

Your Political Will Does Not Mean A Damn Thing

James D. Petersen
Executive Director, The Evergreen Foundation
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Good evening,

Thanks for inviting me to join you.

Before I get started, would everyone in this room who works in the forest products industry please stand.

My message to the rest of you in this room is that if western Montana's already teetering sawmilling infrastructure collapses – as it already has in Arizona and New Mexico – you can forget about your dreams for restoring western Montana's beleaguered national forests, including those here in the Bitterroot Valley.

I know this story better than anyone in this room – probably better than anyone else in Montana - because I've spent a great deal of time in the Southwest watching the federal government cynically attempt to recruit new private investment capital to rebuild the region's sawmilling infrastructure; this after it ran an earlier generation of millowners out of the business.

Why would the federal government now be attempting to recruit new capital for sawmilling ventures in Arizona and New Mexico? Because it knows that if there is no sawmilling infrastructure in the Southwest, there is also no hope for finding viable, profitable markets for the millions of tons of wood – most of it of very low quality - that must be removed from that region's dead and dying national forests.

But radical environmentalists will tell you a very different story. They will tell you that the dead and dying trees that need to be removed from national forests in Arizona and New Mexico should be removed at taxpayer expense – that the trees that need to be removed from overstocked, diseased and dying forests should then be piled and burned or simply buried in the ground – at costs exceeding \$1,000 per acre. Let me assure you, there is not enough gold in Fort Knox to pay for all of the restoration work that needs to be done in the West's national forests.

Why would any environmentalist take such a bizarre stand, when everyone knows that some of the trees that need to be removed from Southwestern forests have commercial value – and that some of these thinning projects could actually pay for themselves?

The answer is both simple and direct: radical environmentalists hate the free enterprise system more than they love the environment.

And the law is on their side. All of the angels in Heaven are no match for the astonishing power Congress has granted to environmental extremists – and until Congress finds the courage to stuff the litigation genie back in the bottle, there is nothing that you or anyone else can do to reverse the eminent ecological collapse of the West's federally-owned forests. So a fairly strong case can be made for the fact that I wasted my time driving down here to talk to you – and you are wasting your time listening to me.

Sawmills across the West, including Montana's family-owned mills, know that what I'm telling you is true. It is the reason why not a single sawmill in the western states – not one - is investing a dime of its hard-earned capital on new technology or infrastructure in anticipation of a revival of even a small portion of the federal timber sale program. The trust relationship that once linked industry and the government is gone. That relationship was more than a half-century in the making – and it generated billions of dollars for the government and for the west's rural timber communities.

Worse– depending on whose estimate you care to accept - perhaps 140 million acres of national forest timberland in the west is in ecological Condition Class 3 or 2: meaning it is ready to burn or soon will be. Many of those acres include threatened bull trout and grizzly bear habitat here in western Montana.

How many of you have driven to Elk City, Idaho in the last year or so? I photographed several drainages there last year. It is a political and an environmental travesty unlike any I've ever seen. In the upper reaches of many streams, lodgepole pine and spruce mortality is nearing 100 percent. These are fish-bearing steelhead spawning streams – yet almost nothing is being done to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire. Why? Because the Forest Service has been unable to devise a large scale plan that will pass muster with the Ninth Circuit Court in San Francisco.

If you have access to a helicopter you can see the same ticking time bomb along Interstate 90 between St. Regis and the state line: mile after mile of standing dead lodgepole at the end of its lifecycle. Lodgepole rarely live longer than 100 years. Most of these trees grew up in the aftermath of the Great 1910 Fire. They are dying a natural death. Fire will finish the job any year now, just as it has for thousands of years. Then the canyon between St. Regis and the Montana-Idaho line will be barren again. You can see what it will look like in photos that were taken after the 1910 fire.

My question is this: Should this kind of environmental devastation be acceptable in an advanced industrial society where safer, less environmentally disastrous, time-tested alternatives are available? Keep in mind we have nearly 100 years of fire research and restoration strategy we can call on. The visible results can be seen in experimental forests scattered all over the West – including Lick Creek only a few miles from here.

