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Timber push scraps state water report

By Tony Schick

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The forest surrounding Jetty Creek, the water supply for the town of Rockaway Beach, has been logged heavily. Some residents there say the timber harvests have impacted their water quality, but the forest owners, industry groups and the state's Department of Forestry disagree.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality drafted a report that identified logging as a contributor to known risks for drinking water quality in communities up and down the Oregon Coast.

But the report has never been published.

It was scrapped by the agency after intense pushback and charges of anti-logging bias from the timber industry and the state Department of Forestry, according to interviews and public records.

In summer 2015, state water-quality specialists finished a draft of a resource guide for 50 public water systems along the coast. It assessed threats to surface water and offered guidance on how to protect it before it reaches treatment systems.

It also focused on the potential impacts from industrial logging operations, which own the majority of land surrounding many drinking water sources. That report prompted fears within the timber industry of a coordinated effort between coastal residents and environmental regulators to limit or prohibit logging along the coast.

They heaped piles of criticism on the Department of Environmental Quality, and prompted input from coastal legislators and others. Industry groups held a symposium on forest water quality, taking aim at the same issues raised in DEQ's work.

Ultimately, the Department of Environmental Quality shelved the report. Eighteen months later, the department still hasn't finished it and doesn't plan to publish.

The fate of that report offers a glimpse at what can happen when a state environmental agency's work runs afoul of a politically influential industry. It also shows how, on certain forestry issues, the agenda of state regulators aligns more closely with the timber industry than with concerned citizens.

"It's unfortunately part of a pattern in which the Department of Forestry has bullied DEQ," said Nina Bell, of Northwest Environmental Advocates. —

Bell has been filing lawsuits over coastal water quality for years.

“That’s not a surprise,” Bell said. “That doesn’t make it right. In fact it’s just flat-out wrong for the Department of Forestry to be only advocating for landowners who stand to gain money by cutting down trees and not being there to help protect the public resources, like drinking water.”

The Department of Environmental Quality considers coastal water systems especially vulnerable. Many are small, and with watersheds facing the ocean, they feel the brunt of coastal wind and rain, which can dump debris into drinking water sources.

“They are all facing very similar issues,” Sheree Stewart, the department’s drinking water protection coordinator, said. “A lot of those watersheds have forest industrial private land, and so the report needed to focus on what those land uses were.”

Consider last year, when a rainstorm dumped 18 inches in Tillamook County. That storm caused flooding and landslides. It destroyed culverts and left small streams looking like chocolate milk.

In Rockaway Beach, the water plant operator needed an excavator to clear the rock and sediment that had poured into Jetty Creek, the town’s main water source.

Water-quality experts predict coastal storms to intensify because of climate change. They also say forest loss can exacerbate the effects of coastal storms.

“So what we’ve seen is an increase in a lot of turbidity and sediments,” Stewart said.

Turbidity is the technical term for the sediment and debris in water. Too much of it interferes with the chlorine used for disinfection. The result can mean chemicals in drinking water that are bad for people’s health.

Rockaway Beach has struggled with turbidity for years. Residents there have gotten several alerts about harmful chemicals in their drinking water, byproducts from the disinfection process.

There's another factor in Rockaway Beach: clearcut logging. Jetty Creek flows through private industrial forest, and 80 percent of this watershed has been logged in recent years.

Swaths of forests have been replaced by bald slopes.

Studies have shown forest loss can lead to greater water-quality problems, including higher treatment costs. The Department of Environmental Quality's draft report stated that "clearcut timber harvesting is known to increase landslide rates on steep slopes and increase streamflows and erosion." It also said narrow strips of trees left near streams are often thrown by the wind, and that timber harvesting can contribute sediment into streams through roads and slash techniques.

Industrial forest companies are by far the single largest owner of land in coastal drinking watersheds, owning 100 percent of some source water areas.

In fact, water for 40 percent of the drinking water systems on the coast flows through forest owned by private companies that log extensively. And 64 percent of all coastal water systems have had two or more alerts, warning customers of problems with disinfecting water so it is safe enough to drink.

A draft of DEQ's unpublished report included these statistics. The timber industry didn't like that. Neither did the Department of Forestry, which regulates the timber industry. They deny any link between forest loss and increased turbidity, let alone problems with harmful disinfection byproducts.

Timber industry groups caught wind of the agency's work at a Board of Forestry meeting, where resident Meg Thompson laid out her concerns, and said she and others were seeking full Bull Run-like protections.

The Bull Run watershed, which supplies drinking water for Portland, has been off limits to loggers since the 1990s.

"We're hoping that eventually using the technical support of DEQ and our source water risk assessments that we can develop full protective plans," Thompson said.

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This testimony proved to be a significant concern of the industry.

Public records obtained by OPB show the groups told the Department of Environmental Quality's director the report encourages the reader to identify 'threats' with little data. They also said DEQ should not help local activists in their push for tougher clean-water standards.

"While fringe elements have, over the years, occasionally called publicly for broad prohibitions on logging in coastal drinking watersheds, the thought that DEQ and Regional Solutions may be facilitating that outcome is alarming," the comments stated.

Officials with two industry groups, Oregonians for Food and Shelter, and the Oregon Forest Industries Council, declined to be interviewed for this story.

Public records also show Peter Daugherty, now the state forester, sent four pages of comments to the Department of Environmental Quality after the agency solicited his feedback. In them, he questioned both the science and the purpose of the report.

Daugherty, who was the department's head of private forests at the time, said "the document seems to be responding to citizen group concerns about forest management, rather than doing an unbiased analysis of threats to drinking water."

Forestry officials suggested DEQ remove language about the connection between timber harvests and landslides or sediment in streams. They said the report needed to be reworded so that it didn't suggest the state's forestry laws were too weak to protect clean water.

In an interview, Daugherty said the two agency's often work closely.

"Partners do do critical, and I mean critical, review of each other's work," Daugherty said. "We see that as a way to improve our partnership and come to a common understanding about the science on forest land and forest management."

He praised the quality of water that flows through Oregon's forests and questioned the premise coastal communities' water quality woes could be blamed on forest management — logging, construction and maintenance of roads and culverts, and pesticide spraying to kill plants that compete with newly planted trees after a clearcut.

“I don’t believe that there’s any scientific evidence that forest practices are directly related to some indications of potential increased turbidity in those systems,” Daugherty said.

Department of Environmental Quality said they stood by the science in their report, but did acknowledge the report had the appearance of bias because it focused so much on private forests. The reason, they said, is the substantial amount of land owned by private forests.

The department has since shifted focus. It produced individual documents for each water system, instead of going ahead with its bigger-picture report that connects the dots on what water-quality experts and environmentalists fear is a systemic risk for communities all along the coast.

The agency now plans to conduct a statewide water assessment in the future, which won’t single out logging or any other industry for degrading drinking water.

The Department of Forestry and timber industry groups both supported that shift.