

22 February 2007

To: Kevin Birch, Oregon Department of Forestry

Subject: FFAC Comments

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on "The most pressing problems on federal forest lands." I would like to express my appreciation to the Governor and your task force for tackling the challenge of attempting to bring order to the chaos that characterizes so much of current management efforts on federal forest lands.

In my remarks I concentrate on the national forests because I know them best, but I am very much aware of the Oregon and California lands, the BLM's work with these lands, and believe that many of my comments also touch similar problems, especially budget and staffing, faced by the agency.

In the interest of space I have probably over simplified some of the problem discussions. However, should more clarification be needed I stand ready to provide more information.

Reaffirmation of the mission of the National Forests:

The Organic Act of 1897 was explicit in describing the reasons for establishing the forests: to provide a sustainable supply of water and timber for the use of citizens, and to allow other uses that did not diminish the ability of the forests to provide the primary resources. However, legal and policy debates over management of the lands for the past forty or so years have clouded the original intent of the Act. Today, in my opinion, few people understand the fundamental reason the national forests were established, including some agency employees and too many political leaders.

It seems to me the future of the forests is dependant upon some form of top level federal process to clarify both the purpose of the forests and the desired management direction. A second component of the process must be an awareness program to promote public understanding of the national forest's natural resource role which is essential before successful land management can be carried out. Certainly a serious effort has to be made to resolve the endless controversy that trashes the concept of scientific forest management, and a clarification of mission would be a major step forward.

Even if there were no controversy, a national forest mission review after 100 years would seem appropriate. Over the last century natural resources needs and desires have changed dramatically. For example, in the 1890's people were predicting a timber famine, which was a major motivation for federal forest establishment. The timber famine didn't occur, but in the last century other resource issues have developed. Today, at least here in the West, the need for water from the national forests is a becoming a major resource issue. And many people believe the forest's priorities should include carbon storage, more wildlife habitat, energy production, open space, recreation, scenic beauty and community economic stability as major products. Timber, once a top priority, is now seen by some as a by product of other management activities, and no longer a management priority.

Laws and Regulations:

Reaffirmation of mission needs to be followed by a look at laws and policies governing the forests. They need to be reviewed, evaluated, coordinated and streamlined. Many directions respond to ideology and special interest

agendas rather than good scientist and professional wisdom. This maze of often conflicting dictates, creates an almost impenetrable web of paper work, which drains staff time, uses increasingly scarce financial resources, creates endless barriers for managers, frustrates agency people, confuses the lay public, irritates state and local governments and does little to improve on the ground forest protection and management.

Legal controls are essential for managing the public's lands, but they certainly need to be thought through in terms of their value to the land, basic legality, their efficiency, effectiveness for management accountability and ability to protect the public's interest.

The recently retired Chief of the Forest Service coined the term, "Analysis Paralysis" to express his frustration with the often overlapping, conflicting and redundant rules and regulations governing the management of forest lands. He made a valiant effort to reduce the problem, but with only very limited success.

Funding:

Funds for managing and protecting the national forests have been on a downward slide since the early 1990's. The 2008 and future year federal budgets continue this trend. There seems to be little concern by the budget preparers about the impact of their budget cuts on the forests, or surrounding lands and communities. There is no easy answer, given the massive federal deficits, but budget starvation will lead to the eventual demise of the forests as we know them. Even in budget good times federal natural resources do not fare well in Congress when competing with other programs such as health care, education, urban development, social welfare or defense.

One possible solution may be an expanded use of "enviroeconomics", economic analysis of things always considered free or impossible to assign an economic value to as a source of revenue. For example, the value of hiking or wildlife watching has historically not been considered something to assign a dollar value to, but in recent times more attention is being paid to uses by serious economists, and I suggest more study would be appropriate.

The possibility of increasing fees for the casual use of forests and more of the renewable resources they produce need more consideration, unpopular as it maybe. Increased fees will raise a public outrage from many, but if the forests are going to survive and be available for future citizens some hard financial decisions are needed.

One potentially major source of funding for the forests, as an example, is a management and protection charge for domestic and irrigation water flowing from the forests. Currently the welfare of federal forest watersheds is considered a federal issue, but it would seem the off site users depending on the water have a financial interest in keeping the watershed productive.

Staffing:

For many years the Forest Service and BLM have been losing people needed to carry out the management and protection of the forests. Budget cuts, program changes, social programs, early retirements, changing population demographics, outsourcing, employee frustration and public attitudes have all contributed to the drastic cuts in personnel, leaving too few well trained, experienced and dedicated people to do the work. A critical loss from the cut-backs is the agency's institutional memory, especially vital for long term forest management programs requiring decades to come to fruition.

In my opinion, many national political leaders, regardless of party affiliation, lack basic knowledge of the skills, experience and dedication needed to manage and protect the forests. Recent budget cut backs and the current mandated draconian outsourcing studies are good examples of how little the political operatives understand, or seem to care about forest management.

Identity:

Abe Lincoln is credited with saying, "With public support anything is possible; without public support nothing is possible." The adage sums up the final major problem I see for the federal forests. Few people today have any knowledge of the reason the federal forests exist. Most of the public see federal lands simply as "park" lands. Resolving forest management issues is going to require an intense and continuing major public relations effort to inform the public of what the federal forests are about, why they are important to individuals and what citizens need to do to assure the future of these legacy lands.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

John

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Background:

I am a graduate of Penn State State University with a degree in Forest Management. Over the years I have done additional academic work in fire management, social science and management development. During my 33 plus years with the US Forest Service I have been a forester, fire management officer, district ranger, public affairs officer, regional fire manager, national fire program manager and regional public affairs director. Since retirement I have been a fire management consultant, a partner in ownership and publication of Wildland Firefighter magazine and currently own a commercial orchard. I am also a member and Fellow of the Society of American Foresters.