You know this devastation well – having witnessed it here in your own beautiful valley, perhaps even in your own backyard or just beyond your living room-window view of the valley. But how do you feel knowing you are powerless to stop what is happening? Does it make you angry? It should – because only your anger will stop the madness in Washington, D.C.

Is what you see dying on the mountains in western Montana the heritage you want to leave to your children and grandchildren? Are you content to cede your political power to the publicly-subsidized Conflict Industry? I assume you know that the taxpayers in this room are a major source of funding for their litigious activities.

I understand that some 600 of you recently came together down here to make a new start in your dealings with the federal government, specifically the Forest Service. You are to be congratulated for your willingness to try one more time to craft political consensus.

I've been reporting on similar efforts for over 20 years – most notably the Applegate Partnership in southern Oregon and the Quincy Library Group in northern California – two projects in which the government and private industry have invested millions of dollars. Quincy and Applegate have long and frustrating histories. Both groups even had the strong support of local environmentalists. Citizens got involved in good faith with good intent– gave of their time and talents, only to find out after the fact that their work counted for nothing because the process had been rigged in advance. Congress had handed all of the decision making power to malcontents, lawyers and their friends on the federal bench.

Worse, Congress now lacks the political will needed to right its own wrong by crafting new legislation that would clear the way for large scale long term thinning projects in the west's dead and dying national forests – projects that could keep family-owned sawmills in business in small out of the way places like Darby, Montana, Orofino, Idaho, Colville, Washington, Enterprise, Oregon, Show Low, Arizona, Hayfork, California and Farmington, New Mexico.

Until the Congress finds the political will to right its wrong, your political will does not mean a damned thing. Your vote does not count – and will not be counted. But shouldn't you have as much to say about the future of these forests as anyone else? I think you should, but you don't.

Wayne Hedman asked me to tell you how I think we got into this mess. It depends on which mess you are talking about. There are two of them: one is environmental, the other is economic.

The economic mess is easily explained. After the northern spotted owl was listed as a threatened species in 1990, the federal timber sale program that had for 50 years been the economic lifeblood of most of the rural west began to collapse. Practically speaking, the program no longer exists. It is history.

You may think you are somewhat safe in this valley because there is still a modest amount of sawmilling infrastructure here. Our friend Pat Connell is still here; but Rocky Mountain Log Homes buys virtually all of its timber in Canada because it can't buy it here. It can see it, standing dead on nearby hills, but it can't buy it because it isn't for sale. Instead, it stands dead, waiting for the fire next time.

Meanwhile, the unspoken and awful truth is that what is left of the timber industry in western Montana is a house of cards. It will not stand much longer. Whatever happens in the future will be determined by people like you sitting in rooms like this all over the western United States. If you can find a way to come together around two or three themes that are so simple that even members of Congress can understand them, you might in time reverse the tide. But it will take time and cost a good deal of money.

I know what those themes are but I have absolutely no idea where you will get the money you need to get the job done. The big bad timber industry that carried your political water for you for nearly 50 years has exited the game and – with rare exception – is no longer interested in doing business with federal agencies that lack the authority and the capacity to make decisions.

Speaking of decisions, how do you feel about the fact that decisions concerning the fate of western Montana's national forests are now made in behind-closed-door meetings chaired by a federal district court judge? Who represents you in these proceedings? Are there public meeting laws in this state? If there are, why aren't they being enforced? Remember, these forests are public assets, public property. They are not the exclusive playgrounds of malcontents and their lawyers – or are they?

I said there were two parts to this problem. The second part is ecological.

Environmentalists would have you believe the wildfires you are witnessing in western Montana and across the entire west are natural events – ecological responses to a century of timber harvesting that left forests incapable of sustaining themselves. But there is no ecological evidence that supports this claim, though it is certainly true that the west's forests came in for very rough treatment during our country's westward migration.

The real problem is more complex – and has historic and political underpinnings. The Great 1910 Fire, which devastated three million acres of old growth timber in northern Idaho and Western Montana, created a public uproar unlike any that had preceded it. Congress subsequently passed two landmark acts – the Weeks Act in 1911 and Clarke-McNary Act in 1924. These two laws put the federal government in the forest firefighting business. Over time, the government and its private industry partners got very good at putting out fires before they got too big – but never let it be forgotten that they did what they did with strong public support at the backs. In fact, there still strong public support for quick action where wildfire is concerned.

