



## Why President Biden Must Reinstate Owl Habitat Protection as Quickly as Possible

Rural poverty, political corruption and far -right extremism are among economic and social ills that plague towns overly invested in Big Timber

By Ernie Niemi and John Talberth<sup>1</sup>

In its last days in office, the Trump Administration dished out favors to corporations that extract oil, gas, coal and timber from federal public lands. One of those favors involved easing timber harvesting restrictions on 3.5 million acres of designated critical habitat for the extinction bound northern spotted owl. <sup>2</sup> On January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021 Secretary of Interior David Bernhardt (Secretary) through the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) issued a final rule in the federal register that excluded nearly 615,000 acres of land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in western Oregon and 2.9 million acres of national forest lands regionwide from continued protection as critical habitat, ostensibly, with a finding that the benefits of exclusion outweighed the costs. <sup>3</sup> By law, such a determination needs to rest on a body of scientific and economic data that quantifies, to the extent practicable, all known benefits and costs expressed either in dollars or non-monetary values.<sup>4</sup>

To justify its finding, the USFWS highlighted two economic and social benefits from providing more raw material for the timber industry: rural economic stability and protection of custom and culture. Not surprisingly, like many Trump era decisions, the decision was based on zero quantitative evidence – these benefits were merely asserted – and flies in the face of socioeconomic realities in Pacific Northwest rural

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<sup>2</sup> In December of 2020, the USFWS determined that the northern spotted owl was warranted for uplisting from a “threatened” to an “endangered” species – Federal Register Vol. 85, No. 241, pages 81144-81152.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Register Friday, January 15<sup>th</sup> 2021, Vol. 86, No. 10, pages 4820 -4860.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g. Carey, M.P., 2014. Cost-Benefit and Other Analysis Requirements in the Rulemaking Process. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

communities. In particular, the new rule promises to set back rather than aid economically distressed rural towns by perpetuating overreliance on an industry that breeds community instability and a culture and custom that helped incubate Timber Unity, the Proud Boys and other far right extremist groups that took part in the insurrection on Capitol Hill. Overreliance on the timber industry is also a big drain on local public finance since logging corporations are good at evading taxes and making taxpayers bear the burden of degraded and depleted water supplies, lost hunting and fishing opportunities, increased fire risk and climate change. The Secretary's determination contained no mention of these costs.

Nor did the Secretary consider the opposite: how maintaining protection for the owl and the old growth forest ecosystems it inhabits gives rural economies just what they need – the opportunity to diversify and grow by capitalizing on Americans' desires to live in clean, healthy environments where nature and biodiversity are valued and protected at the highest levels and where managing public forests to capture carbon and combat climate change takes precedent over fueling excessive consumption of wood and paper products. This analysis summarizes what we know about these costs and missed opportunities.

#### **The economic and social costs of lifting spotted owl protections:**

1. More logging amplifies community instability and perpetuates the kind of custom and culture that breeds far right extremism.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) itself has found that boosting logging levels over and above the current baseline would work to destabilize rather than stabilize the rural economy since the timber industry itself is among the world's most volatile. As noted in the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Western Oregon Resource Management Plan – "[b]ecause the timber industry has a long, national history of high volatility, alternatives with harvest volumes that exceed current levels are likely to introduce greater instability into local economies, based on past business cycles."

Some of this instability is due to the timber industry's exposure to the vagaries of international markets. But the timber industry's own tactics amplify this effect. Jobs have declined as it busted unions, exported logs rather than sending them to local mills and replaced mill jobs with machinery. Communities have become weaker as it evaded taxes. Regional economic growth has sputtered as it replaces healthy forests with

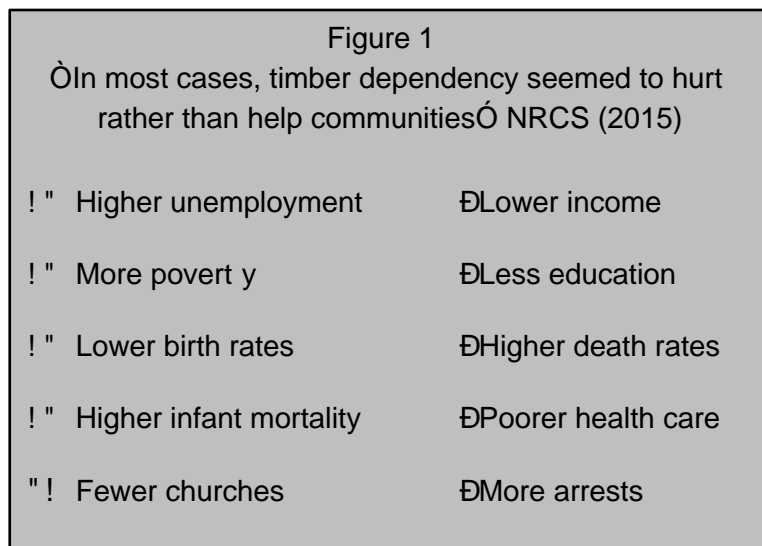
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<sup>5</sup> Bureau of Land Management, 2014. Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Resource Management Plan for Western Oregon, page 702. Portland, OR: USDI Bureau of Land Management, Oregon State Office.

clearcuts that externalize billions of dollars in natural resource damages onto the backs of taxpayers. This instability, in turn, is a breeding ground for a host of social ills plaguing rural areas overly invested in extractive industries Ða pattern known globally

as the resource curse but one all too visible in rural America.

These ills include chronic unemployment and poverty, domestic violence, decaying community infrastructure, and a pattern of corruption by elected officials who provide favors to corporations in return for hefty campaign contributions, dark money advertising, and other forms of electoral support.



