

WILDERNESS COALITION

by Gary Stallings

Another bitter summer in the woods has begun. Across the West environmentalists are readying forest blockades, digging in for direct action to protect old growth trees which political compromise failed to save in the recent round of wilderness legislation. On the other side of the blockade lines, loggers grow increasingly angry at what they see as threats to their fading occupation. What is most striking about this is that the environmentalists and loggers should be allies. Their interests are essentially the same. They are both fighting the same forces.

The interests of loggers and mill workers are different than those of the big timber companies. The wood workers are interested in jobs. The companies are interested in profits. It is a classic labor/management issue. The big companies shut down mills when the home office accountants decide that mill profits are not as high as alternative investments. They are, as they often point out, in business to make money. The mill workers are not confused about what the companies are up to. They are merely desperate. They are classic mill town employees and are glad to volunteer their feelings that the companies they work for are screwing them left and right. Yet they still see environmentalists or "preservationists" as they are more likely to be called, as their enemies.

Industry publications regularly refer to wilderness advocates as "The Wilderness Gang; . . . timber thugs . . . job thieves . . ." and so on. Loggers and mill workers, as well as their unions, are solidly, vehemently, and occasionally violently opposed to any more lands being classified as wilderness. But the fact is that they are putting themselves out of work with this attitude. They are not taking into account the fact that logging old growth requires massive capital investment. This money, spent on a different kind of forestry, would guarantee a timber supply in the future. Spent to mine the last of the old growth, this investment assures a lack of timber in the future.

It is not by accident that only scraps of the old growth forest remain. What is left is the hardest to get to, the most expensive to bring out, and on the most difficult lands to reforest. The best and easiest stuff has already been taken, precisely because it was the best and easiest. It is also a fact that what is left of the old growth would never be cut by anyone who was making rational longterm economic decisions. In many cases it costs more to build roads and get the timber out than it can be sold for. This, however, is no problem for the timber companies as long as they can get the Forest Service to build the roads with public money. The problem, for the workers, is that this is rapidly destroying the timber base on which their jobs depend. Sustained yield management is the alternative. It would assure a continued timber base through intensive management of the best growing areas, and would end the mining of old growth. This is shown by a large number of studies from private foresters, industry representatives, and the Forest Service itself. Every responsible forester agrees with it.

The single most sophisticated and extensive study yet made of forest management practices in the Pacific Northwest was done by William F. Hyde and published in his book "Timber Supply, Land Allocation, and Economic Efficiency." Hyde was interested in how to create a maximum sustained yield in the Douglas fir region. He showed that optimum timber yields would be achieved by ignoring all unroaded areas, taking more than a quarter of the land which has already been developed out of production, and managing the rest intensively. He estimated that this program would more than double the region's timber output.

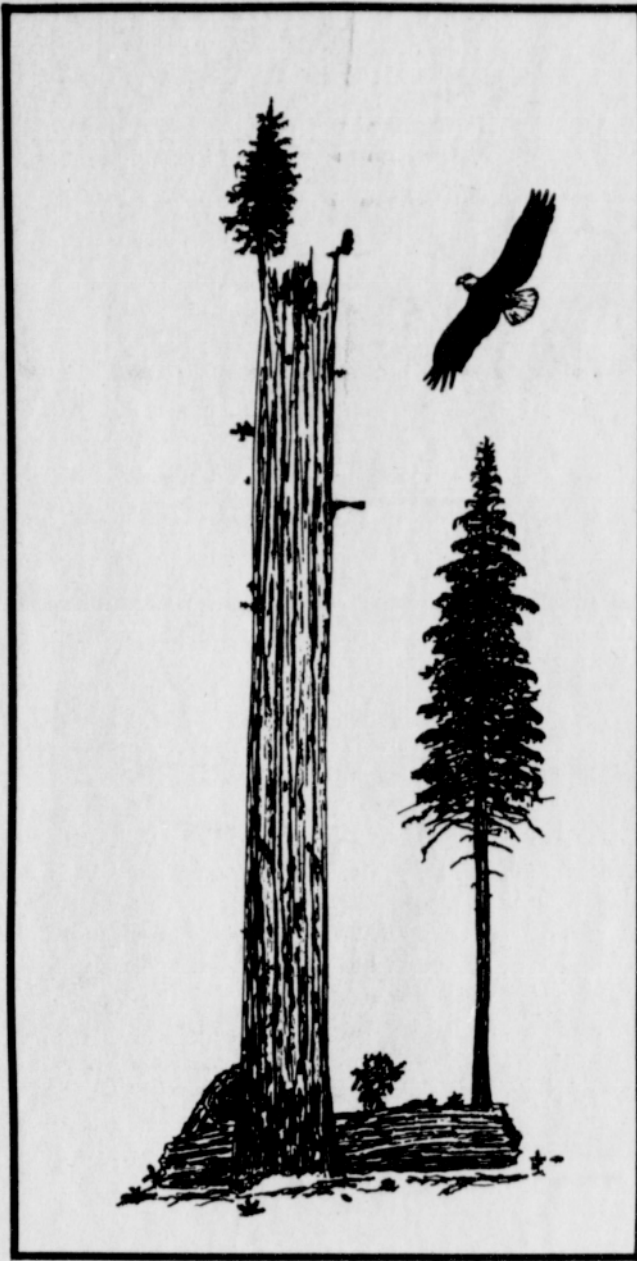
So why doesn't this happen?