The problem is that the fires we are facing today are larger, more frequent and more destructive than any for which we can find ecological evidence anywhere in the West.

This is because these fires are burning in forests that are far denser than they once were. In some mixed conifer forests in the Intermountain West, tree density today is more than a hundred times what it was before white settlement began after the Civil War. We know this because the ecological evidence of past natural disturbances, some of them dating from the time of Christ, tells us it is so. We also know it because we have anecdotal accounts written by early explorers and westward bound pioneers describing the look of the forests they saw. There weren't nearly as many trees in these forests and there were many more grassy plains and savannahs.

Many of these accounts also describe ever-present smoke from fires that were set by lightning or by Indians. Indians used fire for a variety of reasons including hunting and defense against other warring tribes. The Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon – that's "Blue" with a capital "B" and "Mountains" with a capital "M" were once known generically as the blue mountains: little "b" and little "m" because they seemed to be perpetually shrouded in blue smoke – much like western Montana now is every August. The smoke, of course, came from forest fires.

I tell you this story to illustrate some points:

First, natural wildfire fire is a natural feature of the western landscape and has been for eons.

Second, Indian fire has also been a feature of the western landscape for thousands of years. This second fact is very important because it leaves no doubt in my mind that the forests early pioneers described in their diaries were not natural forests, but were in fact the products of widespread human-caused disturbances that may well date to the end of the last Ice Age, some 10,000 years ago.

Third, these fires, regardless of their source, had great ecological value because they kept insects and disease in check, favoring fire-adapted tree species like lodgepole, Ponderosa pine, western larch and Interior Douglas-fir, while holding at bay fire-sensitive shade intolerant tree species like white fir, which today is a major source of increasing forest density throughout the Interior.

Fourth, as per acre forest density increases available sunlight, moisture and soil nutrients must be divided between thousands of trees, where once these necessities of life were shared by as few as 15 or 20 trees per acre. The trees we see in these thickets today are killing each other.

Fifth, wildfire frequency began to increase first as a direct result of the nation's shameful reservation policy. As tribes were driven from their native lands onto distant reservations native fire disappeared from the landscape.

Sixth, we compounded this first mistake in the 1920s by putting the government and private industry into the business of putting out forest fires. But again, it is very important that you understand that this was done with overwhelming public support - done because the country feared what fire was doing in its communities, feared it might also lose its timber supply

As a public policy, excluding wildfire from forests has had its ups and its downs. On the upside, communities, lives and forests were well protected against fearsome loss. But on the downside, the manner in which our forests function began to change. A forester named Earl Weaver first sounded the alarm in the early 1950s. He had noticed that thin-barked white fir, a tree species easily killed by fire, was overtaking fire resistant ponderosa pine in forests in eastern Washington, and he said that if something wasn't done soon to reverse the trend we'd have big problem on our hands in Intermountain forests in the years to come. Weaver went so far as to suggest that we ought to be using prescribed fire in such forests to clear away the white fir seedlings. Most other foresters of that era – all of them schooled in the evils of fire - thought Earl Weaver was nuts. Obviously, he was not.

The question now is, "What should we do about the problem we face?" Should we stand by and watch the West burn to the ground, as many environmental groups advocate in the misplaced name of naturalness – or should we launch the large scale, long-term thinning projects most fire ecologists say would be the best thing to do under the circumstances?

Keep in mind that this question is currently moot because you and I have absolutely nothing to say about what happens or doesn't happen in the west's publicly-owned forests. Congress has ceded our authority to malcontents, their lawyers and judges.

But for the moment let's assume Congress has come to its senses. What now?

My fire ecologist friends tell me that tossing a match over our shoulder on our way out of the woods offers no assurance that the next forest will be the forests pioneers described in their diaries. In fact, it is likely that it won't be. I say this because we know that Indians used fire to manage these forests for eons. The forests early settlers saw and wrote about were not natural. They were managed landscapes.

