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IN MY OPINION: Let's capitalize on Oregon's strengths

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Oregon is one of the most abundant places in the United States. Our state possesses naturally occurring advantages that other states can only dream of. The Columbia River is an untapped resource. We have acres upon acres of arable land ready for growing a broad range of crops, while other states are barren deserts. We have thick forests that can perpetually produce sustainable timber yields. And we have land capacity for industrial operations and numerous ports located on the Pacific Rim, the heartbeat of world commerce.

Oregon's unmatched resources present an opportunity and pathway to prosperity. These resources, if wisely and sustainably managed, mean a future full of growth for Oregon businesses, the opportunity to succeed for Oregon families, and stable funding for government services.

Yet for years, Oregon's government and people have made a series of decisions that have slowly abdicated this position of strength that once set Oregon apart. Our best assets are now relegated to the sidelines. Thanks to years of neglecting our abundant natural resources, there is no easy way to put Oregon's water, forests, land and other natural advantages to work for its citizens. We have the economic and fiscal consequences to show for it: chronically high unemployment, constant revenue shortfalls and the inability to compete with neighboring states.

It doesn't have to be this way. Other states have learned to effectively capitalize on their strengths by responsibly managing their natural resources, and they are reaping the rewards. Montana, North Dakota, Wyoming and Alaska are examples of success stories in a down economy. Why couldn't Oregon be on that list?

There are numerous proposals waiting for action in the state Legislature that would start responsibly putting Oregon's abundant resources to work.

For example, the Legislature can vote to allow Oregon farmers access to excess Columbia River water for the purpose of irrigating acres of unused eastern Oregon farmland, creating a billion-dollar industry. Washington and Idaho each currently access 4 percent of the water in the Columbia River to spur on their agricultural industries, while Oregon only utilizes a meager 0.3 percent. Action by the Legislature would make Oregon more competitive with its neighbors and empower an agricultural renaissance in eastern Oregon benefiting the entire state.

The Legislature could also end artificially low harvest levels in state-owned forests and require sustainable management of timber production for maximum public benefit. There is also a bill that would dedicate revenue from state forests to the Education Stability Fund.

There are bills that would add flexibility to Oregon's land use laws. This would create an

opportunity for geothermal energy development, new industrial facilities, and an expansion of the Port of Portland and other ports. All of these are opportunities for tremendous growth and job creation.

Oregon has no excuse for economic mediocrity. This state has every natural advantage over its neighboring competitors, and a pioneering and ingenious people who know how to work hard and capitalize on opportunity. If we put our natural strengths to work, we can again be a place that is recognized around the world as a leader in prosperity, quality educational opportunities and cutting-edge technologies.

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http://www.oregonlive.com/opinion/index.ssf/2011/05/lets_capitalize_on_oregons_str.html