

February 27, 2023

RE: SB 795

Senate Committee on Natural Resources,

On behalf of the Oregon Forest & Industries Council (“OFIC”) and the private forestland owners and forest product manufacturers that we represent, this letter is being submitted in **support of SB 795**.

By this point, the history of Oregon’s forest trust lands is well known: nearly one-hundred years ago, this legislative body entered into an agreement, by law, with various counties whereby those counties, in exchange for their voluntary deeding of forestland to the state, received from the state the benefit of a promise to manage those lands for the wellbeing of the counties and to share a portion of all timber sale revenue from the same. In total, the 15 forest trust land counties conveyed ownership and management of 613,000 acres of forestland to the Oregon Department of Forestry (“ODF”) with the expectation that those lands would continue, indefinitely, to produce sustainable revenues from timber harvests.

However, over the past decade, ODF has increasingly prioritized conservation values over economic and social considerations, which has led to declining revenues for the counties and the state and threatened the viability of local economic vitality in parts of rural Oregon. Notwithstanding the concerns raised by these counties and the forest industry that operates in these forests and relies on the flow of fiber that they provide, ODF has pushed forward with a plan to further curtail harvest in order to obtain a habitat conservation plan (“HCP”), allowing the department to operate without fear of liability under the federal Endangered Species Act. We don’t intend to debate the merits of the state obtaining an HCP, but we are concerned – as are the counties that first entered into this bilateral contract a century ago – that the form of HCP that ODF has pursued is unnecessarily restrictive and was not crafted with the wellbeing of local communities in mind.

Much has been made in recent months of the budgetary shortfalls for local communities that are likely to result from ODF’s management decisions and the need for the state to find some “alternative revenue source” to shore up county budgets. We believe that SB 795 provides a much simpler solution – and one that the counties and those businesses that operate within their communities actually desire: let the counties make their own decisions regarding management of the trust lands.

We support the desire of many of these 15 counties to return ownership and management of their forestland back to local control. SB 795 would allow any county that so desired to control its own fate and to determine for itself what highest and best use of its forestland is. This would come with an attendant economic benefit to the state, as it would no longer bear the cost of managing any re-conveyed lands. This seems like a win for all involved, and we encourage the committee to view it as such and lend its support to the concept.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tyler Ernst', written in a cursive style.

Tyler Ernst
Policy Counsel, Manufacturing & Resources
Oregon Forest & Industries Council