So could we use fire again in the same way Indians used it? Perhaps, but not initially, because our forests have grown much too dense to safely permit the widespread use of prescribed fire. A great deal of thinning work has to come first. And there is an often forgotten second half of this question – implied though it may be - that cannot be ignored – and the second half of the question is this: Are we ready and willing to accept the same persistent levels of smoke pioneers referenced in their diaries?

Are you as a society willing to endure long summers of smoke filled skies – days in which you can't see the mountains but you can taste the air you breathe – days in which the air you breathe is so unhealthy you can't be outside? Is this what you want here in the Bitterroot? Is it what anyone living in the west today wants? Is it the best we can do in "The Last Best Place?" Will businesses still want to move here? Will tourists still come here? Remember, tourism was supposed to save us from economic calamity after the timber industry was run out of the state.

I think these are very real and very legitimate questions. Unfortunately, no one is asking these questions. The press isn't paying attention. It isn't doing its homework. It isn't asking the hard questions of the judges, lawyers and malcontents who have total control over this situation. We are ignoring history, ecology and the needs of generations yet unborn.

Do not allow these questions to be swept under the carpet by anyone. Demand action. Demand results. Demand accountability. Gather expertise and organize yourselves so that you can fend off public attacks on your character and motives, because you will be attacked – and you will be vilified.

You face a tough fight against formidable, deep-pocketed adversaries. And you're not going to get much help out of the forest planning process. How can you possibly recruit people when they know they have no voice, when they know that long hours, weeks, months and years of volunteer time can be wrecked in a single court hearing?

There is not one person in the United States Forest Service today – including Gail Kimball, who many of you know - who should be telling you that the public involvement process works, because it doesn't. If it did we would have at least one large scale, long term thinning project in place on every national forest in the West – two would be better.

Instead, what we have is one such project in the entire western United States. That project, in the White Mountains in northern Arizona, is probably doomed because there is not enough sawmilling and marketing infrastructure left in the Southwest to profitably support it. And profitability is key because – again – there is not enough gold in Fort Knox to pay for all the forest restoration work that needs to be done across the West.

As you may have already concluded, I don't have much in the way of good news to share with you this evening, but I do have a little – and it may come as a great surprise. Did you know that public support for doing the thinning and stand tending work necessary to pull the West's federally owned forests back from the brink of ecological collapse runs in the mid-80 percent range?

Let me repeat that because it is important. Polling and focus group work done two and three years ago in major urban centers around the country reveals public support for thinning in the West's desperately ill federal forests is in the 80-85 per cent range. By any measure you care to apply, this is a political landslide. And yes, Congress has the results of this polling and focus group work. It used it in its work on the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

I know a good deal about this research because I was involved in it. I saw the dial testing results. I know what happens when you tell urbanites why the west is burning to the ground and what can be done to alleviate the situation before it is too late. What our urban neighbors want to know is why the hell the work isn't being done now!

You have natural allies in these people, but first you have to get on their radar screen. But then how do you start the conversation? Well, you could start with a short story about an old friend of mine: Alan Houston, a PhD wildlife biologist who runs the forestry program at the Ames Plantation in middle Tennessee. Alan and I were out walking on the Cumberland Plateau on a brilliant and cloudless fall morning in October of 1996 when he turned to me out of the blue and said something so profound I can still repeat it verbatim. He said: "When we leave forests to nature, as so many people 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 degree of predictability not found in nature."

Let's switch gears for a moment. Can anyone in this room name me a job or a product on this earth that is not the rest of the harvest or extraction of a raw material and its conversion to a finished product?

I'll spare you the agony: there aren't any.

Imagine a friend's astonishment when I explained to her – gently of course – that her laptop computer was a product of the two industries she hated most: the plastic case a product of the "greedy" oil industry and the guts of her computer – the brain – a product of the "dreaded" mining industry.

How nice it would be if we could manufacture laptop computers from trees grown by the free, non-polluting energy of the sun; CO2 absorbing, oxygen producing trees: renewable, recyclable and biodegradable, with a strength-to-weight ratio that is unmatched among competing structural building materials – all of which use far more energy in their manufacture and use than wood, all of which use more water in their manufacture and use than wood, all of which release more harmful pollutants into the atmosphere in their manufacture and use than does wood. The world should be using more wood, not less.

