

## **Presentation to Federal Forest lands Advisory Committee—by John Lowe—5/15/07**

First of all I want to express my appreciation for this group being formed and tackling a very difficult task. I have been very close to the management of federal lands in Oregon since 1977 and consider federal lands across the nation to be one of our greatest assets. I also fear that the future of these lands and their legacy are in serious jeopardy and my great grandchildren may not know the value of these lands that you and I have known.

I like your draft problem statement. You may want to consider adding that “site conditions” are changing due to climate change—which is not related to past management.

Over the years there have been three “quotes” that seem to always surface when I explore this question: How did we get to the current state of affairs in regard to the stewardship of our public lands.

1. A speech by Teddy Roosevelt in 1903 to the Society of American Foresters has some significance as to the early thinking about the role of forest—I think it is still relevant—

"And now, first and foremost, you can never afford to forget for a moment what is the object of our forest policy. That object is not to preserve the forest because they are beautiful. Though that is good in itself; nor because they are refuges for the wild creatures of the wilderness, though that, too, is good in-itself; but the primary object of our objective of our forest policy, as of the land policy of the United States, is the making of prosperous homes. It is part of the traditional policy of home making in our country. Every other consideration is secondary...You yourselves have got to keep this practical object before your minds; to remember that a forest which contributes nothing to the wealth, progress or safety of the country is of no interest to the government, and, should be of little interest to the forester. **Your attention must be directed to the preservation of the forest, not as an end itself. But as the means of preserving and increasing the prosperity of the nation"**

2. —Gifford Pinchot—1915—give or take a year or so.-- Public support of acts affecting public rights is absolutely required. Find out in advance what the public will stand for. If it is right and they won't stand for it, postpone action and educate them.

3. Author unknown--Anyone who claims to be unbiased—is either fooling themselves or trying to fool you.

Having been 11 years since I retired I asked two past Chiefs of the USFS, Two Regional Directors of Fire Management and a member of the board of the Forest Service Retirees Association for their comments and thoughts.

## What are the important factors contributing to the problem?

### Biological Issues

- a.) Failure to properly identify the problem early.—On the Umatilla N.F. in 1981 I was involved in the tail end of the tussock moth, the height of the pine bark beetle and the beginning of the spruce Budworm invasion. Scientific advice was that it was cyclic and that the Budworm populations were to peak in two to three years and in seven years would be back to normal. By 1984 we knew that stagnation from overly dense stands and off site species resulting from a **lack of fire** were contributing to tree mortality by insects and disease. Management efforts were to reduce the fire hazard of dead material while salvaging usable material. Conflicting objectives such as maintaining thermal cover for elk at 70% crown closure and other controversies hindered efforts to properly address the overstocked stands. I may be off a year or two here but I believe it was about 1992 when the term ecological disaster was first used at a forum on forest health at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington.
- b) **Changes in climate:** Whether from “global warming” or some cyclic phenomenon, I believe this issue certainly has contributed to the current on the ground problem and will continue to for the foreseen future. Planning for species composition and stocking levels will not only have to consider problems brought about by lack of fire but that site capabilities will also change. Left to it's on “natural processes” this increasingly fire-prone ecological state of affairs – will produce larger and hotter wildfires—and associated consequences.

### Social-- Political Issues

- a) **Public policy as defined by agencies, statutes and courts regarding management of National Forest, National Grasslands is a mess** – the best one could say is that it is unclear and poorly defined which allows everyone to have the correct answer. As we have moved from a rural to a urban society there has been many attempts to clarify or re-define the policy from the original organic act. A lot of this legislative activity came as a result of the (for a lack of a better description)—the wilderness-timber wars. These include the Multiple Use-Sustained yield act, The National Forest Management act, Endangered species act, and National Environmental Quality act all of which are still on the books. Attempts to clarify what these laws meant were pushed into the courts by special interest groups.

