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Posted December 18, 2013 - 8:32am

Stop timber companies from charging to access their land

By Dan Boeholt

Editor's note: The following letter characterizes Commissioner Wes Cormier's thoughts on the practice of timber companies paying property tax based on land used for timber production, while at the same time charging the public fees to access the land. Cormier said the author accurately characterizes his position.

Citizens are seeing Timber Land Fee Access springing up before their eyes across Grays Harbor and the state, forcing them to "pay to play — or stay home. Are they here to stay?

This corporate timber land fee access pay to play culture was targeted at the Grays Harbor County commissioners' Dec. 9th morning meeting, when they took the first step toward getting corporate timber's attention to come to the table, by discussing the possibility of raising their low preferential timber land tax rate to a much higher recreational business tax rate.

I believe many other counties are ready to follow with this same strategy.

Having heard from the public at his town hall meetings, Commissioner Wes Cormier said on KBKW "Coffee Talk" last month that he was going to try an idea at the county to help address the timberlands issues with locking gates and also charging fees for access to land owned by large timber companies. I immediately called him to see what idea he had as we had been working on this issue for years with no success.

His idea was to GIS map the county for the timberlands that are gated and/or fee access and offer the service of the county being the one to coordinate keys to citizens to alleviate this as an issue for timberland managers. While I applauded his efforts, I told him that he was years behind in our efforts. Eyes In The Woods had its very successful original public access program in place for 18 years on the Weyerhaeuser Vail tree farm in Thurston County and the company just shut it down and went to a \$150 fee access permit to the first 750 buyers. Access is limited to Aug. 1 to Dec. 31. Now the Weyco Twin Harbors timberlands, currently open, is proposing to go to a fee access permit between \$50 – \$75, unlimited sales and for year-round access. Rayonier, for several years now has had fee access permits for their Promised Land area and now charges \$200 for 142 permits. These corporations are also auctioning off leased areas for access to the highest bidder. Green Diamond and Hancock

are now following suit. The state Department of Fish & Wildlife reports there are now more than 600,000 acres in fee access timberlands and growing each day.

Its about the money, nothing else!

I asked Wes, with his background of having worked in the county Assessor's Office, if these corporations

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charging timberland fee access were acting more like a recreational business than timber companies? They are charging annual fees for public recreational access. The light went off in his head and he started reciting the timber tax code and agreed this needed to be looked into. He pursued looking into it, as did we, and both came to the same conclusion — Yes! They are not meeting the definition of the timber tax and are now acting as a recreational business. So Commissioner Cormier moved forward with this first step.

Unfortunately, he stumbled in trying to get the gates open, with all eyes watching, he dropped the key, bumped his head and lost direction, and in attempting to regain his balance he ended up sticking his foot in his mouth. He tried to recant his statements made in front of a *Daily World* reporter, but it was said and done. What he has changed his mind on is, he is dropping the county GIS mapping and keys issue. Wes is clearly focused now on sending a letter to each corporate timberland owner that charges fee access and ask them to come meet with the Grays Harbor county commissioners on these issues — plain and simple!

We applaud and support these efforts. Previous discussions with corporate by the state, legislative leaders and sportsmen have left us locked out except for a fee. Since the county commissioners took this first strategic bold step, one corporate timberland owner has called and asked for a meeting and another, Port Blakely announced removing its fee access last Wednesday!

All eyes are on Grays Harbor now. Your calls and emails of support to the commissioners is critical right now in helping them get these fees removed! Call 249-3731 or commish@co.grays-harbor.wa.us Contact in support now or sit home later.

Dan Boeholt is a resident of Aberdeen.

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