

O&C forest plan offers protection, opportunity

By Peter DeFazio

On Aug. 25 The Register Guard ran two stories that contained a number of confusing and inaccurate statements about the proposed O&C Trust, Conservation, and Jobs Act. I want to set the record straight.

The Republican-controlled House Natural Resources Committee recently considered a controversial package of forestry bills. The overall bill written by the Republican majority, H.R. 1526, actually includes five different bills.

Contrary to the assertion of a photo caption accompanying this newspaper's stories, I am not "leading the charge in the House" to pass H.R. 1526. I support only two of the five bills in the larger package.

The first bill I support is the bipartisan O&C bill. I worked on this hard-fought compromise for two years with Oregon Reps. Greg Walden and Kurt Schrader. I didn't get everything I wanted. Neither did Walden or Schrader.

This bill has been supported by the Oregon Legislature, 16 Oregon boards of county commissioners, the county sheriffs association, local businesses and labor groups. The original text was made available to the public a year ago. Based on concerns that were raised I negotiated additional changes to the bill, including large additions to riparian buffers to better protect water quality.

The second bill I support extends federal timber payments for one year to help struggling southwest Oregon counties provide basic services.

These two bills are the most realistic solution for the O&C forests and the Oregon communities that depend on them.

I have serious concerns about the other three bills in H.R. 1526 because they would dramatically change how we manage national forests and undermine key federal protections for drinking water and public lands. In fact, when H.R. 1526 was considered by the committee I voted to completely replace these controversial bills with bipartisan forest management provisions that have already been passed by the Senate.

My alternative would have retained all federal protections for our national forests while giving land management agencies tools they need to better manage for the impacts of climate change, forest health, and to help prevent catastrophic wildfires. Unfortunately, we lost by a party line vote.

Even if H.R. 1526 passes the House, the three controversial Republican bills have no chance of passage in the Senate, where Democrats are in control.

Ron Wyden is the chairman of the Senate committee that oversees the O&C lands. We have common objectives. But as a chairman in the majority he is free to craft his own approach. If we can pass a bipartisan O&C plan in the House, differences with the Senate can be worked out in a conference.

Last Sunday's articles misrepresented the environmental protections included in the O&C plan. The reporter wrote that H.R. 1526 would take logging levels on the O&C lands back to 1980s levels of 1.6 billion board feet per year. That's completely false. The O&C plan would generate an estimated 400 million to 500 million board feet per year, 70 percent below historical levels.

When I ran for Congress in 1986 I campaigned on a platform that logging levels on federal lands in Oregon were unsustainable. My position hasn't changed. We cannot go back to the harvest levels of the 1970s and 1980s.

The paper also reported that "just 5 percent of the O&C lands" would be set aside to protect water quality. Again, that's completely false. The O&C plan sets aside 20 percent of the trust lands, or 300,000 acres, in riparian reserves to protect our water supplies. This is four times the protections required by the Oregon Forest Practices Act.

Additionally, the bill permanently protects a 1-million-acre old growth preserve, adds 90,000 acres of new wilderness and provides 130 miles of rivers with wild and scenic river protections.

Seventy-eight percent of harvested timber in Oregon comes from private and tribal lands. My negotiated, added provisions will provide incentives for the first time to increase riparian protections on some of these lands. But any mandatory changes in state-required riparian buffers to protect water quality would have to come from Salem, not Washington, D.C.

I also voted for an amendment, defeated along party lines, that would have preserved the status quo use of herbicides and pesticides on the O&C trust lands.

Despite this, I was still able to include a requirement for an integrated pest management plan to limit the use of chemicals. That plan would be developed through a public process.

Forest policy is a complicated and emotional issue. The legislative process is also complex and has only begun with the O&C proposal.

But the inclusion of the bipartisan O&C Trust, Conservation, and Jobs Act in H.R. 1526 represents a major step forward and an opportunity for Oregon, our struggling rural communities and our unhealthy forests.

Peter DeFazio of Springfield represents Oregon's 4th District in the U.S. House of Representatives. His website, www.defazio.house.gov, has information about the O&C Trust, Conservation, and Jobs Act.