The industry objectives are clear and straightforward. They are interested in profit maximization.

Many mills in the Pacific Northwest are tooled up for big old growth trees and would require extensive modernization in order to profitably handle smaller trees. The companies which own these mills would like to take the last big trees before they retool or move on. The companies own most of the best timberland in the area, but they have already taken all of their own old growth. All that remains is on national forest and Bureau of Land Management acreage. And since they can often get the Forest Service to pay much of the cost of national forest logging with public money, it is a sweet deal for them.

The Forest Service objectives are a bit more complicated. Opinions are divided as to

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just what the Service is up to. Representative John Dingle, a Michigan Democrat, said in exasperation at one Congressional hearing on Forest Service policy, "The Forest Service is a wholly owned subsidiary of the timber industry." But even many environmentalists would disagree with that assessment. Some claim the Service is merely a berserk bureaucracy protecting its own prerogatives.

The fact is that most timber sales the Forest Service makes lose money. These deficit sales are increasingly a point of contention because environmentalists see public subsidies being used to destroy what they consider to be jewels of the national heritage. The Service sells timber from almost every ranger district in the country. Its budget is dependent on timber sales. Budget requests for reforestation, recreation, and other official mandates of the Forest Service are regularly decimated both by Congress and the Office of Management and Budget. But when the agency asks for timber sale funding, it generally gets approval. So it sells timber.

But whether the Forest Service is an industry whore or backward bureaucracy matters little. It is not managing the timberbase for sustained yield even though the law requires it. The point for both environmentalists and woodworkers is that they both get their way

if and only if the timber is managed for sustained yield. The most unassailable argument for the preservation of the remaining old growth is that it is the best possible course to take economically. So if either the environmentalists or the loggers were actually put in charge of forest management they would make precisely the same decisions. There is every reason for them to form a coalition which could help put an end to the periodic unemployment which plagues timber dependent areas and at the same time save all the remaining unprotected stands of old growth timber.

I would like to propose just such a coalition, based on the following proposition: each county should have the final say on all timber management decisions made with regard to the forest lands within their boundaries. This is a program which should get enthusiastic support among working people who depend on timber for a livelihood, business communities which suffer during local economic slumps, and with county officials whose budgets for roads and schools are directly tied to timber revenues. The unions of course would love it. Local newspapers would have to get behind it. The small mill owners and logging contractors would all be in favor.

There is simply an airtight case for leaving all of the remaining old growth in order to maximize the timber supply. Forget about the fisheries, watersheds, endangered species, gene pools, recreational values, spiritual qualities, and sheer magnificent beauty. Never mind about any of that. It is just flat out economic insanity to cut the stuff.

Loggers do not hate old growth anymore than environmentalists hate wood. In fact, woodworkers probably use and enjoy the wilderness as much as any other group. They tend to be hunters and fishermen. They live in timbered areas not just because that is where they occasionally find work, but also because they like it there. All they want is a chance to make a living. The problem is that they are frightened, very realistically and legitimately frightened because their jobs are disappearing.

Most local groups have no difficulty understanding that it makes no economic sense to build a million dollar road to bring out half a million dollars worth of timber. If they were actually in a position to make the timber management decisions which determine their future economic condition, they would choose to maximize the longrange productivity of the timber base. They would manage the forests to provide a sustained yield, not only because that is the law, but also because it would be in their own self interest to do so.

Environmentalists would like the decisions made on the basis of the loggers' self interest because it would mean that no one would ever get around to cutting the old growth. It might never be made statutory wilderness, but neither would it ever be logged.

Control by local groups would put an end to deficit sales because they lose money on them just like all other taxpayers. Instead of building expensive roads to cheap stands of timber, they would put the money where it would provide the most continuous jobs over the longest period of time for the least cost. That would mean they would begin intensive management of the prime areas which are already roaded. These areas are the only hope for a sustained yield, and there is no lack of them.

In today's market, for example, most counties would cut very little timber at all. The market is glutted. Why add to the disaster? Instead, they would be investing in reforestation projects, thinning, and other forms of management with an eye to both current and longterm yields. Of course no single county can make itself independent of the ups and downs of the timber market, but every county could be better off, with more regular jobs and more guaranteed revenues if they were managing their own timber.

Naturally there would be some formidable opposition to this proposition. The Forest Service and the big timber companies who are currently in charge of these decisions would object strenuously. But there is a single, simple answer to all of their objections. They are operating illegally.

If timber management decisions were being made in accordance with the law and simple economic rationality, the remaining old growth areas would not be in danger, and the woodworkers would have as much protection as possible against the boom and bust cycles which have always characterized the timber industry. Then both woodworkers and the wilderness would have a future, and there would be no further need for bitter summers in the woods.

Gary Stallings is a staff member of THE ALLIANCE, which is published in Portland, and from which this article is reprinted.

