

Reducing wildfires preferable to 'cap and invest'

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Oregon's political leaders have prioritized passing an expensive and partisan "cap and invest" bill during the February legislative session as a way to "decarbonize" the state's economy. The legislation is complex, raising questions about its effectiveness, about its effects on homegrown businesses and rural Oregonians, and about how millions in state revenue would be spent.

Unfortunately, the proposal pays scant attention to the carbon emissions resulting from wildfires. Nor does it address how carbon can be sequestered in a way that creates jobs and helps adapt our forests to changing climate conditions.

As an alternative to "cap and invest" the Legislature should consider House Bill 4109, a bipartisan bill that promotes carbon sequestration solutions that promise healthier forests, cleaner air and a stronger rural economy.

Much of the focus on "cap and invest" is on industry and transportation sources, yet emissions from a major forest fire can equal those from millions of cars. In addition to emitting large amounts of carbon dioxide, wildfires emit other greenhouse gasses and pollutants — including methane and nitrous oxide — that are harmful to public health and vulnerable populations such as the elderly. Oregon's abundant forests have enormous potential to capture and store carbon, yet more than 30 percent of this stored carbon is released in the form of wildfire and decay.

Catastrophic wildfires are a problem on our federally owned lands, which make up 60 percent of Oregon's forested land base. Much of these forests are at high risk of severe wildfire as fire suppression, combined with the lack of timber harvesting, has resulted in overgrown stands with smaller trees that are less resilient to wildfire.

As we witnessed during the last fire season, federal forests are burning and dying at a much higher rate compared with other forests. A recent study by the U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station found that 56 percent of the growth on Oregon's national forests is lost to mortality, whether through fire, insects or disease, while only 9 percent is lost through timber harvest or noncommercial treatments. By comparison, the mortality rates on state forests are 19 percent of growth, while private forests lose 12 percent of their growth to the various forms of mortality, even as timber is harvested on these lands at much higher rates.

Active forest management activities such as timber harvest, thinning and prescribed fire can help reduce the risks of catastrophic wildfire while enabling our forests to sequester more carbon. The Sierra Nevada Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service found that treatments on a Northern California watershed helped reduce high-severity fire by up to 75 percent while reducing carbon emissions by as much as 77 percent. In examining data collected by the Forest Service on thinned and unthinned forest stands, University of Montana researchers found that thinning treatments on younger stands contributed to the rapid growth of larger trees that can absorb more carbon.

Oregon's federally owned forests need active forest management to reduce the risks of wildfire, insects and disease. Meanwhile, Oregon's timber industry needs wood to manufacture lumber for construction and other products we use every day. Our state has the capacity to produce more carbon-storing products, which would create more family wage jobs in our rural communities. In addition, new technologies such as cross-laminated timber and biomass energy are opening new markets for smaller trees and lower-grade wood material that wouldn't be utilized for lumber.

The bipartisan and bicameral HB 4109, sponsored by Rep. David Brock Smith, R-Port Orford, and Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay, would direct the state of Oregon to seek new opportunities to boost carbon sequestration through active forest management and advanced wood products, among other technologies. This approach would encourage, not punish, businesses for investing in these technologies and hiring more Oregonians to manufacture products with low carbon footprints.

A "cap and invest" scheme that imposes arbitrary emission limits on a relatively small number of Oregon businesses at the cost of hundreds of millions of dollars per year will do little to influence global climate conditions, but it could potentially cost Oregon jobs and reduce our competitiveness in a global economy. A better solution is to increase the pace and scale of forest management on public lands and reduce the risks of catastrophic wildfires. Let's produce more Oregon grown and manufactured products that are environmentally friendly and support our rural economy.

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