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In My Opinion

Willamette Sale May be Bad News for Forest Health

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The deal isn't finalized. And only Weyerhaeuser knows exactly how it plans to manage, or liquidate, Willamette Industries' forestlands and other assets.

But Weyerhaeuser's takeover of Willamette doesn't bode well for the environment and forest sustainability. It also shows what happens when Wall Street speculators drive forest management.

Weyerhaeuser is one of a few super-size timber companies that control an increasingly large percentage of North America's forests, both directly, and by purchasing other landowners' timber.

This consolidation trend may benefit shareholders, but it also likely means fewer jobs (due to the elimination of now-duplicate positions), more intensive logging, and a tough time for landowners who manage their forests well.

One of the most basic ways commercial forest owners can be more sustainable is to use longer timber rotations, that is, to allow timber stands to grow longer before being logged. This yields more timber volume and value, produces better wildlife habitat, and decreases the amount of land and streams affected by clearcuts and chemical applications each year.

Willamette Industries itself has said that "shorter rotations mean more disruption to the forest ecosystem, more problems with water quality and landslides and more clearcuts."

While Willamette's rotations weren't particularly long, some companies in Oregon and Washington have been using rotations on the order of 60 to 75 years; even longer rotations are possible.

Unfortunately, Weyerhaeuser is using shorter and shorter rotations -- and the company's dominance may force others to do the same. This will keep the region's forests a shadow of their former selves.

Weyerhaeuser acknowledges it will be logging on rotations of 40 to 45 years in the Northwest. Thus the average age of its trees, property-wide, will probably be only 20 to 22 _ years, since the age of companies' timber stands usually range from recently clearcut to ready-to-log.

Weyerhaeuser's actual rotations may be even shorter; they are already as short as 35 to 40 years in parts of the Coast Range. And because companies like Weyerhaeuser are running more and more of the region's sawmills, and gearing them to only use the small logs from short rotations, landowners who use longer, more sustainable rotations will have an increasingly tough time selling their larger logs.

Then there's the possibility that Weyerhaeuser will log the Willamette lands harder, to pay down any debt from the acquisition. This too is a common side effect of industry land deals. A classic example is the liquidation of the Headwaters redwood forest by the Maxxam Co., which acquired Pacific Lumber through a hostile takeover in the 1980s.

Weyerhaeuser exemplifies chemically-intensive, short-rotation, clearcut-oriented, single-species forestry. And the company's other practices are also far from glorious. Weyerhaeuser is eliminating the last 16,000 acres of Northern spotted owl habitat on its Millacoma Tree Farm near Coos Bay, using an Endangered Species Act exemption known euphemistically as a Habitat Conservation Plan.

The company has also been converting thousands of acres of productive forestland to residential sprawl in Washington and other states, has been reported to have drained and filled imperiled wetlands in North Carolina, and is being sued for allegedly failing to follow Washington's new salmon and stream protection rules. The company has also been fined repeatedly for pollution at its mills.

As the Oregonian noted, Willamette is apparently acceding to the takeover to mollify shareholders who recently purchased its stock, betting on the takeover and stock market fluctuations.

Willamette was hardly a model of sustainable forestry either. But clearly something's wrong when Wall Street speculators, instead of foresters and ecologists, drive the management decisions.

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