

Other Views: Compromise only goes so far before action needed

- By RYNDAL CLARK AND MATHIEU FEDERSPIEL
- Jul 4, 2022

Earlier this month, our organizations joined with our allies and went to court to restore protections for large trees in Eastern Oregon. The editors of this paper argued it represented failure on all sides. We agree. To a point.

Anytime we go to court, it is the result of failure. In this case, it was the Forest Service's failure to abide by the law. A fundamental concept of our democracy is that no one — not even the government — is above the law. Regardless of their means, citizens have a right to hold their government accountable.

Our primary concern is for the health of our forests and communities. We support some thinning near communities and appropriate restoration of forests that have been degraded by fire suppression, logging and overgrazing. None of those things require cutting our biggest and oldest trees or logging the backcountry.

When a political appointee signed a decision to undermine decades old protections for our forests, it capped off a politically driven process. It also cut sovereign tribes and the general public off from legally required opportunities to seek a better outcome.

Left with no choice but to allow the illegally amended rule to stand or challenge it in court, we chose to fight for our forests and our rights. Had the substance of the decision been different, we'd fully expect the logging industry to do the same.

We understand there are other perspectives out there. While we find their rhetoric misleading, we acknowledge the logging industry has a right to free speech and to use their political clout to increase their profits.

The real failure is with the Forest Service which failed to honor commitments made over two decades ago.

Supporters of the new rules that allow logging the largest 3% of trees often tell the half-truth that they replaced protections that were meant to be temporary.

They don't mention those protections were meant to be temporary until the agency crafted comprehensive rules that would take all interests into account — including those of us who advocate for clean water, wildlife habitat and healthy communities. That never happened.

The agency regularly made exceptions to the rules. Sometimes with our support.

When we learned the Trump administration was changing the rules, we were skeptical. Still, we participated in good faith. Just as the editors suggested, we sat down and offered compromises and proposals we thought could lead to a good outcome.

However, those olive branches were brushed aside. During a period of historic conflict and distraction, and under tremendous political pressure, the agency pushed toward a predetermined outcome.

That outcome was opposed by dozens of conservation, climate, Indigenous and public health groups, thousands of citizens, 115 independent scientists, and even former Forest Service leadership.

We played by the rules. The agency did not.

So, when a political appointee ended the process by signing a decision that violated numerous laws, we were left with little choice but to exercise our constitutional rights and stand up to our own government.

We join the editors in wanting to see compromise from all sides and a better path forward. We also agree that Sen. Wyden has a history of bringing folks together as he did with his East Side forest bill years ago.

For that to happen again, protections must be restored, with the goal of working toward a viable solution. We'll be waiting at the table.

Rynda Clark is on the leadership team of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness which has four active chapters in Oregon. Mathieu Federspiel is on the leadership team of the Juniper Group of the Oregon Sierra Club.