

SALVAGE LOGGING

Truth was a casualty of the Biscuit fire

The last of the salvage timber sales from the Biscuit fire are nearing completion, marking the end of a significant and controversial chapter in the history of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest. It also provides a time for review, a time to test the claims of many about what the Biscuit recovery project was or was not.

The 2002 Biscuit fire became a lightning rod in the national debate over post-fire logging. It attracted protests, congressional hearings, news stories, scientific debate and, of course, lawsuits. The conflict was serious and waged with a no-holds-barred intensity that I've rarely witnessed in my 30 years in natural resource management. Unfortunately, there were casualties in the process, and one of the most saddening of these casualties was the truth.

Claims were made about the project that frequently left my staff and me open-mouthed in wonder that otherwise reasonable people could make them. Here are some examples from actual newspaper stories:

- "Healthy old-growth trees to be logged in the Biscuit fire area," accompanied by a picture of an unburned old-growth forest. The truth: No unburned old-growth forests were logged, and only fire-killed trees or trees that constituted a legitimate safety hazard were authorized for cutting.

- "The U.S. Forest Service lost more than \$9 million logging trees burned by the massive 2002 Biscuit fire in southwestern Oregon." The truth: We spent about \$5.8 million to analyze, document, prepare, administer and legally defend these salvage sales. The sales generated more than \$12.3 million and provided about \$40 million of value to local communities.

In court, there was testimony that the sales were located in wilderness areas (which would have been illegal), that we didn't retain enough snags for wildlife (there are millions of snags still present throughout the Biscuit fire

area) and that our goal of salvage logging to assist with reforestation was proven unnecessary by scientific research findings.

That last claim was made again and again, with opponents frequently misrepresented our intentions as though we believed that logging was necessary for the forest's recovery. My decision to proceed with salvage logging was intended to realize both the potential jobs it would provide for local communities and the economic return to the federal government. I also knew these sales would be implemented with rigorous environmental protections.



SCOTT CONROY

IN MY OPINION

One claim often heard was that these sales were illegal. My staff received letters and calls from people around the country aghast that we were engaging in actions so obviously against

the law. The courts, however, disagreed and ruled in favor of the Forest Service in more than 17 decisions. Indeed, the Forest Service has prevailed in every court case involving the Biscuit.

The truth is an unacceptable casualty in matters concerning debate over the management of our national forests. These lands are treasures, and I am charged with managing them according to law and for your greatest good for the long term. To do so, I need the productive participation of citizens willing to acknowledge and deal in what is true, even if it doesn't support their beliefs or desires. There is hope and opportunity for good results when honest people deal honestly with each other. Unresearched, unsupported exaggerations and intentional misrepresentations designed to inflame rather than enlighten serve no common good.

One last truth you should know: The time and resources spent battling such claims could have been more productively spent restoring our landscapes in hope of avoiding another Biscuit fire on your lands.

Scott Conroy is supervisor of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest.