

“What is the Forest Service doing right and what is it doing wrong?”

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When Joe Walsh called to ask me if I would come to Phoenix to – in his words – “tell us what we are doing right and what we are doing wrong” – I wasn’t entirely sure I should accept his invitation. The question tugs at the roots of problems that have been festering both within and beyond the Forest Service for at least 30 years.

That I did accept his invitation – and am here this morning - attests to my own concerns about the future of our nation’s federal forests and the future of the Forest Service itself. I confess there are times when I think that the federal government should get the hell out of the land business. I raised this point in a roundabout way in a one-page essay in the August issue of *Evergreen Magazine*. Here is what I wrote:

“Does anyone know what our federal government’s forest management objective is? I don’t – and I’ve been trying to figure it out since 1985. My friend Jack Ward Thomas, who was Chief of the Forest Service during the Clinton years, once told me he thought the objective was to conserve plant and animal species associated with old growth forests. That would be fine if we were doing it, but we’ve lost so much old growth to wildfires in recent years, without attacking the underlying causes of this calamity, that I am no longer sure what our objective is.”

Let me add that nothing has happened since last August to alter my belief that our federal land management policy objectives form a rudderless ship.

Is it important that we have a federal forest management objective? I think so. Nature is indifferent to human need – and our nation of 280 million clearly has a great many needs where our national forests are concerned, so we ought to set some management objectives that help ensure that these needs can be met in perpetuity.

If we let public opinion be our guide, it’s easy to figure out what most people want from federal forests. In survey after survey, clean air, clean water and abundant fish and wildlife habitat consistently outpoll all other forest values. But is our government managing the public’s forests in ways that protect air and water quality or fish and wildlife habitat? Is it protecting biological diversity or soil stability, natural history or archeological sites, recreation areas or just plain old scenery? Not by a long shot, not with millions of acres of treasured public forestland lost to catastrophic fire year after year.

An old Tennessee biologist friend described the problem to me in exquisite words in a 1995 *Evergreen* interview. He said, and I quote, "The problem with leaving forests to nature, as so many seem to want to do, is that we get whatever nature serves up, which can be pretty devastating at times. But with forestry we have options, and a degree of predictability not found in nature."

Let me put my Forest Service relationship in context in both place and time.

I am the founder and publisher of *Evergreen Magazine* and the executive director of the non-profit Evergreen Foundation. The Foundation exists for only one reason: to help advance public understanding and support for science-based forestry. To this end we publish *Evergreen*, a periodic journal designed to keep our members and others abreast of issues and events impacting forestry, forest communities and the forest products industry.

So far as I am able to determine, *Evergreen* is the most widely read forestry magazine in North America. This has been the case since we started publishing in early 1986. Our original mission was to stimulate public interest and involvement in the congressionally mandated forest planning process. With only one exception we used the pages of *Evergreen* to endorse the Forest Service's preferred alternatives.

Between 1986 and 1990 we generated more than one million comments on federal forest plans for Oregon and northern California. Some were the check off cards comment review teams hated for reasons I never understood, but many more were handwritten letters from people whose lives were being turned upside down by sue-happy environmental groups that eventually wrecked the planning process itself.

Suffice it to say, I have spent most of the last 18 years of my life on the front lines in a cultural war that, for a time, divided the nation in a way not unlike the Civil War divided us. In an economic sense many western communities have suffered just as mightily as the Old South suffered in 1864 and 1865. And I dare say there is as much bitterness built up in western rural environs as there was in the South.

But my relationship with the Forest Service began much earlier in my life than *Evergreen's* founding. I remember – as though it was yesterday – the day Wallace District Ranger William Stout strolled into my third grade classroom at Sunnyside School in Kellogg, Idaho, ramrod straight, dressed in his fine green uniform. That was 50 years ago this fall – 1953 – the year *Fortune Magazine* named the U.S. Forest Service one of the two most admired organizations in America. The other was the United States Marine Corps.

