

OREGON CHAINSAW MASSACRES

BY CHARLES HANLON

If all the trees in a forest were killed by wind, fire or disease, the result would, without dissent from any source, be called a disaster.

Rightfully so. The myriads of intricate systems of the forest would have been either destroyed or damaged. The soil would no longer retain its usual capacity for holding moisture. Creatures of the wild would have been deprived of their supporting habitat. No trees would be left standing to purify the air we breathe.

But if all the trees in a forest are killed by chainsaws, the result is called a clearcut. Ah, how devious the ways of men's minds when striving to cover their tracks.

With each passing day, month and year, the wonderful forests of the Pacific Northwest are disappearing. They are not being replaced. It is not possible to replace them. Replanting a clearcut does not a forest make. Even when the seedlings survive, all that has been accomplished is that a lesser stand of trees has been started. A timber stand is not a forest. At best it is a tree farm.

I have long believed that with the passing of time tree farming will follow the path of modern agriculture, becoming increasingly expensive and risky, with constantly growing problems to be fought with an ever greater array of insecticides, pesticides and fertilizers — the final outcome of which is still in doubt so far as the survival of the human race is concerned.

Worldwide experiences, in Germany's Black Forest and elsewhere, indicate that the course we are on at the present moment will ensure a serious decline in timber productivity at some time in the future. No nation, no timber enterprise has ever "conquered" nature. Nature always prevails, and nature is not in a hurry. Sooner or later she will get to those among us who are violating the natural laws of the forest.

The cost of replanting clearcuts and trying to fight off the ill effects of having interrupted nature's enormously complex, but amazingly efficient interconnectedness will inevitably show up on the profit and loss sheet of the timber industry.

Difficult decisions will need to be made, including, "Do we continue to throw more money into a decreasingly profitable enterprise?" Where then will be the jobs, the economic opportunities we hear so much about these days?

The present hue and cry to increase cutting of old growth forests seems to be an orchestrated effort designed to replace sound long-term forest management with immediate economic desires. Never has there been so much propaganda that has the effect of shouting down reasonable discussion of the long range effects of speeding up the decimation of Oregon and Washington forests. The distortion in the purported facts and figures being disseminated ought to be grounds for legal action demanding that distortion be punished and that truth prevail.

Some examples:

The present timber shortage is the direct result of privately owned timber companies and corporations having consciously overcut their timber stands during the last several decades.

The sight and sound of industry spokesmen expressing concern about jobs is an embarrassing spectacle. Industry has eliminated jobs by the thousands by mechanizing their mills, and more jobs have been lost by their ardent cultivation of raw log export markets which require no processing here.

Not one word, not a single syllable, of concern has ever been heard emanating from the halls of the major timber companies about the loss of those jobs. Present moaning about the need for jobs seems somewhat hypocritical. More jobs gained today through increased cutting may be at the expense of enough jobs in the future.

Industry proposals to increase cutting of publicly owned timber, now that privately owned timber has been overcut, is to repeat a serious



PHOTOGRAPH BY ART WOLFE

error. Who will pay? Our children. More jobs today, increased profits today, mean economic troubles for those who come after us.

I am no stranger to the struggle between good public policy and the grasping of aggressive forces in the timber industry. As a 12-year member of the Oregon Senate, I did everything I could to throw the spotlight on the fact that the Board of Forestry was dominated by industry members and that the board made policy for the Oregon Department of Forestry. This included deciding when the sale of publicly owned timber would occur. The companies of those board members could then buy up the timber being sold. All that had been slipped into the statutes. I called it a "multi-billion dollar conflict of interest. The timber industry called me all sorts of things.

What I got for my efforts to establish reasonable public policy regarding publicly owned timberlands was the threat that the timber industry would spend however much money it took to beat me in the next election. They tried. They didn't succeed. I came out of that interesting experience with the firm belief that the voting public will always support the public official who fights for good public policy, even when it is opposed by private interests.

Defending myself in that furious infighting required that I equip myself with as much factual knowledge about the Oregon timber industry as possible. I learned that early in this century vast acreages of the most productive timberlands were transferred from public to private ownership in what has been publicly termed a scandal.

More recently, when it came time to reforest the Tillamook Burn, the industry was asked to

accept a small surcharge on all timber sold to help finance the reforestation efforts. They declined. Now, they stand poised, anxious to cut those trees whose production costs they refused to share.

One of the strangest, most perverse struggles ever to rip through the timber industry is in full voice at this very moment. Those who have been profiting from log exporting want increased cutting of old growth trees on public lands. Such cutting and exporting have the effect of depriving medium and small woods products industry in the Northwest of a necessary supply of timber at a reasonable price. Such exporting deprives Northwest workers of jobs, which of course has the result of impoverishing Northwest communities of economic support. Yet where are the voices from within the industry protesting this invasion of their own future economic interests? A strange silence.

Few things are less appropriate than the crude litany of ridicule, perhaps carefully nurtured and orchestrated by industry voices, designed to poison public opinion against those who sincerely believe current decimation of forests is bad judgement, environmentally and economically. Those whose only interest is to preserve the planet as a livable world do not deserve denigration. It is a shameful performance by an industry that purports to be responsible.

The industry would have us believe that the fight to save the spotted owl which lives in natural forests is a planetly foolish effort engaged in only by fools. That's a clever distortion of the truth. It is not the spotted owl that is endangered, it is its habitat, the natural forests — the ones the cutters want to convert into cash.

When the forests are gone, we're all losers.

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