

## A timber town learns to care for the forest

Perched on the easternmost edge of Oregon timber country, where scattered mountain ranges fade into the high desert, the hamlet of Lakeview is an apparition. All indications suggest that it should be dead and gone, a casualty of its own lust for timber, the global economy and an era of tightened environmental rules.

by Greg Hanscom

<http://www.headwatersnews.org/HCN.oremill.html>

But arriving in Lakeview on a summer evening, a visitor can immediately sense the town's pulse. Trucks come and go on the main drag. Young couples and Forest Service firefighters huddle over burgers and shakes at the Dairy Queen. Kids toss each other into the town swimming pool, their shouts echoing through streets crisscrossed by cats and coveys of quail.

Climb the hill above town, up toward the faded "L" and a thicket of radio towers, and, if the wind is just right, you can smell the main reason there's still life here. Over the dusty scent of dried grass and sage, you'll catch a sweet-sour breath of wet wood. Look down on the compact downtown. Follow the main street north, past the giant cowboy who holds up the Safeway sign, past the cemetery filled with old Irish names, and you'll see the source: The Fremont Sawmill and the mist of sprinklers in the lot, keeping decks of logs wet so they'll stay fresh.

This mill, owned by the Portland-based Collins Companies, is one of only a handful in eastern Oregon that have survived the last decade, thanks to the ingenuity - and the chutzpah - of the residents of this tiny town of 2,500.

Paul Harlan remembers how close Lakeview came to dying. In 1996, Harlan closed the sawmill in Paisley, 40 miles north of here, when it became clear that the supply of timber on national forests was drying up. On the "west side" forests in the Cascades and along the coast, environmental lawsuits and the listing of the spotted owl and marbled murrelet had put a kink in the flow of timber from the federal forests -and eventually led to the Northwest Forest Plan. Here on the "east side," the plan didn't apply, but facing another round of lawsuits, the Forest Service had hastily written up a rule that banned cutting any tree over 21 inches in diameter. In Harlan's words, the agency, "by edict, shut the forests down."

The Paisley mill was one of two remaining in the county, down from five a decade earlier. When it closed, 25 people lost their jobs, says Harlan, and the town lost a significant chunk of its economy. "It was a huge blow," he says. "Almost everyone was there to watch the last log go through."

Rather than resigning themselves to a similar fate, community leaders in Lakeview, including Harlan, did something unprecedented for a timber town. They invited the environmentalists to visit.

"I wanted people to leave their guns at the door and talk about what's happening out on the forest, and where we can go from here," says Harlan.

Rancher Jane O'Keefe, a county commissioner at the time, trekked to Portland, Seattle and Washington, D.C., to talk to state and national environmental leaders. In July 1998, Lakeview hosted a meeting with 90 environmentalists, scientists and Forest Service officials, including then-agency chief Jack Ward Thomas.

"We had been brought to our knees by polarization, by the conflict industry," says Thomas today. "We were desperately looking for some kind of ability to work with people in consensus efforts."

Not everyone wanted to work together: The day of the meeting, greens were greeted by a sign that read, "Go Home Eco Nazis!" Nonetheless, the meeting led to a longstanding partnership that revolves around a 495,000-acre chunk of the Fremont-Winema National Forest that is in desperate need of rehabilitation.

On its face, what's happening on the Fremont-Winema is many environmentalist's worst nightmare: The Lakeview Federal Sustained Yield Unit was created in 1950 under a law designed to guarantee a steady stream of federal logs to mills in timber communities. But activists have long argued that the ecological health of forests should trump economic concerns.

To make things worse, in 1998, as Lakeview began to push to re-authorize the unit, many Northwestern environmentalists were still feeling burned by another experiment in local forest management. The Quincy Library Group had proposed a sweeping plan for 2.4 million acres of national forests in Northern California. But the Forest Service wouldn't adopt the plan, so the group took it to Washington, D.C., where, despite the vehement objections of many environmentalists, they helped push it through Congress (HCN, 12/17/01: Quincy collaboration heads to court) .

"The first year and a half in Lakeview was really tough," says Martin Goebel, president of the Portland-based nonprofit Sustainable Northwest, which helped organize the meeting in July, and the series of planning sessions that followed. "There was increasing skepticism (among environmentalists) that rural communities could care for the land."

