin. The intent of this thin is to create a healthy and resilient forest that will have economic and ecological value twenty years down the road. With pulp prices too low to cover costs and poor small log prices we will be lucky to break even with this treatment. The acreage planted to ponderosa pine trees are also in need of thinning but there is no market for the trees to be removed. Our solution is to thin these stands by mechanically masticating the excess trees. Since the Ips bark beetle is attracted to pine slash, this work will be done in the late summer and fall when the beetles are inactive. At a treatment cost of several hundred dollars per acre we are thankful that the NRCS will cover some of this cost.

When purchasing our properties we chose the Small Tract Option tax to defer 80 percent of the property tax to the time of harvest. We thus pay a severance tax on the timber volume removed, regardless of whether the harvest was profitable. Without this incentive and other governmental assistance our restoration work may not have been possible. Being retired, I receive social security benefits, have a pension from working for the Forest Service, and have an IRA to draw from. I make additional money and stay fit by cutting firewood, selling rustic broom handles, distilling and selling essential oils, and raising a few cattle. Many small forestland owners have invested their life savings in their land and do not have the financial security that I enjoy. Forestry is a long-term investment that often does not produce a return-on-investment for 30 years or more years. Eliminating the Small Tract Option or increasing the Harvest tax will discourage people from buying land and investing in forest restoration and could break many of my fellow tree farmers.

Respectfully,

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