For the benefit of those of you too young to know, the old Forest Service uniform was deliberately patterned after the Marine uniform. Similarly, the 10 Standing Orders for firefighters are taken from the Marine's 10 Standing Orders. Bud Moore, a Marine himself long before he became Northern Region fire boss, had the idea.

Back then there was an esprit de corps in the Forest Service that I am sad to say it can no longer lay claim to. My Random House dictionary defines esprit de corps as "a sense of union and of common interests and responsibilities, as developed among a group of persons associated together."

There is not as much esprit de corps in America as there once was – so I guess I should not be surprised there is not much left in what so many Forest Service old timers simply called "the outfit." It still thrives in the oldest among you, men like my friend Marlin Johnson, but they will retire soon – and more of the Forest Service's history of quite remarkable accomplishment will go with them.

Time doesn't permit me to dwell much on the Forest Service's history of service to the nation, but I want to read something to you that I think probably set the tone for much of what the outfit accomplished in its first 50-some years. This is a quote from a speech in which President Teddy Roosevelt laid out his vision for protecting the nation's forests. The event was a Society of American Foresters meeting in Washington, D.C. in, I believe, 1903. Here is what he said:

"And now, first and foremost, you can never forget for a moment what is the object of our forest policy. That object is not to preserve forests 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 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 homemaking in our country. Every other consideration comes as 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 forests, not as an end in itself, but as the means of preserving and increasing the prosperity of the nation."

I can't help but wonder what President Roosevelt, a man revered by early conservationists, would have to say about the mess we are in today. I don't think he would mince his words in voicing his great displeasure with what we have done to his vision.

How far we have fallen – in less time than it takes to grow the very forests we all treasure.

I think it is time to for a course correction – time for each of you to consider rededicating yourselves to what I believe is the Forest Service's true mission: the stewardship and care of America's National Forests. These forests were not established to be off limits to public use. Quite the contrary, they exist as sources of economic and social well being for the country. They were never intended to be the playthings of special interest groups – and those who were involved in their formation – conservationists in a vastly different meaning of the word - would be appalled by what is happening today.

Here in the West, water has replaced timber as the primary raw material the public needs from its forests. 70 percent of the water consumed in our western towns and cities rises from publicly owned forests. Every time a faucet is turned on in Denver, Salt Lake City, Missoula, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles or here in Phoenix, the user enjoys a gift of life from an often-distant forest. Yet the myth persists that harvesting timber from forests degrades water quality, when in fact water quality remains very high when the harvesting is done properly.

By contrast, I know of nothing that degrades water quality or disrupts forest hydrological function more than a stand-replacing wildfire. The fact that this truth rarely makes news – save for the flash floods that follow many wildfires - is your failing, because as communicators it is your job to dispel myths and to publicly challenge misstatements of fact. Yet few in the Forest Service do it because, as many say, "we don't want to take sides."

This will sound unnecessarily harsh – and I don't mean it to be – but if you cannot bring yourself to side with the truth you should get out of the public information business and let somebody willing to defend science-based forestry take your place

If you detect great frustration in me, you are right. I am very frustrated. But I hope you also hear some sadness in my voice, because my heart aches for what is happening to you and to federal forests in your care. But there isn't much we can do this morning about what is happening to our forests, so I want to focus on what is happening to you. My hope is to buoy your spirits – and get you to recommit your professional lives to what the United States Forest Service stood for during its first 80-some years.

I was in the public relations business for many years before we started *Evergreen*. And before I hung out my public relations shingle I worked for newspapers as a reporter and later an editor. My degrees are in journalism and broadcasting, so I know something about the business you are in and the challenges you face daily. I also know some of the same people you know. John Marker is a good friend and colleague. We talk frequently. He knows I am here today – and some of what I will share with you comes from his many years in the Forest Service. More of what I will share comes from Phil Aune, another Forest Service veteran who is also both a good friend and a colleague.

