How the Cow Creek tribe of Oregon sought economic stability through the timber industry
Members of the Roseburg-based Cow Creek tribe are faced with uncertainty after their proposal to purchase the Elliott State Forest failed to pass. On May 10, the Oregon State Land Board — comprised of Governor Kate Brown, Secretary of State Dennis Richardson and Treasurer Tobias Read — unanimously voted to keep the forest publicly owned. Cow Creek leaders saw the Elliott as an opportunity to support the tribe by creating new jobs and providing funding for health care and education.

The Cow Creek Band was not nationally recognized as a tribe until 1982, 129 years after the United States government originally disbanded them. With national recognition came eligibility for health care, educational funding and job opportunities. However, Michael Rondeau, chairman of the Cow Creek Gaming Commission Board, said the federal government’s funding has fallen short of meeting the tribe’s financial needs, causing them to rely on revenue from annually-increasing membership fees.

“Just like with everything else, there’s been a population growth, and we’ve had the baby boomers that are coming into [senior citizen] status now, where there is a need for things such as additional healthcare and specialized housing for elders,” Rondeau said.

The Cow Creek Band’s Seven Feathers Casino Resort is its most lucrative enterprise. The casino’s revenue funds services such as healthcare, education and housing. Rondeau says that by 2022, 100% of the casino revenue will go toward healthcare alone. Additional projects that support the tribe’s infrastructure are a truck stop, travel center, bingo hall and ranchland.

But Rondeau views his tribe’s ability to provide for its people as part of a greater agenda. “Every dollar the tribe spends on its tribal citizens, who are also from the state of Oregon and the United States, it lessens the burden on the general population, and general benefit services.” Therefore, when state officials announced they were selling the Elliott State Forest in August 2015, Rondeau said the Cow Creek saw it as an opportunity for the tribe to be part of the solution to a state problem. The Cow Creek Band, partnering with Roseburg-based Lone Rock Timber Management Company, was the lone bidder to purchase 82,500 acres of the forest for $220.8 million, which would all go toward supporting schools in Douglas county.

Poverty is a real thing here...I think at times, when these opportunities come, the tribe sees the answer for the future. But it is taken away.”

Feathers Casino is owned by the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians. The tribe relies on revenue streams such as the truck stop seen above, the casino, as well as an RV park.
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Tim Vredenburg
Since 1930, the state has used timber sales from logging to fund Oregon’s K-12 education system through the Common School Fund. However, in 2013, environmentalists sued the state for violating the Endangered Species Act, prompting the state to withdraw from logging more than 900 acres of timber, decreasing the Common School Fund’s income by $9.85 million. This meant the Elliott cost the state more than it made. The Cow Creek Band saw the Elliott not only as a revenue generator, but as an opportunity to revive cultural forest management practices that were lost as western science developed.

The Cow Creek have been burning undergrowth on its lands for hundreds of years. The use of fire helped keep the soil fertile and created space for game to gather in meadowlands, making hunting and gathering easier for the tribe. However, western environmental ideals have traditionally considered fire taboo, and over time, eliminated its use from management practices. Tim Vredenburg, director of forest management for the Cow Creek Band, says that the eradication of fire from forest management routines has done more harm than good. He explained that this causes the soil to become hydrophobic, repelling water instead of absorbing it, which leads to mass erosion and more flammable forests.

“When [the trees] start dying, all it takes is a lightning strike or spark, and there’s a catastrophic fire,” Vredenburg said. “The ‘let nature do what nature does’ [approach to conservation] doesn’t take into account the involvement of people in nature. When there is a fire, it doesn’t behave the same way it does 150 years ago. It is devastation.”

Lack of open terrain has also caused elk and deer to move out of forests and into pasture land, causing a loss of game for tribal members and creating tension with ranchers and landowners.

The tribe has responded to these dilemmas by carrying out “fuel reduction” practices in its tribal lands, which include thinning trees and disposing of logging residue through burning. Thus, the tribe would lessen the effects of forest fires as well as help maintain a diverse population of trees in the land it controls. Vredenburg insists that these practices are key to keeping their forests healthy.

“As we’re approaching or in a changing climate,” Vredenburg said, “we don’t necessarily know what [it] will bring, but we do know our forests are going to be better able to survive and persist.”

The Cow Creek’s plan was to utilize these traditional practices in their management of the Elliott State Forest, but needed outside support to meet the $220 million price tag. That partner was the Lone Rock Timber Company. The tribe was impressed by the company’s willingness to replant their forests, offering to add more than one million new seedlings annually.

“Tribal leadership [needed] a partner that breathed the same air, drank the same water and lived with the same consequences of management that they did,” Vredenburg said. “They are a family-owned company that has been in this area for a while— 50 years—not as long as the tribe, but has shown that they intend to stay here for a long time.”

Oregon environmental groups that oppose the privatization of the Elliott State Forest recognize how controlled forest burning is a necessary part of keeping it healthy. But many of their members are not in favor of logging or burning its old growth forest — containing trees 100 years old and making up 50% of the Elliott. They have also criticized Lone Rock for its plans to perform clear-cutting in parts of Elliott State Forest. Their concerns are in regard to the protection of endangered species in the area that depend on old growth— namely the spotted owl and the marbled murrelet.

The tribe and Lone Rock did not have a plan on how they were going to protect these sensitive creatures, other than follow regulations to keep 25% of the Elliott untouched. However, the tribe has a history of preserving the land they call home.

“That’s their culture, the thread that weaves through everything the tribe does, is bringing those values and things that are important to them into all aspects of their education, healthcare and businesses,” Vredenburg said.

The state rejected the sale of the Elliott State Forest to the Cow Creek. After decades of displacement and oppression, the tribe has chosen to not view this event as another opportunity to regain cultural and ancestral land squandered.

“I know the Cow Creek, they are fighters, they are resilient. At one time, the government tried to annihilate them, and they persisted,” Vredenburg said. “I see them struggling, at times, but they’ll thrive, they always have, and I think that’s their spirit.”