Joel McEntire commentary: Forest board's poor decision is another hit to timber-reliant communities' livelihood

Rep. Joel McEntire listens during a public hearing on an initiative regarding parental rights in Olympia on Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024.

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By Rep. Joel McEntire, R-Cathlamet

The Washington Forest Practices Board's recent approval of the rule requiring buffers along streams is another devastating hit to Washington's rural timber-reliant counties, and one they cannot afford.

It is an insult to our communities, their schools, libraries and hospitals, and to anyone whose livelihood is connected to sustainable forest management.

The rule, passed last week by a 7-5 vote, requires large buffers along small, non-fish-bearing streams and takes approximately 200,000 acres of timberland out of production.

According to an economic impact analysis by the University of Washington, the decision will cost landowners $2.8 billion in harvestable timber. The report shows the most impacted counties are Pacific and Wahkiakum, with the rule removing 603 million and 157 million board feet from private forestland.

The laws of our forests, fish and streams have been under the Forests and Fish Law since 1999. It was considered landmark legislation because it brought together a broad coalition of organizations and groups. For more than 25 years, the Forests and Fish Law has guided responsible forest management across Washington state.
The new rule threatens the collaboration and management that have taken place since the law's inception.

When the Forests and Fish Law was passed, it created an adaptive management process — an approach to decision-making allowing for flexible adjustments based on new information and outcomes. The adaptive management plan was to ensure that changes to forest practices would be based on science, transparency, and collaboration.

The board's new rule has brought many in the original coalition out of the woodwork. They, along with many others, including legislators from both sides of the aisle, have let the board know the rule is greatly flawed and needs to go back through the adaptive process.

According to analysts, 200,000 acres of working forests is about 4-8% of the annual private harvest. That equates to wood for 15,000 homes and 2,000 jobs.

Keep in mind that in August, Public Lands Commissioner Dave Upthegrove announced that the state Department of Natural Resources was putting aside 77,000 acres for conservation. Another plan that severely limits the land available for timber harvest and sales, and is harmful to Washington state schools and other districts or entities that depend on timber.

Our timber-dependent counties have never recovered from the spotted-owl fiasco. Former Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz testified before the House Capital Budget Committee in December 2024. In testifying about encumbered lands, lands that have restrictions on them, she mentioned the government forced them not to touch their lands, but never paid them for it.

She stated the communities were "gutted overnight, never repaid, never restored."
"We literally gutted these communities from inside out. We did it over 27 years ago, and we need to continue to repair the mistakes of our past and do it in a way that takes care of place and people."

The anger exhibited by those who have lost jobs in Southwest Washington is different from that felt by those affected by a changing economy. The anger is directed at government officials, their agencies and the process. It doesn't take care of people; it

only serves environmental interests. Many have had to sell their land and assets and move on, never to return to the timber industry.

Environmental activism has put enormous pressure on lawmakers and decision makers in our state government. The verdict always seems to go their way. There is no balance. To regain the balance, we need to understand who continues to press against the interests of our local economies.

The board's decision will only amplify our state's struggling forest economy and negatively affect the districts that rely on timberland funds.
In Southwest Washington, communities should have quality schools, jobs and reliable community services.

This is another governmental rule that takes away from those necessities.
The board needs to go back and let the science and adaptive management process guide the policy. There can be an environmental and economic balance to managing our forests that protects our natural resources without further devastating our rural communities.

Rep. Joel McEntire is serving his third term representing the 19th District, which includes parts of Cowlitz, Grays Harbor, Lewis, Pacific, Wahkiakum and Thurston counties.