For the past 15 months I have been involved in Project Protect, a grass roots campaign designed to support the Bush Administration's forest health initiatives. We have published four issues of *Evergreen* in support of the President's hopes for pulling the West's great forests back from the brink of ecological collapse. I have also spoken widely on the need for Congress to immediately fund science-based thinning and forest restoration programs on physical scales large enough to be ecologically and economically meaningful. While we still have some distance to go, there is solid evidence that the public understands both the problem and the solution.

Let me tell you a bit about the results of focus group work we've done over the last year in Washington, D.C., Denver, Sacramento, Memphis, Portland and here in Phoenix. In Memphis, Al Gore's back yard, 25 voters – including 12 that voted for Mr. Gore and 12 that voted for Mr. Bush – were briefed on the underlying causes of the nations' forest health crisis, then given an opportunity to discuss management options ranging from doing nothing to implementing a comprehensive long-term thinning and restoration program. At the close of discussion they were asked to vote for or against restoration. The vote was 23-2 *for restoration*.

After the vote was taken, Mr. Gore's supporters were told that President Bush – a president they did not vote for – supported forest restoration. Did any of them want to change their vote? Not one Gore supporter wanted to change his or her vote.

They were then told that logging and timber companies might profit from doing the restoration work. Again, did any of Mr. Gore's supporters want to change his or her vote? Again, no one wanted to reject restoration.

The same demographic profile, weighted a bit to reflect the larger role women play in Oregon politics, yielded the same result in the Portland focus group. But there were three added surprises. First, participants made the direct connection between extremist environmentalists, timber sale appeals and litigation. Second, they also believe that judges should give equal weight to the short-term risks and long-term benefits associated with forest restoration. And finally, while there was strong support for thinning near communities, there is equal support for forest thinning in watersheds and wildlife habitats that lie well beyond the urban interface.

I suspect these focus groups results come as a great surprise to many of you. I say this because, as an organization, the Forest Service is not acting like it knows where the public mindset lies today. Why else would you continue to apologize for what you perceive to be past mistakes – an apology that I frankly think is unnecessary. Why apologize for the strategically vital role that the Forest Service has played in housing a growing and prosperous nation? Why apologize for a forest policy- making process over which you have absolutely no control?

If you owe the country an apology at all it is for being less than candid about the underlying causes of the wildfire crisis that threatens the West's forests and communities. And contrary to what some allege past harvesting activity has little to do with this crisis. Exclusion of fire – a policy that continues to enjoy wide public support – is a factor; but in my opinion, the real problem has been our failure to replace socially unacceptable wildfire regimes with stand management programs designed to hold fire, insects and diseases within what ecologists call “the range of natural variability” – the quite wide variation in the frequency and scale of disturbance regimes that have shaped and reshaped the nation's forests through time.

I know politics often trumps the truth, but if you expect the public to respect and trust you it is vital that you tell the truth – the whole unvarnished truth. And if someone stands in your way I'd suggest you take your complaint to the Chief. He gets paid to handle unpleasant situations. The buck stops on his desk.

I say this knowing full well that there was a time when one of your main sources of grief was the sawmill owner down the road who needed logs. Try to remember that it was the federal government that wooed the industry's decades of investment in milling and logging technology that now clutters auction yards across the West. Try also to remember that I don't know a single mill owner who would knowingly endorse a forest plan wherein harvest exceeds growth. But plenty of people all over the country know that mortality now exceeds both growth and harvest by wide margins on several western National Forests. The public's inner sensibilities are offended by this fact, and well they should be. How some in the Forest Service can talk about sustainability knowing full well that in many forests in their care trees are dying faster than they are growing is beyond me. Even people who don't know beans about forestry or ecosystems can sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with this situation.

