

SUNDAY FOCUS : Finding a balance

Timber is both a commodity and a natural resource

By Matthew S. L. Cate and Chris Joyner, Staff Writers

First of two parts.

Last fall, a private pilot was cruising above the Cumberland Plateau when he saw something that disturbed him.

"It is appalling what is going on on the plateau right now," he said, recalling the sight of swaths of land denuded in one of the area's clearcutting operations.

The pilot isn't the first observer upset by logging in what environmentalists claim is one of the most diverse ecosystems in North America. He is, however, the governor of Tennessee.

"I've already asked our state forestry people to talk to me," Gov. Phil Bredesen said. "There have been examples of logging right up to the borders of state parks."

Timber harvesting on the Cumberland has expanded over the past three decades as the timber industry moved more of its operations from the heavily regulated forests of the Pacific Northwest to business-friendly Dixie. Only now are policymakers beginning to advocate an end to Tennessee's regulation-free zone for timber.

The Cumberland Plateau is the site of a struggle between those who want to preserve forests and those who benefit economically by growing or harvesting trees.

According to state figures, Tennessee's \$10 billion timber industry provides 78,000 jobs. But conservationists say a looming environmental disaster endangers wildlife, pollutes waterways, spreads tree infestations and will damage the plateau's forests for future generations.

PROPERTY RIGHTS AT PLAY

In the Pacific Northwest, loggers fought state regulators and environmentalists over the right to harvest timber on public land. But most of Tennessee's timberland is in the hands of small private landowners.

"I'm not a guy who says cut everything, (but timber is) a cash crop," said Charles Daugherty, owner of a 30-acre tree farm in Crossville, Tenn. "It's paid a lot of bills over the years."

Private landowners hold 72 percent of the timberland on the Cumberland Plateau, compared to 17 percent belonging to the forest industry. Eleven percent is public land. According to the Tennessee Forestry Association, the majority of the state's timberland is held by 500,000 individual landowners, many of whom sell their timber to large companies.

Sen. Jeff Miller, R-Cleveland, chairman of the Senate Environment, Conservation and Tourism Committee, said state legislators need to consider how laws might infringe on individual rights before regulating the timber industry.

"We take it very seriously before we allow government to interfere or intercede to make sure it is necessary and that the rights of the individual are balanced against that," he said.

Environmentalists blame the timber industry for thousands of acres of clear-cut forests on the Cumberland Plateau. In 2000, the industry owned more than 100,000 acres, or 20 percent of the total land area of the seven southern plateau counties near Chattanooga.

Cielo Sand, chairwoman of Tennessee Friends of the Forest, said logging companies should be required to secure a permit at least before harvesting any trees.

House Majority Caucus Chairman Randy Rinks, D-Savannah, said state regulation is unnecessary.

"I've always thought of the forest as a crop," said Rep. Rinks, who is president of a building supply company. "It needs to be harvested from time to time."

TIMBER INDUSTRY MOVES SOUTH

Today, 60 percent of the nation's timber products, such as cardboard, paper and fiberboard used in construction, come from wood harvested in the South.

According to federal statistics, an average of 410 million cubic feet of timber are removed every year from Tennessee's forests through clear-cutting - where trees are removed down to the ground - and other harvesting methods.

Tracy O'Neill, spokeswoman for the Tennessee Forestry Association, said most clear-cutting in Tennessee is the result of residential developers, not forestry.

"They're the greatest threat to our forest," she said.

However, early findings of the University of the South's Landscape Analysis Lab's continuing study of the plateau's major forest change show the "significant majority" of large clear-cuts since September 2000 have been for forestry activities, not urban and residential development.

The study focuses only on the plateau surface of Franklin, Marion, Grundy, Sequatchie, Warren, Van Buren and Bledsoe counties. The largest plateau city in those counties is Spencer, home to about 1,700 people.

"We're not suffering from urban expansion and urban sprawl out here," lab director Dr. Jon Evans said.

He said more than 90 percent of the clear-cutting on the Cumberland Plateau since 1980 is the result of industrial forestry.

Not all clear-cutting is the result of commercial logging or real-estate development. Huge areas of pine timberland have been devoured by the Southern pine beetle, according to federal forestry officials.

The Tennessee Department of Agriculture estimates the beetle has infested 385,000 acres of natural and planted pine trees since 1998. State officials report the beetle infestation has resulted in \$381 million in lost timber.

