



Corruption in the woods

Guest view

Ernie Niemi Special to Eugene Register-Guard USA TODAY NETWORK I'm one of the thousands living in rural Lane County wondering why the Holiday Farm Fire was so catastrophic and what can be done to prevent a future fire from destroying more homes, businesses and communities.

But my preliminary review of the evidence reveals one overwhelming theme: the corrosive and reckless influence Wall Street timberland corporations exert over Oregon's legislators and governors.

Why did the fire burn so hot and move so quickly? Preliminary assessment indicates that it did so in large part because the fire burned through a heavily logged landscape covered with industrial plantations of densely packed, small trees.

Research has demonstrated such landscapes burn with exceptionally high severity. So why didn't the Board of Forestry respond to the research and discourage or prohibit such plantations? Because the board has been far more concerned about maximizing profits for investors than ensuring the safety of Oregonians. This bias occurs because the industry has persuaded governors and legislators to give a majority of positions on the board to the industry's friends.

Why didn't the state have more resources available to fight the fire? Partly because fires in California have siphoned off many firefighters. But also because the industry doesn't pay its fair share of the state's fire-fighting budget. Privately owned timberland constitutes about 77% of the total land that receives fire protection provided by the state.

These landowners provide 22% of the fire-protection budget, however, so you and other taxpayers pick up the bulk of the tab . Last year, Rep. Paul Holvey proposed House Bill 2495, to make fire-control taxes fairer by increasing the industry's contribution by a modest amount, about \$5 per acre. The industry rejected even this small increase. Somehow, enough legislators bowed to the pressure and defeated the bill. (Disclaimer: I testified to the legislature in support of HB 2495.)

Why wasn't more done to insulate communities from fire? There are three important reasons.. One, the timber industry grabbed money that otherwise would have supported county-level services by persuading legislators to terminate

taxes that were paid when trees are harvested . Two, the industry grabbed money that otherwise would have supported community-level services by convincing legislators to gift them with numerous tax breaks totaling

more than \$300 million per year . Three, the industry objected to House Bill 2020, which proposed placing a tax on fossil fuels as an incentive for consumers to burn less and reduce emissions of carbon dioxide that cause climate change. Faced with these objections, Republican legislators walked out of this year's legislative session. Their action surely defeated HB 2020, but it also meant the legislature

failed to pass – legislation that provided funding to thin forests, hire firefighters and make buildings less vulnerable .

Why hasn't Oregon done more to reduce climate change? Here, I'll give Brown and most Democratic legislators partial credit. They tried to cap greenhouse-gas emissions of major industries through HB 2020. Oregon can't meet emission-reduction targets without curtailing timber emissions. Nonetheless, enough legislators were persuaded to exempt timber from this provision of the bill, so that clear-cutting can emit carbon dioxide without limit. Republican legislators were persuaded to defeat HB 2020 anyhow. It is important to recognize that the industry and Republicans opposed HB 2020 even though research showed that passage of the bill would have generated net economic benefits for Oregonians, and the bill included provisions to insulate low-income households from undue cost burdens.

To me, this smells like corruption. We won't make significant progress in reducing the devastation from future fires unless and until we roust the industry and its servants from Salem.

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