Sustainability for Washington's Forests & Fish Program

Strengthens accountability & stabilizes funding for forest adaptive management

Issue

Comprehensive environmental protections and regulatory certainty provided by the Forests & Fish Law are threatened by under-funding key commitments.

- Long-term regulatory stability requires validation of protections' effectiveness for salmon and water quality.
- Dedicated, stable funding for Forests & Fish science is needed to evaluate protections.
- New proposal meets funding needs.
- Program accountability and efficiency are critical to program success.
- Under-spent funds are distributed to forest conservation programs.

A diverse coalition of industry, environmental, tribal, local government and agency interests have come together to support this funding proposal.

Supporting collaborators

Washington Forest Protection Association

Forests & Fish Conservation Caucus

Upper Columbia United Tribes

Washington State Association of Counties

"This work represents a commitment of timber, local government, tribes, state, and conservation interests to clean water, fish, and a viable timber industry."

Maia Bellon, Director Washington Department of Ecology

"Forests & Fish stands as one of the most important and effective protections our state has ever done for salmon, fish habitat and water quality."

Peter Goldmark Commissioner of Public Lands

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Background

In 1999, the Legislature passed the landmark Forests & Fish Law, a historic, science-based forest practices regulation system that protects 60,000 miles of streams running through 9.3 million acres of state and private forestland. The four goals of the Forests & Fish Law are:

- Restore riparian habitat to support harvestable levels of salmon.
- Meet the requirements of the Endangered Species Act for aquatic species.
- Meet the requirements of the Clean Water Act for water quality.
- Ensure forest industry economic viability.

In 2006, the Forests & Fish Law was endorsed by the federal government through a statewide Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). As one of the largest and most comprehensive systems of environmental protections in the United States, the HCP and Forests & Fish framework is designed to fully comply with both the federal Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act.

To ensure appropriate environmental protections, the HCP includes a robust adaptive management program to monitor and verify that forest practices are meeting goals set by the Forests & Fish Law. Forest practice rules are monitored for their effectiveness at meeting resource objectives and are designed to change, if needed, based on peer-reviewed scientific study. In May, 2012—to avert a lawsuit about the adequacy of funding the HCP's adaptive management program—agencies and stakeholders agreed to address the funding shortfall and vital improvements for a more effective and efficient adaptive management program.

The proposal

- Stabilized funding
  - No fiscal impact on FY14 supplemental budget.
  - Rededicates the state's portion of the Forest Harvest Excise Tax from the state general fund to an account dedicated to funding forestry programs.
  - Beginning in 2015-17 biennium it will be a redirection of approximately $7.6 million.
  - Forest Excise Tax collections in excess of science needs go to three Forests & Fish programs that have been traditionally underfunded. Those three programs are:
    - Forest Riparian Easement Program (FREP).
    - Family Forest Fish Passage Program (FFFPP).
    - Riparian Open Space Program (ROSP) beginning in fiscal year 2017.
- Reform and accountability
  - Program performance reviews to ensure efficient and effective process.
  - Financial audits to ensure that the funds are being spent wisely.
  - Budget limits to ensure spending discipline; biennial reports to the Legislature.
  - Funding re-dedicated if the HCP or Clean Water Act Assurances are revoked.
  - Forest excise tax is streamlined.