Clear-cutting opponents counter that the operators of large tracts of pine forests facilitate the spread of the beetle by replacing hardwood trees with thousands of acres of the insect's favorite food - pine trees.

Landowners mostly replant pine because it grows fast. A newly planted pine stand generally will be ready to harvest in 30 years, forestry experts said.

ATTENTION FOCUSED ON PLATEAU

In February, the Natural Resource Defense Council, a New York -based environmental group, named the Cumberland Plateau one of its "biogems."

"Our position is there should be no more conversion of forests to pine plantations," said Allen Hershkowitz, the council's senior scientist.

The biogem designation places the region alongside the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Yellowstone National Park, which the council considers among the most endangered ecosystems in the Americas.

Mr. Hershkowitz said the council's campaign will advocate the creation of parks and preserves on plateau forest land.

Representatives from the timber industry say they use responsible forestry practices.

Barry Graden, forestry development manager for Greenville, S.C.-based paper company Bowater, said he does not understand why timber harvesting on the Cumberland Plateau has become such a big issue in recent years. Bowater, the largest industrial landowner on the plateau, with 267,000 acres, has been taking trees from the area for 50 years and has a financial stake in maintaining timber growth in the region, he said.

Mr. Graden said the company has its own procedures for sustainable forestry that go beyond what is required by law. In 2000, the company received an award from the Tennessee Conservation League for voluntarily spending \$80 million on recycling and using equipment that reduces emissions from its facility in Calhoun, Tenn.

Bowater also participates in the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, an industry-sanctioned conservation program.

"We take that so seriously that we've opted for a third-party audit to determine that we are in compliance with the Sustainable Forestry Initiative," he said.

Swiss accounting firm KPMG International audits Bowater participation in the Sustainable Forestry Initiative.

REGULATORY FREEDOM

Oregon passed the first comprehensive forestry regulation in 1971, etching into law rules on timber harvesting, logging-road construction, water quality and replanting, said Rod Nichols, spokesman for the Oregon Forestry Department.

In Tennessee, landowners are not required to report those things to the state, said Tom Womack, spokesman for the Tennessee Department of Agriculture. As a result, the department's Division of Forestry does not know how many acres of land were clear-cut last year, he said.

For the third year, Sen. David Fowler, R-Signal Mountain, has sought to create the state's first regulations affecting clear-cutting. A bill by Sen. Fowler would require state permits for timber mill operations using at least 80,000 tons of pulpwood a year for the paper industry.

Even Sen. Fowler acknowledges the bill faces an uphill battle.

State Sen. Jerry Cooper, D Morrison, is founder of a hardwood products company and in 1992 was named the outstanding senator of the year by the timber industry. Now, Sen. Cooper, chairman of the Commerce, Labor and Agriculture Committee, said he would like to see minimal regulation requiring paper companies to notify the state before harvesting timber.

Sen. Cooper said his district includes a large clear-cut at the intersection of state Highways 8 and 111 southeast of McMinnville, which environmentalists dubbed "the Triangle of Destruction."

"There is no plant life, no animal life. It makes you cry," Sen. Cooper said. "God gave us these assets and put us in charge of taking care of them."

Tennessee Assistant Agriculture Commissioner Mike Countess said a bill requiring loggers to notify the state before beginning an operation would "be very complicated."

"How is that monitored and how is enforcement brought to bear?" he asked.

State Agriculture Commissioner Ken Givens said he does not think current timber practices are environmentally damaging.

"It seems the things that have been alleged on the Cumberland Plateau deal more with aesthetics and how the tourists might view that," he said.

Gov. Bredesen, meanwhile, said he believes there is a "middle road" that would allow the state to protect natural resources while still looking out for the interests of the timber industry.

"The clear-cutting concerns me for a bunch of reasons: the water quality and the visual impact of it (and) replacing hardwood forests with pine," he said. "These are things I would like to look into over the next several months, and I've asked the Department of Agriculture to help me."

Staff Writer John Commins contributed to this report.

E-mail Matthew S. L. Cate at mcate@timesfreepress.com E-mail Chris Joyner at cjoyner@timesfreepress.com

Economic impact of timber industry Tennessee Jobs: 78,000 Wages: \$2.3 billion The South Jobs: 771,392 Wages: \$25.4 billion Source: U.S. Forest Service; Tennessee Department of Agriculture