



Oregon State University
College of Forestry

Office of the Dean
Oregon State University
311 Peavy Forest Science Center
Corvallis, Oregon 97331

P 541-737-1585
forestry.oregonstate.edu

MEMORANDUM

DATE: 2/16/2024

TO: Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources

FR: Professor Thomas H. DeLuca, Cheryl Ramberg-Ford Allyn C. Ford Dean of the College of Forestry

RE: Elliott State Research Forest: Opportunity, Challenges, and Next Steps

Introduction: The Elliott State Research Forest is a beautiful, once-in-a-generation opportunity. If done right, this research forest holds incredible potential that would enable exploration and lead to solutions for environmental and resource challenges that will have lasting impacts for generations to come. As our global population surpasses eight billion people, the world is experiencing growing climate and sustainability crises. Forestry has a responsibility to help meet human resource needs while finding ways to support our living world and contribute to a more sustainable future. The Elliott State Research Forest (ESRF) presents a rare opportunity to establish a long-term research forest that will provide knowledge to support conservation, education, Tribal cultural values, recreation, local economies, and adaptive forest management.

Long-term field-based research is key to establishing an understanding of ecosystem function and is essential for advancing policy and decision-making informed by data. Time is the crucial ingredient for building our understanding of complex, dynamic ecosystems and human-environment relationships. As a field-based research station, the ESRF has incredible potential to deepen our understanding of forest ecosystems and management, as well as bringing multiple perspectives together to address vital questions in a changing world. As a key partner in developing the vision for the ESRF and an internationally recognized leader in forestry education, research, and policy, the Oregon State University (OSU) College of Forestry continues to be excited about the potential for the ESRF to be a world-class public research forest in Oregon if it is built on a strong foundation.

Process and Key Challenges: In December 2018, the State Land Board requested that OSU explore with the Oregon Department of State Lands (DSL) the potential transformation of the Elliott State Forest into a world-class public research forest. This exploratory work has been ongoing since early 2019 and has included the engagement of advisory committees at the state and college level, preliminary Government-to-Government engagement with Tribes, coordination with agencies and partners, collaboration with an ESRF Advisory Committee and ESRFA Prospective Board, and the solicitation of input from a range of diverse stakeholders.

Over the past two years, Oregon State University developed and finalized the Forest Management Plan and supporting documents with input from the public and more than 120 contributors, including advisory committees, researchers from different institutions, species experts, forest managers, and Tribes. At the same time, the Department of State Lands led the development of a habitat conservation plan (HCP) directly tied to the ESRF Research Proposal that was accepted by the State Land Board in April 2021 and identified as a foundational document by Senate Bill 1546.

Prior to the development of these documents, an agreement was made between OSU and the Land Board that OSU would manage the ESRF forest operations and research program but would not own the forest. OSU and other partners also made other compromises while aiming to achieve the vision for the Elliott as a public research forest that is informed by multiple perspectives and ways of knowing. While some of these compromises support the integrity of the research forest and the planning process itself, there are key issues that need to be addressed. While compromise to include multiple perspectives has been a core tenant of collaboration since early in the process, as time went on, the vision for the Elliott and overall commitment to the collaborative process became skewed.

In direct response to a handful of mandates shared with OSU by the State Land Board assistants regarding management of the forest, OSU President Murthy shared [a letter](#) with the State Land Board on November 13, 2023. This letter indicated that OSU would not be able to bring the university's participation in management of the Elliott State Research Forest to its Board of Trustees for a vote in December 2023 due to concerns about the current strategy. Specifically, the university is concerned that increasing constraints being placed on the forest's management and research activities will present barriers to achieving the mutually agreed upon goals. This decision was made in response to multiple issues:

1. **A request from the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians (CTCLUSI)** to the OSU Board of Trustees and the Department of State Lands to pause the process and consult with the Tribe about their concerns regarding the research design, management plan, and habitat conservation plan.
2. **The State's intent to limit variation in annual harvest volume to 17 million board feet per year**, communicated to OSU by the state land board assistants via email in October 2023. This volume cap would be in addition to a four-year rolling harvest cap on acreage that was established in the Habitat Conservation Plan. OSU is concerned that the combination of the volume and acreage caps are unnecessarily restrictive, as they do not consider natural variation, disturbances, or the need for year-to-year management flexibility under the adaptive research strategy. As outlined in the December 2023 ESRF Forest Management Plan, OSU never planned to harvest timber when it did not directly align with the approved Research Proposal and the Habitat Conservation Plan and the long-term average annual harvest projected by OSU remains at 17 million board feet. However, in order to effectively conduct research and braid together western science and Indigenous Knowledge, an adaptive management model is required. Time-sensitive restoration harvests to improve forest health and resiliency to climate change would also be limited by the volume cap, including those that would move current

plantations on a trajectory to provide habitat for sensitive species on the forest over a limited time period that was negotiated with the advisory committee. In basic terms, this narrow restriction on annual harvest volumes naively treats this complex forest as a simple, uniform tree stand. This approach is detrimental to the overall health of the forest, species conservation measures, and implementation of the ESRF research design.

3. **The State's insistence on a carbon offset project at the early stages of the forest's establishment.** OSU is not opposed to a carbon project on the forest, however, the university feels that a carbon project must be aligned with research, demonstrate clear additionality, and be timed appropriately. OSU's concerns were outlined in a letter to the Land Board in 2022 and reshared in 2023 (see Appendix), emphasizing the potential constraints on the research imposed by a premature carbon project and due to the lack of actual additional carbon storage upon which credits might be sold given the suite of conservation measures and strategies already planned on the forest.
4. **The lack of an actionable plan for start-up funds that were identified as necessary to launch the research forest** and concerns about the long-term financial self-sufficiency of the ESRF within its current structure.

It is important to note, OSU and its Board of Trustees did not and have not declined to have the university involved in the Elliott State Research Forest. OSU remains committed to the research forest concept and supportive of the potential for the ESRF as a unique research forest reflecting scientific integrity and the State Land Board's vision that began this process. OSU is also interested in partnering to lead the research program, provided that the management and governance plans for the ESRF support the integrity of the research program, respectful engagement with Tribes, and the values that have underpinned the ESRF vision from the beginning.

Essential Criteria for Success of the Elliott State Research Forest: The Oregon State University College of Forestry is an internationally recognized leader in forest research and management, with decades of experience stewarding research forests across the State. The college is a trusted resource for policymakers, industry and private landowners in Oregon and around the world. Relying on the collective knowledge of its experts, the College of Forestry has developed the following list of criteria that will ensure the Elliott State Research Forest's success in long-term field-based research:

- **Commitment and Trust:** There must be a strong commitment to and trust in the College of Forestry/OSU as a partner in research planning and implementation. Integrity, trust and mutual respect should underpin this partnership.
- **Research Funding and Support:** A clear management plan and consistent baseline budget, aligned with a novel research program, are crucial. Ensuring long-term funding stability is essential for sustaining research initiatives.
- **Representative Board:** The current advisory group does not include active research scientists. The board of directors for the ESRF should fully reflect the forest's purpose, with a strong

representation of research scientists (approximately 50% of the board) along with diverse perspectives and expertise from other board members.

- Engagement with Tribes: Provide adequate time and effort to continue discussions and collaboration with Tribal partners, respecting their perspectives and contributions to research and in particular with CTCLUSI given the concerns raised to OSU and to the DSL.
- Minimal Political Influence: Research at the ESRF should be shielded from undue political influence, allowing for objective and unbiased scientific investigations that do not shift with shorter political cycles.

To ensure the success of the ESRF as a world-class research forest, a commitment to integrity, sustained funding, a representative board, engagement with Tribes, and the protection of research from political influences are essential. Investing in these criteria is an investment in advancing our understanding of forest ecosystems, forest management, and fostering strong connections with local and statewide communities. The state of Oregon has a unique opportunity to launch a forward-looking public research forest committed to long-term research and monitoring. There is a difference between a research forest and a forest where people can do research. OSU is committed to the vision for an Elliott State Research Forest that is based on a strong, holistic foundation. At this time, OSU is waiting to understand the State's plans for moving forward considering the conditions outlined above. OSU welcomes the opportunity to discuss the concerns raised by the CTCLUSI and in President Murthy's letter to identify a path forward that achieves the original vision for the research forest.