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The beginning of the end of Oregon's timber wars

By The Oregonian Editorial Board

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Look who's standing together for the first time since Oregonians splintered over the logging of federal forests more than 20 years ago -- it's the hard core, some of Oregon's most prominent environmentalists and timber executives.

There's Andy Kerr, once the most hated environmentalist in Oregon's timber country, where he was hung in effigy. Next to him, that's John Shelk, the mill owner who has fought as long and hard as anyone to keep the timber industry alive east of the Cascades.

Yes, it's the careful language of the brokered compromise on eastside forests that Sen. Ron Wyden and his staff will take to Congress in an attempt to break the timber stalemate, accelerate forest health projects and help save the last few surviving sawmills across central and eastern Oregon.

But Wyden should carry this photograph wherever he goes with his new timber legislation. It's this image that made Wednesday's announcement in Washington more important, more powerful, than just another unveiling of a forest bill.

It's these people and the year-long process of negotiation they engaged in that make this legislation different from everything that has come before it. At last, after all this time, all the lawsuits, bitter enemies in the longest-running environmental dispute in Oregon have found common ground on how to manage the dry forests east of the Cascades.

They all agree that forest health logging across more than 8.3 million acres of overgrown, fireprone public forests in central and eastern Oregon should be doubled within the next year and tripled within three years. They all agree that larger older trees should be off limits and that there are already more than enough permanent roads crisscrossing public forests.

Moreover, they all agree it is critical that the expedited logging happen quickly enough to save the last few struggling sawmills east of the Cascades in Oregon before they all go the way of defunct mills in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming, and take with them any realistic chance of dealing with a huge forest health crisis.

All this provides an opportunity that Congress and the Obama administration must seize. Wyden's bill would authorize an extra \$50 million for the Forest Service to shift its focus to large-scale forest restoration projects while protecting old growth and streams. Congress needs to know this: In a state with runaway unemployment in timber country, dying mills and forests that are ripe for catastrophic fire, there is no more important legislation.

It's also imperative that groups such as Oregon Wild, the American Forest Resource Council, the Pacific Rivers Council and many others be rewarded for their spirit of compromise and bold leadership with congressional action and real, lasting progress on the ground. If that happens, this could be the start of something even bigger: a similar compromise leading to better, more productive management of the public forests on Oregon's west side.

Yes, the west-side forest issues are more complex, but as Wyden and his staff insist, there is common ground there, too.

Look again at that photo -- nearly everyone in the picture has spent much of their adult lives fighting over public-lands logging. Wednesday's announcement was about leaving a different legacy, something other than a smoking battlefield, in the great federal forests of Oregon. While we thank all those who contributed to this agreement for their work, we must add: You're not done yet.