



Federal Forest Advisory Committee

Bend Riverhouse, May 15

Problems With Disruption of Natural Processes

Regardless of the route that you took to get to Bend today you witnessed many examples of the unnatural conditions that currently exist on our federal forests, and the consequences of those conditions. If you travelled from the West side you got a firsthand look at the B&B fire, but also within eyesight was the McCache Fire, the Link fire and the Eyerly fire on the Sisters Ranger Districts that burned nearly 200,000 acres and threatened many homes. If you travelled from Lakeview you went past the Winter Rim fires on the Freemont and the Davis Mountain fire on the South Deschutes. If you came from the East you travelled by the Maxwell and Hash Rock fires on the Ochoco.

We have a tragedy occurring on our National Forests and it is wildfire. This tragedy isn't caused from the latest fad called global warming, but has in fact been several decades in the making. It is a combination of past aggressive fire suppression, and the fact that we currently have little active management or concern for the increasing amount of biomass growing each year on our federal forests. These factors combined today have created a scenario that we cannot control even with the most sophisticated fire fighting tools. This is not just an Oregon issue, this is a national issue since nearly 10 million acres of wildland burned in 2006 and we are off to a fast start in 2007 with fires in Georgia and Florida.

Unfortunately with more fires comes a greater need to put more of the Forest Service's budget toward fire preparedness. In 1991 16% of the Forest Service's budget went to fighting fire. In 2000 it was 21% of the budget, but in 2007 it is a whopping 45% of the budget. Our national forests are getting managed but it is not by silviculturists, it is by Mother Nature. Unfortunately out of necessity, the Forest Service is no longer a land management organization it is a fire fighting organization. We are in a vicious circle, the land desperately needs managed, but increasingly, management dollars are being taken away to fight wildfires thus the lands never get managed.

Fires are the most visible and identifiable aspect of poor forest health, but the lack of management on our National Forests is causing more insect and disease outbreaks and creating fuel loadings on west side forests that are far above historic levels and will undoubtedly trigger catastrophic fire events in the near future as well.

Solutions To Existing Forest Health Problems

I have outlined the greatest threats to our National Forest which I believe is wildfire and lack of active management to reduce fuel loading. I hope this Committee is willing to take a hard look at these problems and to make some recommendations that are non-traditional because the current management strategy is not working. **I believe this panel needs to ask some tough questions and needs to embrace some bold new ideas if the needed management is going to be restored to our National Forests.**

- The first question that needs answered is if the Forest Service and BLM are going to be land management agencies or fire fighting agencies. If they are only going to manage the land in a token way like today, I suggest we turn these National Forests into National Parks and only provide fire fighting resources. This would be fairer to the industry that has been waiting for them to engage and manage the forests and for the communities that are depending on forest products jobs for survival. Industry could down size and exist on State and Private timber and communities could reinvent themselves now rather than to die a slow death like they are doing now. The Agencies are trying to be a little bit of everything for everybody on a flat budget and are doing poorly at everything.
- If the Forest Service and BLM commit to being land management agencies (which I hope is the case) then they need a bifurcated budget process that totally separates the land management budget from the fire budget both in dollars and in personnel. This would prevent severe fire seasons from impacting the land management programs and would allow a consistent and predictable amount of acres to be treated each year.
- I believe one of this Panel's biggest roles could be to help secure the needed funding for the Forest Service and BLM to treat all of their Condition Class II and Condition Class III lands in a 20-year cycle here in Oregon. Fire conditions are only going to worsen as more biomass is produced on every acre every year. There needs to be a plan of assistance to address the backlog and prevent future fuel buildups.
- This panel should insist that all projects which focus on treating Condition Class II and III lands carried out under the HFRA authorities. Under this law only an Action/No Action alternative is needed. Input is taken on the project from the public and appeals to the project are only allowed if they were part of the public input which gives the agencies an opportunity to deal with issues upfront and not to content with a constantly changing array of issues. Should an appeal go to court it is an expedited procedure requiring settlement within an abbreviated time. A key factor to this process is that the judge must weigh the balance of harms meaning that they must consider what might happen to the land should a fuels reduction project not be carried out. The HFRA authority is being used sparingly by the agencies but offers an expedited manner to treat overcrowded forests which needs broader implementation.
- Finally I would suggest that this Committee revisit its work plan and agenda. I believe the first part of your job, which you are well on your way to accomplishing, is to identify

the problems and to find solutions. I think the second part of your task should be to make sure implementation of your strategy is successful, and not leave that to someone else after you have done all of this good work.

Thank you for taking my comments.

Tom Partin
President
American Forest Resource Council