

Executive Summary

About 18 percent of California's land mass is composed of productive forests, an extensive and valuable natural resource that provides not only timber and wood products, but also wildlife and fish habitat, recreational opportunities and esthetic enjoyment. A challenge facing state government is to allow multiple uses of this resource without degrading its value or allowing any one use to dominate or exclude the others.

To carry out this responsibility, the State has created the Timber Harvest Plan process to regulate logging activities. Originally a streamlined procedure that assured continued logging while acknowledging environmental needs, the process has been reshaped and molded in response to new state laws, federal laws and court decisions. While the focus of many of these new thrusts is on issues other than logging -- such as preservation of species and protection of water quality -- the impact on timber operations is substantial and tangible.

Timber Harvest Plans have grown increasingly complex in response to emerging laws and policies. At the same time, the ground rules for what is allowed, what mitigation measures are required and what is forbidden are constantly changing and are rarely clearly understood by all the parties involved. Despite the frequent reforms and fine-tuning, the process remains an inadequate tool for protecting both economic and environmental interests.

The ripple effect from how timber harvest proposals are handled touches all Californians in both direct and subtle ways. The timber industry employs 113,000 people, with another 300,000 jobs linked to timber operations. Counties where logging occurs receive millions of dollars in timber taxes. An unrestricted approach to timber harvesting threatens to eliminate plant and animal species that can never be replaced, while an overly restrictive approach drives the cost of wood products up, affecting prices on everything from pencils to houses.

The Little Hoover Commission has identified the key problems with the Timber Harvest Plan process in two findings and has proposed meaningful reform of the State's approach in eight recommendations.



The Process

Finding #1: The current Timber Harvest Plan process is complex, inequitable and costly, producing frustration for the administering state departments, the timber industry and environmental advocacy groups.

Participation in the review of Timber Harvest Plans is spread across two agencies, four departments and seven boards, leaving the process open to inconsistent policy application and fragmented leadership. Rules regulating the process change so frequently that participants are often unclear about what standards they are required to meet. In addition, the process is the target of criticism from all sides, including:

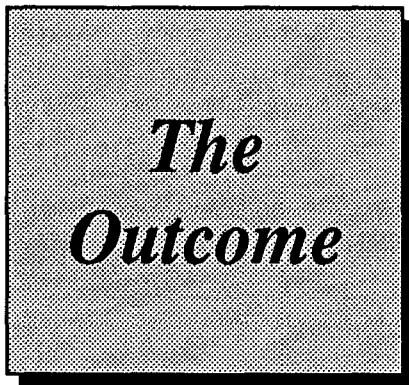
- State departments, which say they lack the resources to do the thorough review required by a combination of state and federal laws.
- The timber industry, which says demands for more information as new laws, regulations and court orders come into play makes the Timber Harvest Plans increasingly lengthy and costly for the harvesters. Timber industry interests are also critical of approval delays -- especially in the case of controversial and complicated harvesting proposals.
- Environmental groups, which say the limited amount of time for public input effectively rules out any meaningful analysis and

response. Too often, they add, the plan is a paperwork exercise that is routinely approved.

Recommendation #1: The Governor and the Legislature should direct the Board of Forestry to develop integrated policies and guidelines -- in consultation with the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, the Department of Fish and Game, the timber industry and environmental groups -- to govern wildlife, fish and plant issues raised by Timber Harvest Plans.

Recommendation #2: The Governor and the Legislature should enact legislation that make regulations promulgated by the Board of Forestry effective at specific times of the year.

Recommendation #3: The Governor and the Legislature should enact legislation to extend the public comment period for Timber Harvest Plan reviews and require notification of outcome.



Finding #2: The Timber Harvest Plan process has not proven effective in achieving a sound balance between economic and environmental concerns.

The authorizing statutes for the Timber Harvest Plan set the stage for logging while acknowledging the need to protect natural resources, including waterways, wildlife, fish, plants, scenic views and recreational areas. Despite timber industry complaints about the process, harvesting on private land has declined only marginally in the past five years and plans are routinely approved -- both signs that economic interests are being met. But the plan process has proven less effective in protecting the environment, as demonstrated in three areas:

- The process looks at potential damage on a site-by-site basis rather than across entire ecosystems, making it difficult to assess cumulative impacts over time and throughout watersheds.

- Litigation rather than resolution is often the focus of the participants, leading to a strained decision-making process and lack of consensus.
- Resources and priorities are devoted to issues of process rather than outcome, with the result that people are more interested in dotting i's and crossing t's than in how effective mitigation measures are.

Recommendation #4: The Governor and the Legislature should enact legislation to require the completion of master protection plans for watersheds containing productive forests.

Recommendation #5: The Governor and the Legislature should direct the Board of Forestry to establish a certification process allowing timber owners to satisfy environmental concerns in advance of harvest proposals.

Recommendation #6: The Governor and the Legislature should direct the Board of Forestry to develop an objective environmental-risk assessment system that would assist in the evaluation of Timber Harvest Plans.

Recommendation #7: The Governor and the Legislature should enact legislation establishing a public appeals process to allow non-litigation challenges to Timber Harvest Plan approvals.

Recommendation #8: The Governor and the Legislature should enact legislation to direct the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection to draft a plan within one year for shifting priorities from plan review to performance monitoring, feedback on effectiveness of requirements and enforcement activities.