This has resulted in a **dysfunctional decision making process** for the agencies. - The old worn out term “analysis paralysis” is alive and well. The amount of

“process” necessary to even attempt to meet the requirements of increasingly conflicted laws and regulations is stifling. Ongoing judicial decisions relating to failure to properly comply with process requirements (which are increasing confusing and conflicting) by federal courts amounts to almost a veto process by individuals and groups. Adding to this dilemma is the fact that of the products of multiple use, wood, forage, wildlife/fish, water, and recreation there are no legal requirements to produce wood, forage or recreation. Because of this court rulings favor a no action alternative or at least major delays. Failure to make timely decisive decisions results in a lack of clarity as to what are the land management objectives. Certainly the partisan political situation we find ourselves in contributes to this lack of clarity in public land policy. **We can't decide whether Federal Forest Health is a true ecosystem scientific issue or is it a social question, of economics, jobs and public values.**

b) **Lack of public understanding and therefore support.** Except for some special interest groups still fighting the wilderness-timber wars—and those living in close proximity to the forest--the “the public” in general has no real idea of what they are being asked to support. Hopefully the current magnitude of the fire situation along with “global warming” discussion can be utilized to improve this situation.

c) **Lack of adequate funding-**

Dramatic declines (over 80%) in federal timber management programs have occurred since 1990. The KV and BD funds generated by timber sales which were used for wildlife/fish habitat work, silvicultural treatments, fuel reductions etc. were also gone. . . At the same time “process” now consumes much of the available funds short cutting implementation and monitoring work. Not only did this result in less stewardship work in the field it significantly reduced the capability of the organization to respond to every increasing wildfire suppression needs. It was about this time when the **revenue generated from the National Forest no longer exceeded the budget request. Politically funding for managing the National Forests has to compete with all other programs—social services and military.** (Includes money for counties/schools)

Funding has reached almost a crisis stage as agencies are required to take the ever increasing cost of fire of suppression out of their other budget items. (Expected to be 45% plus in 2008) All of these have required the agencies to carry out significant reductions in personnel. The resultant situation is made worse by accelerated attrition of those in leadership positions. Due to retirement of the leadership cadre there is a declining institutional memory relative to aggressive active management.

d) **The Urban interface issue.**

Activities related to the “healthy forest initiative” are, for political realities, concentrated in the wildland urban interface seemingly without full recognition of inevitable consequences. Such consequences include a necessity, even obligation,

to maintain the created conditions. At some foreseeable point all available funds will be required to simply maintain created conditions. These activities will encourage and facilitate additional home construction in the wildland urban interface.

An additional problem is that the concentration on the **Urban interface has decreased our ability to adequately protect the isolated and remote roadless areas and wilderness areas** which much of the major debate over public land management is waged. One thing has not changed—initial attack is still the number one way to attack wildfires but with reduced capacity we have to set priorities for fire fighting resources and if life or property are not involved-- managers of these wild places set there and watch it go up in smoke and by the time re-enforcement get there from a higher priority area the fire has become it's own master.

d)**Lack of stability/dependability of product delivery** makes it almost impossible for businesses to make long term investments in infrastructure to help utilize products from forest health activities. This nation's use of wood, per capita, is by far the greatest in the world and continues to increase as our population and standard of living continues to rise. **However, we have increasingly shifted the source of that wood to "elsewhere" along with the ecological consequences, associated capital, jobs, and payments to government.** I find this somewhat ironic here in Oregon where we have some of the best timber growing lands in the world and some of them happen to be on public lands.

### **What are the possible solutions to the problem?**

I believe your vision statement is a multiple use concept, which I hardly endorse. Solutions are addressed in terms of meeting your vision. I think the question of what should be done in regards to forest health and fire has been answered for sometime—the question and challenge is how do we get it done. Efforts like this should be accelerated, preferably in collaborative efforts, to formulate a clear policy for the management of public lands. The policy should be detailed to include such specifics as to include an objective to treat at least 20 times what we are doing today. It must also include stability and dependability of raw materials produced.

Current multiple -use mandates cannot be realized at acceptable/reasonable costs due to the evolved consequences of the interactions of legislation, regulations, and court

decisions.

Only Congress can bring forth a long lasting solution to the increasing quagmire.

**Before**

**this will happen there must be the political will to make it happen—that will only come**

**when public support or out cry-starts showing up in the polls.** I don't know what

process would be best but we need to fix it not just another short term patch to get thru the

next election. Some have suggested that it is time for a national public land law review

commission be established.