Significantly, and without fanfare, the timber industry has undergone profound change since the federal timber sale program collapsed. Contrary to environmentalist claims, there isn't much of a market for large logs anymore. Most mills don't want them. Their future lies in converting high quality, small diameter logs – harvested mainly from private forests - into technologically advanced engineered wood products: laminated veneer lumber, oriented strand board and a host of other dimension and panel products with far higher performance standards than traditional sawn lumber or plywood. If you have time to visit a housing development under construction here in the Phoenix area, please do so. You will be astonished by what you see.

Something else has changed too. Most mills that survived the collapse of the federal timber sale program aren't interested in doing business with the Forest Service anymore. Your prospects are too uncertain – and they know it. Until the appeals and litigation mess is unwound, if I can be, you aren't going to find many customers for your trees or your biomass. And no lender in his right mind is going to lend money to a startup business on your verbal promise of a stable and adequate supply of fiber. A mutually beneficial business relationship that the federal government spent a near century nurturing has gone up in smoke – both literally and figuratively.

I think you need to talk publicly about this predicament, because taxpayers have a right to know what a mess we all have on our hands now. As I've said so many times, minus technologically advanced processing infrastructure and robust markets for products made from small diameter trees, restoration forestry will remain a distant dream. Which means your job will continue to consist largely of announcing body counts: 10,000 acres burned here, 100,000 acres incinerated there. Sooner or later, someone in this room is going to make it to the Big Dance: a one million acre firestorm accompanied by horrific loss of life.

The San Diego colossus was just a warm-up. And I don't think press relations were handled as well as they might have been. I know it was a big fire with lots of early confusion, didn't hear anyone challenge the environmentalist claim that it was "just a brush fire."

What about the more than 3,000 homes that were destroyed? What about the 22 people who lost their lives? What about the thousands whose lives turned upside down by this tragedy?

The "just a brush-fire" assertion is absurd beyond words. There are hundreds of aerial photographs on the Internet showing thousands of acres of dead and dying forests in the San Bernardino National Forest and the Lake Arrowhead area. Millions of TV watchers *know* this wasn't a brush fire. But the claim went unchallenged. Why?

How nice it would have been if Alan Houston had been there help you – and to remind us all that when we leave forests to nature, as so many seem to want to do, we get whatever nature serves up, which can be pretty devastating at times. But with forestry we have options, and a degree of predictability not found in nature.

Or Alston Chase, to recall what he told me 13 years ago when I asked him what the lesson was in *Playing God In Yellowstone*, his blockbuster book tracing the history of modern day radical environmentalism. He's what he said: "The lesson in *Playing God* is that there is no such thing as leaving nature alone. People are part of creation. We do not have the option of choosing not to be stewards of the land. We must master the art and science of good stewardship. Unfortunately, a good many environmentalists still do not understand that the only way to preserve nature is to manage nature."

Or Wally Covington – whose environmental credentials are above reproach – and who has spent years telling all of us that the federal government must immediately implement thinning and restoration programs on a scale many times larger than the in vogue pilot projects that are themselves hamstrung by layers of self-defeating regulation.

And how nice if forest restoration could have spoken for itself. Across the West there are many examples of restoration work begun before anyone had ever heard of restoration forestry. My favorite is the Boise Basin Experimental Forest north of Boise, Idaho. There you can bear witness to the remarkable ecological benefits of a thinning and prescribed fire strategy launched by the Forest Service nearly 40 years ago. The same wonder can be observed on adjacent Boise Cascade timberland. The agency and the company learned from one another as they went along.

Watching the reports from San Diego, I could not help but recall the Tylenol scare of the early 1970's. The manner in which McNeil Laboratories promptly handled what would otherwise have been a disaster is considered a classic in good public relations. Rather than publicly deny that Tylenol bottle caps weren't tamper proof, the company admitted the problem and – in a matter of hours - removed every bottle of the painkiller from every shelf in every drug and grocery store in the nation.

