

OPINION

Forest trust lands help fund schools, fuel rural economy

By JIM MCENTIRE
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EVERYONE should understand the vital role that state-

owned forest and agricultural lands play in providing funds to K-12 education and in Washington's rural economy.

Washington citizens own 2.1 million acres of state-forest trust lands, and these lands are managed by the state Department of Natural Resources for the benefit of various trust beneficiaries, the largest of which is the state's K-12 school system. Money from timber sales and agricultural land leases provide a substantial and dependable revenue stream to the Legislature and local school districts, greatly helping to fully fund basic education and school construction — more than \$124 million in 2015 — plus more money in timber sales from lands held in trust for counties.

State trust lands accounted for 45 percent of Washington's total contribution to K-12 school construction in the 2007-2009 biennium. Of course, timber revenues are not the entire answer to solving K-12 school funding, but they are a vital part of the overall funding plan. These revenue sources do matter — a lot.

When Washington became a state in 1889, Congress granted the state millions of acres of federally owned land, creating stable and permanent funding for primary, secondary and higher education. These lands are protected by a trust created by federal law and enshrined in the state's constitution. This permanent state-forest-trust-land system has funded billions of dollars in school operations and construction over more than a century.

Additionally, many counties and their junior taxing districts,

such as schools, libraries and fire districts, get funding in timber sales from lands held in a separate trust for counties. In 2015,

about through active forest management.

It is not in our overall interest to let our working forests go — we

would have our state's biggest publicly owned economic and environmental asset end up like our federal forests: overcrowded, unmanaged, unhealthy — a tinderbox for wildfire. Effective management of healthy trust-land forests is critical if we are to get essential revenue, provide important habitat for fish and wildlife, and cool, clean water and enable our trees to be effective carbon sinks that help in the effort to mitigate against climate change.

Compromising the health of our forests by not maintaining harvests on state trust lands would mean drastic

reductions in jobs and timber for Washington mills and rural communities. Washington is the second-largest timber-producing state in the country, supporting 106,000 jobs and \$5.2 billion in wages, much of it outside urban areas. Eighteen percent of the annual harvest comes from state forest lands. This timber is legally prevented from being exported, and thus it directly supports our domestic timber market. A substantial amount of it is processed in local mills, which sell in-state, regionally and even nationally.

Our state-forest-trust-land system is an integral part of the past and future success of all of Washington. It has such deep and wide-ranging positive impacts, in fact, that we should be considering how to expand it.

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The Naneum Ridge State Forest, primarily in Kittitas County, is a working forest managed by the Department of Natural Resources to provide revenue in support of public services.

these junior taxing districts received more than \$90 million in revenue. For rural communities, these funds are critical to keeping property-tax levies affordable for Washington's rural citizens. As a former Clallam County commissioner and member of the state Board of Natural Resources, I know the issue firsthand.

The state's timber lands — last valued at more than \$12 billion — are an enormous economic asset to all of us, especially in rural Washington. In addition to enabling a sturdy forest-products industry in rural counties, state timber lands provide wildlife habitat, good stream conditions for endangered fish populations and a venue for hunting and other forms of outdoor recreation.

Trees grow very well in Western Washington. East of the Cascades though, state-owned forests are in tenuous shape from insect infestations, a warming climate and declining timber harvests in recent decades. Managing wildfire depends in large part on healthy forests, brought

