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On the Hot Seat

Focus on OSU forestry Dean Hal Salwasser intensifies.

The heat is on. Four months after a scandal over post-fire logging erupted at Oregon State University's College of Forestry (COF), the school plans to hold a vote of confidence in its dean, Hal Salwasser.

The question at hand is whether Salwasser is too close to the timber industry to fairly and effectively lead the college, which is renowned not only for its research on wood production but also for its ecological scholarship.

Internal emails reveal that in January 2006, Salwasser strategized with timber industry insiders in an attempt to discredit COF student Daniel Donato's paper reporting negative ecological impacts of logging in forests burned by the 2002 Biscuit Fire. The dean also made disparaging remarks about environmentalists. (For background, see *EW* articles 4/13 and 5/11).

In a recent COF survey, many faculty and graduate students suggested that Salwasser routinely harasses, intimidates and censors scholars who focus on ecosystem-based research, makes closed-door decisions unduly influenced by the timber industry and is an unfit leader for the college. Survey respondents also criticized Salwasser for testifying in support of a salvage logging bill now before Congress, in apparent violation of an OSU policy of neutrality on legislative debates. The survey results prompted plans for a college-wide, web-based vote of confidence on June 5.

Salwasser has apologized for his role in criticizing Donato's report and for failing to clarify that his advocacy of the salvage logging bill is strictly personal.

A look at Salwasser's professional past may offer a greater context for his actions in recent months. Salwasser has a history of playing hardball for timber industry interests, according to several environmental leaders who have clashed with him.

Andy Stahl, director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, said that he first butted heads with Salwasser in the mid-1980s. At the time, Stahl was working on spotted owl research as a forester for the National Wildlife Federation and Salwasser was working for the Forest Service under President Reagan as a wildlife ecologist. Salwasser "poked his finger into my chest and he said, 'Stahl, if you don't drop this spotted owl thing, we're gonna nail your fuckin' ass,'" Stahl said.

"That is absolutely false," Salwasser said. "I don't even use that kind of language. This guy needs to check out the organization that he belongs to that claims to have ethics."

Richard Fairbanks, who now works for the Wilderness Society, offered another anecdote. In the early 1990s, Fairbanks, then a Forest Service employee, appeared on CBS News' "Eye on America" and said that the export of raw logs accounted for more lost mill jobs than spotted owl protections ever did. Salwasser — then director of a Forest Service institution called New Perspectives — emailed Fairbanks, calling him a disgrace to the agency and suggesting



Hal Salwasser

that the Forest Service should never have hired him, according to Fairbanks. Within weeks Fairbanks was "surplusd" and reassigned to do menial work. He suspects it was retaliation for the comments he had made on CBS News.

Fairbanks no longer has that email, and Salwasser said he doesn't recall the exchange. "I may have met Rich Fairbanks out in the field, but I don't recall ever having that kind of conversation with him," Salwasser said.

Fast-forward to 2004, when Salwasser, then dean of the COF, and Dominick DellaSala, a COF alumnus who now works with the World Wildlife Fund, presented to a group of reporters on the Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources' fellowship program. DellaSala alleged that the COF has an inappropriately cozy relationship with Columbia Helicopters, citing an endowed chair and a suspiciously timed \$1 million donation from the company. The gift came months after COF professor John Sessions released a report recommending immediate, aggressive logging of areas burned in the Biscuit Fire. The report suggested that much of the yarding be done by helicopter, a potential windfall for Columbia. According to DellaSala, Salwasser pulled him aside and admonished him, saying that he was "skating on thin ice."

"I don't recall saying that," Salwasser responded. "My recollection is that I, as politely as possible, said, 'I'd like you to know the background on this gift.'"

Salwasser said that the anecdotes recounted by Stahl, Fairbanks and DellaSala were an orchestrated attempt at "character assassination" by foes with an axe to grind. "It's not my habit to intimidate people. I'm very careful about that because of my size," said Salwasser, who stands 6'6". "I've never retaliated against people and I've never even thought about it. These are allegations that are not consistent with my character."

It's still unclear how, or if, OSU will discipline Salwasser if the June 5 vote reflects poorly on his leadership. "OSU doesn't have a formal policy on votes of no confidence," said OSU spokesman Todd Simmons. "It's difficult to say what exactly will happen."

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