That same opportunity to perform masterfully in the face of adversity awaits every person and every organization – including the United States Forest Service. But you have to tell the truth, the whole, unvarnished truth. And you have to tell it promptly. Don't wait for someone to drag it out of you. Your adversaries can't possibly distrust you anymore than they already do, and the public will admire you for your candor and courage.

Which brings me to my main point – to the main reason why I flew down here from Montana to talk with you. It is this: I fear the Forest Service – an organization I have admired greatly since childhood - is squandering its once unassailable public credibility by failing to recognize how profoundly the political landscape has changed in recent years. Forestry – once singularly synonymous with harvesting timber – has become a quality of life issue.

Perhaps it is the lingering memory of the 2000 fire season that finally turned the tables. I don't know. But the public finally gets it, finally makes the direct connection between stand-replacing wildfires and horrific negative environmental impacts on air and water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, old growth forests it treasures and abundant year-round recreation opportunity.

Yet the Forest Service continues to operate in another world on another plain – one on which it finds it necessary to apologize for things it did not do, for events that occurred at a time when the public's forestry priorities were also on another plain. Stop doing this to yourselves. No good can come of it. The public has driven on. Its' top priorities are on protecting what is and could be, not what was and will never be again. In a figurative sense, you are standing in front of a 300-foot wall of flames talking about how you are protecting old growth and endangered species. It isn't credible.

In a recent Wall Street Journal Commentary Bob Nelson asked if perhaps the time has come to abolish the Forest Service, to create a new streamlined federal agency by integrating the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and other agencies responsible for managing the public's land-related assets – its timber, minerals, recreation and energy resources.

A few years ago Roger Sedjo said much the same thing in an interview in which he told me he did not believe the Forest Service still produced a product the public recognized. He made a good point. Are big wildfires and the mop-ups that follow your last remaining products? I hope not, but it has become increasingly difficult for the public to figure out what you do.

Maybe it is time for a super-agency, but merging the Forest Service and the BLM without fixing the litigation mess we're in would be tantamount to re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. We'd still sink to the bottom. No less an outspoken authority than my good friend Jack Ward Thomas has said much the same thing – time and time again in congressional testimony, public meetings, press interviews and reports he's written.

But before we throw the Forest Service and the BLM on the trash heap, I'd like to try something. I'd like to decentralize these agencies – return power to the local level where men and women like you can again become the community ambassadors you once were. How many of you belong to a Rotary Club, a Chamber of Commerce or a Kiwanis Club? When did you last walk into a local car dealership or county commissioner's office for no other reason but to introduce yourself and make small talk? And by contrast, how many of you spend most of your time going from one meeting to the next, without ever stepping out of your cloistered work environment?

The bad news is that no one in the communities you are pledged to serve knows you anymore. The good news is that it does not take an act of Congress to change this. You can do it when you get home. Instead of going to the office, go downtown.

Decentralizing the Forest Service – pushing the decision making process back down to the local level - would also pay big dividends in at risk forests. Who better to make decisions about thinning and harvesting and prescribed fire than those who work in District Ranger offices and are most familiar with the ground in their care and the communities they serve?

If you want to know how we got so far away from this quite practical idea, listen to the wisdom of Sally Fairfax. This is something she wrote back in 1980 when, I believe, she was teaching in the College of Natural Resources at the University of California.

“Far from achieving a rational decision-making process, RPA and NFMA may well result in stalemate and indecision as the Forest Service turns from managing land to simply overseeing a convoluted, ever more complex set of Congressionally mandated procedures. The tradition of land stewardship, if indeed it survived the 1950s and 1960s, may have died in the 1970s. RPA and NFMA take the initiative from experienced land managers – those revered people on the ground, the folks who have lived with the land and their mistakes long enough to have developed wisdom and a capacity for judgment – and gives it to lawyers, computers, economists and politically active special interest groups seeking to protect and enhance their own diverse positions. This shift in initiative will result from the layers of legally binding procedure that RPA and NFMA foist on top of an already complex and overly rigid planning process. Constant procedural tinkering does not, I fear, lead to efficiency or simplicity. Rather it promises a proliferation of steps, sub-steps, appendices and diverticulae that makes the Forest Service susceptible to the ultimate lawyer's malaise, the reification of process over substance.”

