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DNR must look at logging practices

Officials from the state Department of Natural Resources need to determine whether existing logging practices played a major role in December's flooding in Southwest Washington.

If logging rules for steep and unstable slopes were a factor in the flooding, the rules must be changed to minimize repetition during future storms.

Plaudits to the Senate Natural Resources, Ocean & Recreation Committee for tackling this question head-on at a hearing even before the start of the 2008 legislative session. The victims of the December floods deserve answers, as do all Washington residents.

This isn't about appointing blame. It's about collecting scientific data, analyzing that data and measuring the information in light of existing logging practices. If today's rules are not sufficient to protect the environment and prevent future flooding, they must be changed.

Already, there are two distinct sides to the debate.

Environmentalists and scientists told the Senate committee that clear-cut logging on steep slopes triggered many of the landslides that swept through the region at the height of the December storm.

"I think we may fairly ask whether the recent landsliding and flood damage are what one might expect from existing policy," said David Montgomery, a University of Washington geomorphology professor who studies landslides. "Unfortunately, I see few surprises here."

Timber industry officials defended logging practices in the Willapa and Chehalis River basins. "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."

Not so, said state climatologist Phil Mote of UW. Mote said the storm fell far short of setting records. The data he reviewed indicated rainfall of 4 inches to 7 inches in lower elevations, with slightly more rain at higher elevations. "This is not a top-three rainfall event," Mote said. "I want to stress that."

Weyerhaeuser officials, who said they felt a bit like the pig invited to the barbecue, disagreed.

Weyerhaeuser recorded 14 inches 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 mph in some places.

Whatever the cause, state officials estimate that the storm produced about 140,000 truckloads of downed timber.

Given the conflicting testimony on the effect of both the weather and logging practices, it's imperative that DNR officials collect as much scientific data as possible. Then they must do an honest assessment of that information and come back to the Legislature with a report and recommendation on whether clear-cutting and logging on steep or unstable slopes played a significant role in the flooding. If so, it's time to adopt new logging regulations.