

STATEMENT OF SENATOR GORDON H. SMITH
SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
HEARING ON THE COOS, LOWER UMPQUA, AND SIUSLAW
RESTORATION AMENDMENTS ACTS OF 2003: S. 868
MARCH 30, 2004

Today, the Committee is considering Senate Bill 868 “The Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Restoration Amendments Acts of 2003.” This legislation would effectively establish a land base for the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indians.

Many years ago when the Tribes first approached me, I told them that I could only support a proposal that met with broad local support and that was a net positive for Tribal members and Oregon as a whole.

S.868 is the result of years of discussions with the Tribes, the Oregon congressional delegation, local communities and environmentalists. That cooperation is reflected in a well-balanced plan that embraces the ecological needs of the forest and a struggling local economy.

The forest area that is being considered in my legislation lies within the Siuslaw National Forest. Under the Clinton Northwest Forest Plan, the Siuslaw is largely set aside in Late Successional Reserves (“LSRs”).

Timber management in these areas can only be used to accelerate the development of old growth characteristics for spotted owl habitat. Since most of the forest was heavily logged in the past, it is now so choked with second generation timber stands that it is incompatible with wildlife needs.

Both environmental groups and the forest products industry have advocated extensive thinning projects on the Siuslaw National Forest to create productive wildlife habitat and timber for local economies.

New Stewardship Contracting authority has allowed the Forest Service to move forward on a small number of thinning projects in the Siuslaw. Even the Oregon Natural Resources Council, which is represented in today’s panel, has recently stated that “we do see the need for work to move these forests ahead.”

But that work is not moving forward with any noticeable speed. The Siuslaw National Forest has identified 300,000 acres in need of thinning, yet only about 2,000 acres are being treated per year based on current staffing levels. Thus, it will take the Forest Service 150 years to meet its management objectives for the Siuslaw National Forest.

Certainly, that is not nearly fast enough for a state that's burning more spotted owl habitat than it's growing.

This legislation offers a change in course. The Tribes propose doing precisely what the Forest Service wants to do, but is limited by procedural analysis and funding shortfalls. By allowing the Tribes to manage a small portion of the Siuslaw National Forest, thinning projects would be accelerated. Not only would this help meet the needs of threatened species, but would provide revenues to the tribe for social services and jobs for the local economy.

Very rarely do I find common ground between the federal government, loggers, environmentalists, and the Tribes. Through their patience and perseverance, the Tribes have accomplished more on that front than I thought possible. They have gained support from their local elected officials. They have gained support from environmental groups and from the forest products industry. And now they are looking for support from their government.

If the federal government is serious about tribal self-determination and honest about the record of tribal forest management, then I believe that this proposal can gain traction.

To that extent, I hope today's hearing will bring us all closer to doing what's right for Tribes and for the land.

And now, I'd like to invite USDA Undersecretary Mark Rey to make his statement.