

Examining OFRI's Claims on Oregon's Drinking Water



On August 4, 2020, *The Oregonian-OPB-ProPublica* published a report exposing the Oregon Forest Resources Institute (OFRI) for suppressing science on carbon, downplaying the impacts of industrial forestry on Oregon's drinking water supplies, and engaging in illegal lobbying efforts. This brief examines OFRI's misleading messaging about the impact of industrial logging on drinking water.

OFRI's "Trees To Tap" report begins with a message from the report's principal investigator, Jon Souder: "there's been a huge evolution in forestry practices over the past 60 years. There are still things to be concerned about, but they are different and orders of magnitude less impactful on the environment." Yet Oregon's forestry practices don't reliably keep drinking water clean. In 2013, health officials studied the communities near Triangle Lake and found low levels of toxic herbicides in drinking water, air, and resident's urine. Logging practices have also affected water in Arch Cape, Corbett, Wheeler, and Rockaway Beach.

Souder's statement doesn't point to responsible forestry practices — it instead points to a past when there were virtually no protections for drinking water. Using no protections as a baseline makes incredibly inadequate rules seem acceptable. Further in the report, OFRI continues to misrepresent Oregon's forestry practices: "forest practices that minimize impacts to water quality have improved significantly in recent decades." OFRI frequently promotes a narrative that emphasizes progress without specifying the current problems with logging.

OFRI writes, "While herbicide detections downstream were orders of magnitude lower than human health standards, some nearby residents have raised concerns." This statement downplays the effect herbicides have on water quality. Oregon State University (OSU) examined logging over sixty years and found that herbicides pollute drinking water. Instead of acknowledging the significant harm that pesticide sprays have caused communities over the years, OFRI writes off these experiences as locals who simply "raised concerns" about the issue. According to Sheree Stewart of the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, "If we could have done a better job of protecting some of these smaller watersheds, perhaps we could have saved these communities a lot of money."

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OFRI makes herbicides seem safe by emphasizing the less consequential aspects of specific types. "Trees to Taps" focuses on how glyphosate is "less mobile in soil" and how while "most of the others commonly used (e.g., Imazapyr, MSM, SMM) are moderately to very mobile in soil," they are not volatile and "most don't accumulate in water and soil." The report neglects to mention the few that are volatile and do accumulate in water and soil. The fact that "most" herbicides won't create problems for drinking water glosses over the more consequential fact that some herbicides *do* pollute Oregon water sources.

The report also inappropriately touts Oregon's vegetation buffers. The report describes "full buffers of unharvested trees" in Tillamook County. In actuality, Oregon's buffers aren't "full" when compared to Washington and California's buffers. Washington allows a minimum of a fifty-foot buffer on streams that hold drinking water and in California, the buffer must be at least thirty feet. By contrast, Oregon only requires a twenty-foot no-cut buffer and no buffer for headwater, non-fish bearing streams (even if they feed into fish-bearing streams).

OFRI refers to a lack of information throughout the report and calls for increased research in the future. More scientific research is rarely a poor idea, but there is already evidence that documents the impact of logging on water quality. OFRI couldn't "predict[] the effects of forest harvest and regeneration on water yield," but Oregon environmental regulators found that industrial logging is a risk to more than 170 public water systems. And OSU found that "water levels in streams surrounded by industrial timber plantations dropped by more than 50% compared with older forests." Post-fire logging has been shown to increase sediment runoff into streams by up to 28 times, which refutes OFRI's claim that there is "limited research" linking upstream logging and downstream sediment loads.

In one OFRI TV advertisement, Bob and Kirk, "Third and fourth generation Oregon Loggers," "remind people that Oregon has strong laws that help protect our watersheds." Despite Bob and Kirk's message, an OPB article reported that "Oregon legislators have failed to change logging laws that state regulators, scientists and the federal government say are insufficient to protect clean water." An analysis conducted by Oregon news organizations found that in the last 20 years, at least 40% of the forests in areas near drinking water sources were cut down in over 24 communities.

OFRI spends millions of dollars of taxpayer money to feed the public biased information at the expense of our forests and our water. Oregonians deserve better. Instead of using harvest taxes to fund misleading and biased information, Oregon should redirect taxes to support outdoor education, teacher training and forestry practices that protect drinking water quantity and quality for all Oregon communities.

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