How on earth Sally saw this coming nearly 25 years ago is beyond me, but she did.

But there is some good news, exciting news in fact, and it is this excitement that I want to close on today, because I think your jobs could be fun again. The excitement involves the Forest Products Laboratory's splendid small-wood research and marketing program – a program we think so much of that we devoted an entire issue of *Evergreen* to it. Here it is: "Giant Minds, Giant Ideas, The USFS Forest Products Laboratory at Madison, Wisconsin."

The Lab is producing a product the public will readily recognize and eagerly support - a strategy that addresses the development of both infrastructure and markets needed to fulfill the Bush Administration's forest restoration mission, a mission that you now know enjoys very wide public support.

And you can help if you want to. The Evergreen Foundation and the Lab are jointly sponsoring tours for community groups, entrepreneurs, elected officials, loggers and mill owners who are interesting in learning more about technologies for processing small diameter trees as solid wood or biomass. We hope to start in January.

I will guess that there are people in the communities you serve that would jump at the chance to tour the lab, jump at the chance to learn more about some very hopeful manufacturing processes and marketing strategies designed to pull forests and communities back from the brink of economic, social and environmental collapse.

"Giant Minds, Giant Ideas" is actually the second *Evergreen* issue in which we have profiled entrepreneurs who are trying to help the federal government develop profitable new markets for small diameter trees and biomass. The first was "The New Pioneers," published about a year ago. It won the Society of American Foresters National Journalism Award. And while we are very proud of this award, we believe the real heroes in this story are the men and women who are laying their life savings on the line in the hope of making a positive difference in their communities and the environment. The labs' fine cadre of scientists and marketing specialists has helped every one of these visionaries.

You should all be very proud of the Forest Products Labs' history of contribution to our society and the environment. And if you don't mind a suggestion from an old newspaperman, you should shout this story to the high heavens. I think it embodies the best of what is left of an organization that was once spoken of in the same breath as the United States Marine Corps.

The Lab is distributing copies of "Giant Minds, Giant Ideas" and so are we. Try the Lab first if you want copies. They won't charge you but we will. Either way, I expect we'll run out and have to reprint, especially if you take it upon yourselves to market this story in the communities you serve. Obviously, we hope you'll also beat the drum for our tours. We don't have exact dates set yet but we will soon. You'll find information on the Lab's website and on ours, which is www.evergreenmagazine.org.

I am going to close this morning with verbatim comments from Phil Aune and John Marker, whose combined Forest Service experience spans nearly 70 years.

First, Phil: "Generally speaking, most public information officers tend to try to answer questions too politically. In other words, how well will it sound in the political genre of the day? Recognizing that they work for the Administration and generally have to defend policy, they do a pretty good job of defending the policy of the day – with one major exception. They come across as being ashamed of managing forests. When they have to answer questions about cutting trees, they come off with equivocations every time. They sound like, "the devil made me do it."

Second, John: "While I realize that agency public relations people are kept on a very short leash by the political commissars, and an unfortunate statement made to the media brings instant correction, these folks can still do good. They should seize every opportunity to encourage the media and the public to look beyond the current 'dust up' to a bigger picture. This is especially

important in forest management, as we all well know. I find it effective to talk and write about what forest legacy we leave to future generations, our grand babies. And the most effective place to do this is in the forests, not the conference room, especially around a campfire. There is still magic in campfires.”

Based on my 30 years in the business I will add this: Where truth thrives hope abides. Where there is no truth, there is no hope. Good public relations consists of speaking the truth and listening for its' hopeful echo in the communities you serve.

Thanks for inviting me to join you this morning.