

Gardening the Forest

YOU CAN'T FIX THE FORESTS WITH A CHAINSAW

If the public really understood the illogic behind U.S. Forest Service management, including those endorsed by forest collaboratives, I am certain there would be more opposition to current Forest Service policies.

First, most USFS timber sales lose money. They are a net loss to taxpayers. After the costs of road construction, sale layout and environmental analyses, wildlife surveys (reforestation and other mitigation if required) are completed, most timber sales are unprofitable.

Indeed, the USFS frequently uses a kind of accounting chicanery, often ignoring basic overhead costs like the money spent on trucks, gasoline, office space and the personnel expenses of other experts like wildlife biologists, soil specialists and hydrologists that may review a timber sale during preparation that ought to be counted as a cost of any timber program.

The USFS will assert that ultimately there are benefits like logging roads provide access for recreation or that thinning will reduce wildfire severity. However, as will be pointed out later, most of these claims are not really benefits. We have thousands of miles of roads already, and adding more does not create a benefit. Even if thinning did reduce wildfires, which is questionable, it can be argued that we should not be reducing wildfire severity.

The agency will also argue that because it can't log the biggest trees, profitability of timber sales is reduced. But again, ecologically speaking, those big trees are extremely important to long-term forest ecosystem sustainability. Besides, many of the larger trees in more accessible terrain have already been high-graded and removed, further reducing the profitability of any timber sales.

Some private forest advocates say the USFS could increase its profits by logging more old growth, increasing the size of timber sales, and/or by reducing the environmental analysis and remediation. Yet these costs should always be included in the profit and loss of

a sale just as a business must include the costs of rent, power, employee compensation and compliance with all zoning, environmental and other laws in the profit and loss of their operations.

Second, most economic analyses of timber sales actually ignore or minimize the real costs associated with logging operations. These include collateral damage (thus costs) of logging such as altered water flow intercepted by logging roads, sediment in streams from logging events, disturbance/displacement of sensitive wildlife, soil compaction, the spread of weeds, loss of scenery, habitat fragmentation and so forth.

Many of these costs are on-going and never end. For instance, once weeds are introduced into an area, it is nearly impossible to eliminate them. And thus the cost of a logging sale that introduces weeds could be impossible to determine, but we know that it is far more than the value of any wood derived from selling federal timber.

Third, most natural ecological processes such as wildfire, beetles, etc. are critical to the long-term ecological health of forests. Yet the USFS typically attempts to reduce these factors to the greatest degree possible — in essence short-circuiting forest ecosystem function. In reality, they are typically not successful in these efforts — wildfires still burn a lot of acreage and thankfully we haven't figured out yet how to stop beetle outbreaks — but the fact that they waste billions attempting to purge natural processes is yet another indication of irrational forest policy.

Rather than a sign of unhealthy forests as portrayed by the pro-logging bias of the agency, these natural processes are important for recruitment of down wood into the ecosystem, create a diversity of wildlife habitat, and naturally thin forests. Stand replacement fires, for instance, have the second highest biodiversity found in forest ecosystems. In reality a "healthy" forest is one where wildfire, beetles and other natural processes operate. These agents are like predator to ungulate populations — they are important top-down influences.

Fourth, when confronted with the losses associated with logging, the Forest Service suggests that timber sales and logging support the economic vitality of rural communities. However, even if one agreed that it is desirable for taxpayers to provide welfare to rural communities in the form of logging operations, this ignores the fact that corporate stockholders and company owners skim off a lot of that subsidy before it ever gets to mill workers and woods workers. Indeed, some economic analyses show it would be better to simply give checks to employees to not log than incur the costs of a timber sale. Better yet, pay people to fix all the things that are ignored or given little attention like wildlife surveys, decommissioning of roads, maintenance of campgrounds and so forth.

Current policies like "forest restoration" are actually degrading forest ecosystem. Foresters cannot tell which trees, for instance, have a genetic propensity to withstand drought or tolerance for cold or ability to withstand fires and beetles. Random removal of trees reduces the genetic resilience of the forest ecosystem. Logging removes biomass. Reducing tree densities through logging short-circuits fires, beetles and other natural processes that create unique forest types like snag forests and are important for recruitment of dead trees.

Here's where you find the policies are totally illogical. First, the USFS attempts to eliminate natural thinning agents like wildfire and beetles. Then the USFS claims forests are too "dense" and require "thinning" trees (more appropriately termed "kill" trees) to reduce density. A reduction in density, it is argued, will reduce the natural ecological processes like beetles and fires. Meanwhile it spends tax dollars trying to eliminate the natural thinning agents.

To use an old cliché, it adds insult to injury by allowing timber companies to haul trees off site, robbing the forest of critical nutrients and structural components.

This is analogous to the policies of fish and wildlife agencies that "control" wolves and mountain lions, then argue that elk and deer herds are too big, thus must be "thinned" by hunters. Of course, research has more than adequately demonstrated that hunters kill different animals than native predators do, typically selecting the healthiest herd members including the biggest males and most productive age class of females, while native predators tend to take the young, old and injured. Thus just as hunting policies as currently employed are degrading our wildlife population, current forest policies are having a similar negative effect on our forest ecosystems.

Forest ecosystems are perfectly capable of responding to these natural ecological processes that are ultimately driven by climatic conditions. Large wildfires, for instance, bring forest types in balance with available water, nutrients and temperatures much more effectively than any logging schemes.

What I see happening is the gardening of our forests. The USFS, like a gardener who has allotted space for various crops with rows of carrots, corn and potatoes, tries to garden our forests. It decides that a particular landscape should be dominated by ponderosa pine or Douglas fir, or that place will be aspen or meadows, or this place is for spotted owls and that place for elk winter range, and so on. The problem is that wild forest ecosystems are dynamic and do not neatly fit into boxes or categories.

The problem is that even if we wanted to "garden" our wild forests, we are thus far, thankfully, incapable of doing this. All we do is wreak havoc on forest ecosystems. Every proposal to "fix" the forests creates new problems we never envisioned. In trying to garden our forests, we degrade them.

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