- a) **Help formulate public opinion which recognizes the problem our public lands are facing and the consequences of not fixing them. This has to be accomplished before other necessary steps will not be successful.**

How do we establish a collaborative special interest group which is willing to spend the

time, money and leadership necessary to effect public opinion on a national scale.

The

smokey bear campaign comes to mind as a possible model. It will be difficult to compete

with the daily media's bombardment of "save a tree" without any discussion of the variability

between deforestation where forest are converted to other uses such as range lands and

farmland now growing Christmas trees. **One of the major hurdles to overcome is there is no true Multiple Use special interest group.**

- b) **There must be an element which addresses the "funding" issue.** I believe it must have a revenue generating aspect from commodities such as wood products, grazing fees, recreation fees, water use, etc. We need to take a comprehensive look—for instance those of us who hunt and fish pay the state in license fees but nothing goes to the management of federal forest. Similar issues can be related to the Portland water supply as well as many irrigation districts. I pay \$677 per year for water which all comes off the National Forest but none of that goes to the management of the land. The current authority for stewardship contracts where money received from commodities can be used for treating the forest is a good program—it is helpful only if projects can be implemented.

I would also propose a dedicated funding source similar to the Pittman Robertson funds

where a federal "tax" is collected on various products used extensively on public lands.

Because of the nature of the beast—funding must be somewhat stable and dependable.

**If the real objective is first to treat enough federal lands to make a difference, then we the taxpayer and the Congress and administration need to fund the program to do at least 20 times the acreage per year that is being done.**

c) **We must find a way to fix the decision making process.** I believe this is the most challenging part of the solution. I also believe this is the largest reason that major accomplishments have not already been made in the area of forest health and fire. This issue is so complicated and a lightning rod for controversy that I would propose a task force to work on it as a separate issue. I believe it is time to quit blaming managers for not adequately doing their job or proposing we just need more collaboration. Given there is some element of truth to both—that alone will not solve this problem. Does anyone think abortion and gay rights differences can be fixed by better management and collaboration.

As to the decision making process maybe we should look to congress as how they settle tough decisions like veto's and constitutional amendment. At least they have a process which does not include conscience—which to me is seldom possible without throwing out the baby with the bath water.

. .

**What are the consequences of the various solutions?**

Probably the only consequence I see is that when you propose legislative fixes you never

know what may come out the other end of the process. However it is time to recognize that

the public land management system is broke both in the functional and economic sense —

and needs fixing. **The consequences of more patches are likely to be, at best, "feel**

**good" exercises that avoid coming to grips with the ongoing ecological/economic/**

## **social/political disaster that continues to develop around the management of public's lands**

### **What are the barriers to implementing your suggested solutions?**

The primary barriers to the development of a solution to the growing disaster of the management of the public's lands reside almost solely in the political arena. The political will to do something will be effected primarily by public opinion. Our success in molding public opinion will determine whether or not our great grandchildren have a public lands legacy to argue over. I fear that if we cannot return to some substantial economic values from these lands to help pay for the cost of adequate management—we will see accelerated efforts to do away with them.

The technical barriers that I see is whether or not the scientific community can learn how to articulate the facts or at least our best estimate of the facts, given an clear objective, so that the “public doesn't have to decide which set of facts are politically correct on any given day.

Most “land managers” are not comfortable in the arena of forming public opinion. Most feel that if they do a good job in a professional manner the public will accept it. The “wars” that have raged between “environmentalists” and those who have profited from the resources on the federal estate have been fought by influencing public opinion from their on biases-- so the question is can we now move public opinion formulation into a different arena. Can we take a different message and get in front of the public—ie- various mass media outlets. Currently the mass media is creating a generation which will believe that the only way we can save the planet is to save a tree—without any difference between trees.—whether they come from a program of forest conversion to another use or from a Christmas tree farm which if it was not growing Christmas trees it would not be growing trees-maybe turnips..

**The consequences of the current situation will continue, and likely worsen, along ongoing trajectories. That, in turn, may be expected to become increasingly unacceptable to the public.**