I said a moment ago that I'd tell you what I think your message points should be. When we did our polling and focus group work two and three years ago we asked participants to name the forest values they prized most. It was no contest. The four forest values that polled highest from coast to coast are as follows:

Clean air

Clean water

Abundant fish and wildlife habitat

A wealth of year-round recreation opportunity

I submit to you that these are not amenities found amid the black sticks left in the wake of stand replacing wildfires.

I will also suggest that these amenities – clean air, clean water, abundant fish and wildlife habitat and a wealth of recreation opportunity – are products of well- managed forests. But note that I said "products," not "by-products." I did so very purposefully, because I think the public is more comfortable with the idea that its amenities come first – and that wood, which was once the chief product of forestry - becomes a by-product – at least in publicly owned forests. By reversing these historic roles, focusing first on the amenities people want and making wood a by-product of their desires – forestry can begin to recover some of the credibility it began to lose in the 1970s.

I'm going to wrap up my comments this evening with a series of quite thought provoking quotations taken from past issues of Evergreen, the magazine that I've been publishing for the last 22 years. When strung together, these quotations, tell a powerful story that I hope will become part of your story.

Some of you may know Alston Chase by reputation. He lives over around Livingston. About 20 years ago he wrote a fascinating book titled "Playing God in Yellowstone," in which he described the philosophical underpinnings of radical environmentalism. I interviewed Chase for a cover story in Evergreen Magazine in the September 1990. Among the observations he shared with me was this statement:

"Environmentalism increasingly reflects urban perspectives. As people move to cities, they become infatuated with fantasies of land untouched by humans. This demographic shift is revealed through ongoing debates about endangered species, grazing, water rights, private property, mining and logging. And it is partly a healthy trend. But this urbanization of environmental values also signals the loss of a rural way of life and the disappearance of hands on experience with nature. So the irony: as popular concern for preservation increases, public understanding about how to achieve it declines."

In the 17 years since I interviewed Dr. Chase, the demographic shift that had people moving to cities has reversed course. Now many of them are moving to rural environs, like the Bitterroot Valley, in pursuit of the same fantasies Chase referenced in our discussion.

If you've not read "Playing God in Yellowstone," I recommend that you do so. Only then will you begin to understand how vital it is for rural Americans, like you, to reach out to their new neighbors. Here is what Chase said when I asked him about the take home message in his book:

"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. Environmentalists do not understand that the only way to preserve nature is to manage nature."

My old friend Tom Bonnicksen knows something about nature. He's a PhD forest ecologist, author and former naturalist with the National Park Service. Here's what he had to say when I asked him what would happen if timber harvesting were banned in federal forests:

"The proposed ban on timber harvesting in federal forests – however well intended – chases an unachievable ideal. It says that if we leave forests alone the result will be a more natural landscape. But reality presents a much different picture. Our forests are byproducts of 12,000 years of dominance by Native Americans, mainly through their use of fire. Removing human influences – by imposing a harvest ban in national forests – would have horrendous impacts on native forests and species. Many early and mid-succession plant and animal communities would be lost, creating very unnatural landscapes, a significant decline in biological diversity and a significant increase in the size and frequency of wildfires, resulting in further losses to native forests."

We're already witnessing the kind of social upheaval that occurs in timber communities when harvesting levels plummet, as they have over the last 15 years. My friend Bob Lee, a PhD sociologist, biologist and author who teaches at the University of Washington talked about this upheaval in an interview we did in the mid-1990s:

"Preserving and maintaining this nation's cultural diversity is as important to the survival of America as is preserving and maintaining biological diversity. What we are preserving in rural farm and timber communities is people, not abstractions or symbols, but real people who embody basic values which are fundamental to our nation's history and its traditions."

Speaking of history and traditions, here's what Dr. Robert Buckman said about the environmentalist obsession with old growth forests. Buckman is a professor emeritus at Oregon State University College of Forestry, former Director of Research for the U.S. Forest Service and past president of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations:

"Conservationists need to consider a broader range of land management options. There is currently a significant bias favoring old-growth related research. It is undermining our more complete understanding of how the pieces of nature fit together. For every old-growth related research project, there should be companion research involving young and middle-aged forests. Biological diversity is the sum of all ecological processes, not just those we can observe in old-growth forests."

