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[In Down Economy, Washington Lawmaker Pushes for More Logging](#)

By Dan Springer

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Tired of going back to the government every year with their hands out, rural counties are looking for a way to get off the federal dime and put unemployed loggers back to work.

Washington Rep. Doc Hastings says he has an answer that would tackle both problems. "I think we need to utilize our natural resources a whole lot better from an economic standpoint," Hastings told Fox News.

Hastings is proposing a plan to end to the so-called timber payments to counties that have historically relied on revenue from U.S. Forest Service timber sales. In its place, Congress would lift some environmental regulations and streamline the appeals process to allow for more timber sales on U.S. forest land.

The one problem with Hastings plan -- the decline of spotted owls. Seen by conservation groups as an indicator species for the health of the Pacific Northwest's old growth forests, the spotted owl became a symbol in the battle between logging and the environment.

The bird won, being listed in 1990 as an endangered species, and forcing a reduction in logging on federal land. The birds, on average 18 inches in length and weighing two pounds, are still endangered today.

"It's a bad idea," Shawn Cantrell, executive director of the Seattle Audubon Society, said of Hastings' plan. "It would simply re-ignite the timber wars over the owls."

Since 1990, logging on federal land has plummeted. In 1990, 10.5 billion board feet of timber was cut in federal forests. Last year, that number was 2.1 billion board feet. In exchange for the loss of revenue, in 2001, the government put into effect the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act. It has softened the blow to county governments that have seen a plummet in timber sale revenue. Counties use the money to

fund everything from schools to roads and fire departments. Last year taxpayers shelled out \$364 million.

The payments were designed to be temporary and over the last several years Congress has threatened to not renew them. Now, they are set to expire Dec. 31 and Hastings wants them to go away for good.

Under Hastings' plan, the U.S. Forest Service would hit timber targets based on historical averages between 1980 and 2000. Counties would keep 75 percent of the proceeds, instead of the current 25 percent, and live without the subsidies.

Chelan County, Wash., which used to have 10 sawmills in operation but last year saw the last one shut down, has been receiving around \$1 million each year since the timber payments started. Losing that money without a return to logging would force cuts to many services.

The economic impact is clear, said Chelan County Commissioner Ron Walter, who welcomes a return to self-sufficiency.

"I think the preference is to get people working back in the woods, and get the woods and the federal forests to where they're an integral part of the local economy," Walter said. Ron Simon was a forester in Chelan County, but has been unemployed ever since the last mill shuttered.

"I'm 60 years old, I'd have to move out of the area to get another job," Simon told Fox News. "At my age that's getting a little bit problematic."

The latest push comes as the dispute grows about what to do to revive the still endangered spotted owl. Despite the sharp cuts in logging, the spotted owl is still in decline. Biologists have determined a big factor is the non-native barred owl, which is bigger and tougher than the spotted owl and is crowding it out.

But even with plans in the works to considering killing barred owls in order to save spotted owls, Cantrell said returning to 1990 logging levels is still unsustainable.

"It would devastate a whole range of key birds, wildlife and also affect the watershed where many of our communities get their drinking water," he said.

Hastings disagrees. He argues the lack of logging has led to a deterioration in forest health and caused a spike in catastrophic wildfires.

"Federal forests were designed to be multiple purpose. That means commercial activity. If you want something that people aren't going to go in to, that's why we have wilderness areas," he said.

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