Indeed, in a meta-analysis of published research, the National Research Council (NRCS) found that indicators of social well-being were markedly worse in communities where the timber industry has a greater presence (Figure 1)<sup>6</sup>. In Oregon, there is a strong statistical correlation between more logging and higher levels of poverty. In counties that devote more land to logging, more of the population lives at or below the official poverty line and workers take home lower median wages (Figure 2).<sup>7</sup>

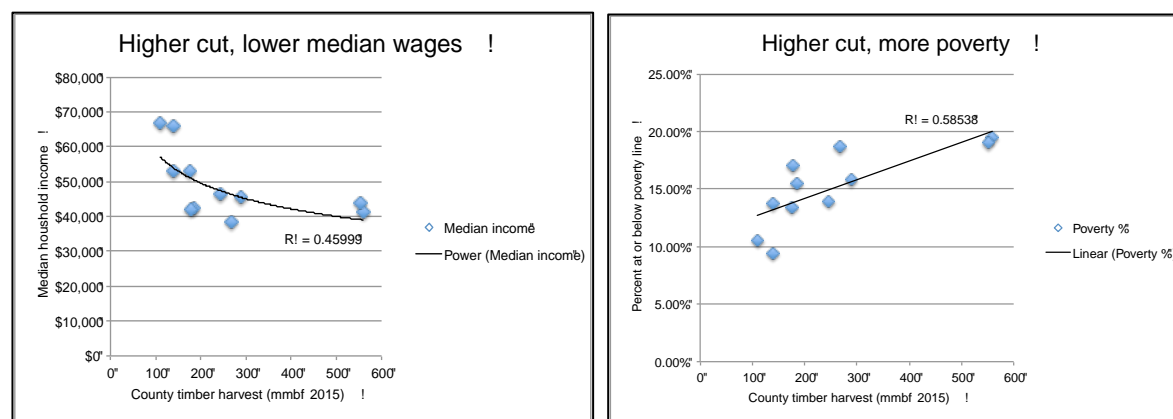


Figure 2: Among western Oregon counties that have significant timber harvest, more logging is strongly correlated with more people below the poverty line and lower wages (Talberth 2017).

<sup>6</sup> National Research Council. 2000. Environmental Issues in Pacific Northwest Forest Management. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/4983>.

<sup>7</sup> County harvest data courtesy of Oregon Department of Forestry. Poverty and median wage data are taken from the U.S. Census. See Talberth, J., 2017. Modernizing State Forest Practices Laws to Halt and Reverse Deforestation. West Linn, OR: Center for Sustainable Economy.

Another tragic outcome of chronic community instability and poverty associated with high logging levels is that it provides optimal conditions for the customs and culture of far-right extremist groups whose assault on the US Capitol sent shock waves across the nation. The connection between rural poverty, federal policies that favor extractive corporations over people, and the rise of far-right extremism has been established at least since the 1980s<sup>8</sup>

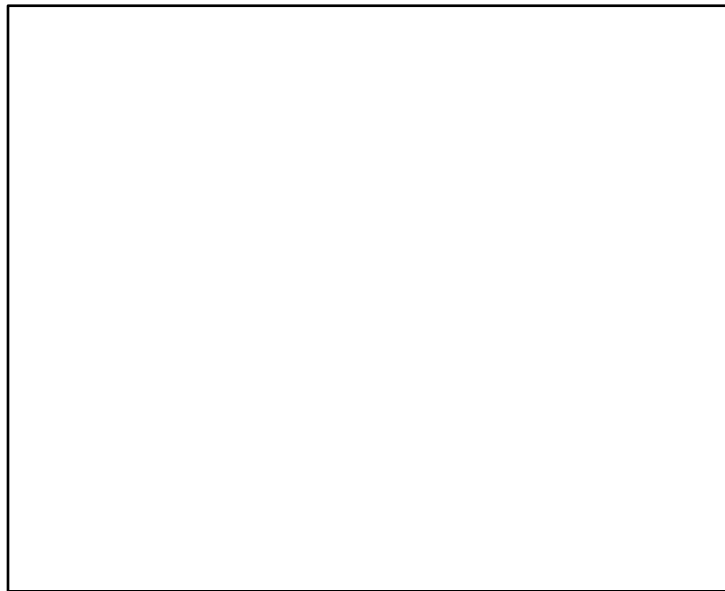


Figure 3: Headlines from Mother Jones, January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

Timber Unity, one of the groups that helped organize and inspire the assaults on Salem and the US Capitol was founded by Oregon corporate timber money and is a prominent presence in the counties within the range of the northern spotted owl. Recently, Mother Jones exposed how Timber Unity members are aligned with neofascists, anti-government militias, white supremacists, conspiracy theorists and those advocating for violence against climate protesters and politicians (Figure 3).<sup>9</sup>

In making the decision to lift critical habitat designation, the Secretary and the USFWS arbitrarily ignored these destabilizing effects of increased logging as well as the national security threat of maintaining socioeconomic conditions that help enable far right extremism.

## 2.! More logging harms the local tax base and cripples local government finances.

The Secretary and USFWS also turned logic on its head in alleging that more logging is needed to give weight to the local tax and economic base.<sup>10</sup> The fact is that counties dominated by the logging industry have been extremely hard hit in their ability to

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g. Youngblood, M., 2020. Extremist ideology as a complex contagion: the spread of far-right radicalizations in the United States between 2005 and 2017. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, 49 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00546-3>; DeBruin, C., 2019. Right Wing Extremism in the United States. Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects. 997.

<sup>9</sup> Leber, R., 2021. Let's Examine the Ties Between the Timber Industry and Extremists. Mother Jones, January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Available online at: <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2021/01/timber-unity-capitol-riot/>.

<sup>10</sup> Federal Register 86(10) at 4834.