Certain fish and wildlife species – grizzly bears, bull trout, spotted owls and certain salmon and steelhead runs to name just four– have become proxies in the old growth debate, and it's widely assumed that the only way to save forests is to create vast reserves where they can prosper beyond human influences. But here's what Dr. Bill Libby, a world-renowned forest geneticist and professor emeritus from the University of California at Berkeley said about that in a mid-1990s interview:

"Plantation forestry saves more endangered species in a month than most American conservationists save in their lifetimes. As federal logging in the Pacific Northwest is slowed to a virtual standstill, species extinction in tropical forests has accelerated at a thunderous rate. Is saving the spotted owl and the marbled murrelet worth the loss of eight to ten thousand species in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Madagascar? Not in my opinion."

My old friend Dr. Jim Bowyer took a different approach when we discussed the matter about a year ago. Jim is a professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota Department of Bio-products and Bio-processing and Director of the Responsible Materials Program for Minneapolis-based Dovetail Partners. Here's what he said:

"A nation that consumes more than it produces is exporting its environmental impacts to other nations that provide what is consumed. It is like shipping your garbage to another town that needs the money and is willing to put up with the stench. Most of the raw materials consumed by the industrialized world – including the United States – come from impoverished countries that lack the money, technology and political will needed to regulate their own extractive industries. In the emerging global economy, nations should be increasing, not decreasing their dependence on wood fiber because wood is renewable, recyclable, biodegradable and far more energy efficient in its manufacture and use than are products made from steel, aluminum, plastic and concrete. Furthermore, growing forests and the lumber they provide store large amounts of carbon dioxide that would otherwise escape into the atmosphere, adding to the potential for global warming."

Here's a similar perspective from my old friend Hal Salwasser, a PhD wildlife biologist who spent many years with the Forest Service before being named Dean of the Oregon State University College of Forestry. Some of you may remember Hal from his days as Region 1 Regional Forester, before he was run off by Al Gore.

"It is not unethical to grow and cut trees in ways that leave soil, water and ecosystems in a healthy condition for the future. What is environmentally unethical and globally irresponsible is to use amounts of wood we are not willing to produce as prudent land stewards – or to think that we can get by with wood substitutes that use far more energy to produce and are not as recyclable or biodegradable as wood. What good does it do to conserve biological diversity in our backyard forests if society merely depletes the same in some else's forests to satisfy their wants and needs. The ultimate challenges may not be what we think they are – old growth, jobs, spotted owls, roadless areas, endangered species or even biological diversity. These are important issues we must address, but they are only symptoms of the real challenges: human population growth, consumption and pollution. The real challenge is not to see whether bio-centerism can overcome homo-centerism as the paradigm of the 1990s, but to develop a new and more useful paradigm: eco-centerism, where people and nature are seen as interdependent parts of the whole."

But for its sheer magnitude, no one can trump the insights of my old friend Leonard Netzorg. Leonard was a union lawyer in Detroit in the 1930s. He went on to become the best lawyer the forest products industry ever had. In one of our many long conversations – which were always made more spirited by his homemade plum sherry - he said something I've never forgotten. In fact, I wrote it down – and will close out this evening by sharing it with you.

"There is no perfect truth that can guide us forward. The larger issues of our time, including those swirling about our forests, require separating society's material wants from its spiritual needs.

"Society has demonstrated an unwillingness to vest in scientists the final authority to make decisions that affect the rest of us. We insist that our non-scientific views be heard, that we whose lives are affected have the right to participate in the decision-making and policy processes that flow from today's scientific facts.

"Meanwhile, the timber industry is going to have to learn how to share these forests with others who have different values and want different things from the forest. Frankly, I welcome it and I rue the day when polarized factions no longer tear away at the fabric of our society.

"The American Revolution is still going on. We are still changing, still learning. If some of us were not constantly tearing away at what others of us think we know, we would all still think the earth flat. What is science today is witchcraft tomorrow."