

# The Herald

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## Forest logging: Money vs. Mother Nature

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INDIANAPOLIS — A bill that would have put a protective status on old-growth areas in Indiana's state forests died before it could be given a hearing, and efforts to add similar language to an annual Department of Natural Resources housekeeping bill also failed because of a fiscal note that asserted the legislation would create a \$460,000 annual hit to DNR revenue.

The initial goal of SB 365, authored by Sen. Eric Bassler, R-Washington, was to set aside 10 percent of each state forest to prohibit logging and preserve old growth. That 10 percent represents roughly 15,000 acres across the state's total 156,000 acres in 12 forests.

Bassler, who is in his first term, said the process of writing and supporting the bill has been a learning experience for him, and he now understands it sometimes takes two or three attempts before a bill can become law despite bipartisan interest.

"There was support from both sides of the aisle," Bassler said. "Some of it may be due to the fact some legislators feel we shouldn't be telling any certain department how to do their job, which I appreciate and kind of understand. Or it could also be a lack of knowledge (on the subject) and not getting used to the idea."

Republican Sen. Brent Steele, who represents an area encompassing parts of Martin and Jackson-Washington state forests, attempted to add an amendment to an annual DNR bill authored by Sen. Sue Glick, R-LaGrange, that would have accomplished the same thing, but a fiscal note attached to the legislation stated that the DNR would lose out on \$460,000 in annual revenue because of the loss of timber sales in those protected areas. Any bill with a fiscal tag of more than \$150,000 must be approved by the state senate's committee on appropriations. With little time left in the session, which ended Thursday, Steele was urged to drop the amendment.

Rep. Mike Braun, R-Jasper, had considered similar legislation to Bassler's bill

earlier in the session, but ultimately decided not pursue it in favor of Bassler's approach. Braun said he's disappointed Bassler's bill failed and would like to work with him in the coming years to try again.

"The only thing that was a little misleading is that on the fiscal tag, the \$460,000 per year is calculated on the entire 10 percent of forests that would be protected. What they don't tell you is it's really only half that value because the DNR has already committed to protecting 5 percent of its old growth areas, so they've already committed to half of that loss," Braun said.

Jeff Stant serves as executive director of the Indiana Forest Alliance. Stant said his organization is up in arms over the death of SB 365 and subsequent efforts because recent logging efforts by the DNR have created "heavy vegetative manipulation" areas of state forests that many Hoosiers use for recreation.

"The state forests are really the only places in Indiana where the public can go out and experience wildlife and engage in wilderness recreation in a natural setting," Stant said. "The (DNR and Indiana Division of Forestry) believe the primary function of our state forests should be producing timber products."

Stant points to the fact that 10 years ago, nearly 40 percent of all state forests in Indiana weren't open for logging. Budget shortfalls and a tanking economy in the late 2000s led the DNR — one of the departments whose budget has been slashed nearly every year for the past decade — to increase its timber base from 60 percent in 2004 to 95 percent in 2016.

"They've got their priorities screwed up," Stant said. "The law that created the state forests back in (1903) allowed logging, but that wasn't the purpose. They were to set them aside for the good of the people of Indiana."

Local proponents of Indiana forests agree with Stant.

"The Ferdinand State Forest is being cut at unprecedented rates, sometimes in clear cuts that turn an enjoyable hike into disbelief and dismay," said Rock Emmert, who lives in Ferdinand. "The displacement of already-strained wildlife and the loss of pristine forests one cannot evaluate in monetary terms. I'm opposed to commercial logging of our public forests, especially widespread wholesale cutting without citizen consent."

Judy Colby, who lives in Bristow, runs a camp for children and adults with disabilities called Anderson Woods. Camp property abuts state forest on two sides, giving her a front-row seat to commercial logging.

Colby said she is by no means against cutting, but argued the manner in which commercial bidders come into the state forests is not sustainable. She would like to see the DNR and Indiana Division of Forestry practice selective cutting to keep

the forests healthy. To her, protecting just 10 percent of old-growth areas is “pittance” compared to the entirety of the state’s forest system.

“If you drive past where they’ve cut, it’s just a jungle of stumps and downed trees that have been left to die. They’ve devastated the forest,” Colby said. “I would like them to treat the state forests as belonging to the people.”

Jack Seifert with the state division of forestry, disagrees. Over a long career in forest management, Seifert has served as Purdue University’s extension research forester, carrying out applied research in plantation and natural stand management. In 2005, he took over as state forester during some of the toughest times the DNR and division of forestry have experienced.

“We’ve been managing the state forests since before 1900. We have a long history of forest management. We’ve been harvesting timber off those lands all that time,” Seifert said.

Seifert explains that his department is 60 percent self-funded and much of its revenue comes from timber sales — meaning a \$460,000 annual shortfall would be catastrophic in the grand scheme of forest management across the Hoosier State.

Without the proper management of those resources, he argues, the DNR would not be able to survive.

“There’s well over 200,000 acres in the DNR portfolio that are already off-limits to harvesting,” Seifert said. “We argue that this is our mandate, we’ve been legislated to manage the forests for all these uses. It’s unfortunately the nature of our business to manage a lot of people’s wishes with fiscal and environmental concerns.”

For Bassler and Braun, though, the end of the bill isn’t the end of the issue.

“All of this will raise its head again, but it won’t be anymore successful unless there is broader, grass-roots support across the geography of state forest users that speak up,” Braun said.

“I’m going to sit down with Rep. Braun and maybe look at going through the process again next session,” Bassler said. “We’re going to keep this on the front of people’s minds because I don’t think it’s that significant of an ask to set aside 10 percent of the state forests for old-growth areas.”

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