Those doubts seemed to be confirmed, in fact, when an initial survey of the sustained-yield unit showed a forest in rough shape. "The community didn't know how bad the forest was," says forest ecologist Richard Hart. "The forest lives and dies by the soil. But there are areas where 70 percent of the ground has been driven over. They tractor-logged it. They just backed up to every tree."

But the locals in Lakeview convinced environmentalists that they were willing to change their ways, and over the next few years, the newborn Lakeview Stewardship Group drew up a set of management goals for the unit. Local contractors would continue to receive preference for work in the unit, but the restoration of forests and watersheds, rather than providing logs for the mill, would have to come first. The group also agreed to let scientists closely monitor its work.

Mike Anderson, a resource analyst for The Wilderness Society in Seattle, says he was skeptical at first, but he's now a regular participant in the stewardship group. "It can't be pigeon-holed as a local control effort," he says. "It doesn't have that county supremacy or wise-use mentality to it. It's much broader than that."

After a few more visits to Washington, D.C., members of the group were able to convince a new Forest Service chief, Mike Dombeck, that their experiment in local management was worth another chance. One of the last things Dombeck did before leaving office in 2001 was to reauthorize the unit for 10 years and adopt the stewardship group's management goals. It is one of only a handful of sustained-yield units still in existence.

While the scientists, agency staffers and environmentalists peer over its shoulder, the community of Lakeview is essentially managing a half-million-acre chunk of the Fremont-Winema National Forests - and that's just the beginning.

The stewardship group is now drafting a long-term management plan for the sustained-yield unit. The group's nonprofit arm, the Lake County Resources Initiative, is training local loggers and contractors to do forest restoration, and helping local operators win contracts on the national forest. Ecologist Richard Hart and the local science teacher, Clair Thomas, are teaching high school and college kids from Lakeview and neighboring communities how to monitor the forest's health.

"The science we're using makes specialists nervous - it knocks their intellectual egos around," says Hart, who spends his summers teaching students how to detect everything from soil compaction to root rot. "They say, 'You can't teach college kids this stuff.' " But one faculty member at Washington State University has already offered each of these kids a full-ride scholarship to his forestry program.

And the Fremont Sawmill, the town's largest private employer, has survived. Paul Harlan and Collins Company practice eco-friendly forest management on the company's private timber lands, which were some of the first in the nation to win "green" certification from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) (HCN, 6/24/02: Can green-certified lumber make it?) . The mill has retooled to handle smaller diameter logs, and added a swing shift to get enough volume through with smaller logs.

To augment the timber coming off nearby forests, Collins is importing logs from other areas where mills have gone belly-up, says Harlan, who was recently elected to his

second term as president of the U.S. board of the Forest Stewardship Council. The company recently bought a trainload of logs salvaged from a burned forest near Lake Arrowhead, near San Bernadino in Southern California.

Nonetheless, the Fremont-Winema National Forest is an important source of logs, and the stewardship group has helped keep them flowing: Last year, when the Oregon Natural Resources Council appealed two salvage sales on the Fremont, the stewardship group - with its environmentalist members acting as ambassadors - convinced ONRC to agree to a compromise. The sales provided one-third of the Fremont Sawmill's raw material for the year.

The Lakeview collaboration has had ripple effects in the environmental community, says The Wilderness Society's Mike Anderson. Anderson helped put together a guide to collaboration for environmentalists, and says the experience in Lakeview has made his group more comfortable with such efforts. It paved the way, for example, for The Wilderness Society to work with ranchers in Idaho's Owyhee country (HCN, 12/8/03: Riding the middle path) .

What's next for Lakeview? The Lake County Resources Initiative this summer finished a feasibility study for a power plant to be fueled by the slash that is coming off the forests. The idea was the brainchild of Lakeview high school students. Residents are also working to restore a native red band trout fishery by doing work on both public and private lands.

Rancher Jane O'Keefe says the community has come to accept the new way of doing things. "The forest needed some healing, and that was pretty tough for folks to hear," she says. "But I think people understand that the world is changing."

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