

Published January 11, 2008

## **Clear-cutting, nature blamed for landslides**

John Dodge

The massive landslides that choked the upper Chehalis River Valley with floodwater and woody debris in early December were blamed on both Mother Nature and clear-cut logging at a spirited state Senate committee meeting Thursday.

Environmentalists and scientists argued that excessive logging on steep slopes triggered many of the landslides that swept through Southwest Washington in the midst of December's major storm.

"As a geologist, I see no surprises here," University of Washington professor David Montgomery told members of the Senate Natural Resources, Ocean & Recreation Committee.

"When you clear-cut potentially unstable slopes, you increase the risk of landslides up to tenfold," he said.

Timber industry officials defended logging practices in the Willapa and Chehalis River basins, blaming the mass wasting of soil and trees on a freakish amount of snow, rain and wind over a three-day period.

"We found landslides on steep slopes, gentle ground, clear-cuts and mature forestland," said Kevin Godbout, director of external affairs for Weyerhaeuser Co. "The driving mechanism was extreme weather."

Weyerhaeuser recorded 14 to 20 inches of rain over 48 hours at some high-elevation weather stations in the teeth of the storm, as well as winds topping 100 miles per hour in some places.

Much of the debate Thursday centered on whether the Forests & Fish logging rules, approved by the Legislature in 1999 and since codified by the state Department of Natural Resources, provide enough protection of public safety and natural resources when it comes to logging on steep hillsides.

"Without rule changes, clear-cut-caused landslides will occur again and again," testified Karl Forsgaard, attorney for the Seattle-based Washington Forest Law Center.

He and others with environmental concerns called on the 2008 Legislature to pass a bill making it tougher to log on steep slopes in uplands above flood-prone areas.

Weyerhaeuser officials and others from the industry rejected the idea of a new forestry rule. The way to deal with the issue is to study what happened on forestland in the Southwest Washington storm zone, then modify the rules, if necessary, to reduce landslide risk, they said.

"We need to determine if the geologic review we're already doing is enough," Weyerhaeuser scientist Robert Bilby told legislators.

"We'll do that in 2008."