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# TURNING THE TIDE FOR NATIONAL FORESTS



I am a 30-year Forest Service (FS) veteran. I have a love affair with the national forests and want those lands to remain in public ownership. Ongoing developments increasingly threaten that status. The best long-term mechanism to retain public ownership is targeted application of “user pays” concepts.

From economic and social standpoints, national forests have changed from an economic asset to an increasing liability. Why?

## LIABILITY LIMBO

Timber sale revenues, long the FS’s “cash cow,” have declined by more than 80 percent since the 1990s. Sales are ever more costly to prepare and execute due to impact analyses, consideration of alternatives, appeals, legal chal-

lenges, and decreased demand for domestically produced wood due to imports. In addition, the FS is extracting less valuable wood as it has shifted from cutting mature trees for lumber to thinning less valuable trees to reduce the risk of wildfires. This has led to massive mill closures. And most large timber companies are now in the business of selling their land rather than harvesting trees.

Laws affecting national forest management have departed from an emphasis on sustainable production of timber, grazing, and other outputs that provided revenues to offset management costs. Previously, resource production provided revenues under laws such as the Organic Administration Act (1897), Transfer Act (1905), Knutson-Vandenberg Act (1930), and Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act (1960).

Beginning with the Wilderness Act in 1964 and En-

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dangered Species Act in 1973, new legislation gave priority to land preservation in relatively pristine condition and preservation of threatened or endangered species (and ecosystems upon which they depend). Political direction placed the brunt of compliance on national forests with severe negative impacts on timber and grazing programs.

Other laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act (1969) and the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Act (1974) called for detailed analysis of proposed management actions and periodic planning at significant continuing costs. The Equal Access to Justice Act (1980) provided tools for the rising “environmental movement” to challenge FS decisions in Federal Court. When plaintiffs prevail, they are awarded costs. When plaintiffs lose, there is no liability—regardless of costs imposed on the government. This facilitated legal challenges that were expensive in time and money, even when the FS prevailed in the significant majority of cases.

## THE NEVER-ENDING CYCLE

A vicious cycle of increasing costs, time delays, and inability to carry out management actions rendered it impossible to sustain predicted outputs. Yet, there were no significant shortages of wood as cheaper imports from foreign producers—who were free of procedural and environmental constraints and had much lower labor costs—filled the gap. The result was a simultaneous exportation of jobs and dollars related to growing, harvesting, processing, and distributing domestic wood products.

At the same time, leasing of grazing privileges became less economically rational. Universal fees were set by Congress (below market value and oblivious to the quality of grazing) and have not increased relative to inflation. As a result, fees do not cover costs. Politicians set the fees, not the competition for available grazing.

## ZEROING IN ON WILDFIRE

A witch’s brew, one hundred years in the making, has made the FS’s primary focus wildfire—its prevention, control, and management. Significant attention to wildfire prevention and suppression began with massive fires in 1910. These efforts were largely successful and generally applauded. The aim was protection of watersheds and trees until they could be harvested—a rational objective at the time. Timber harvests were, due to persistent lack of ap-

propriations, inadequately followed up with management of developing stands. The result was a plethora of overstocked stands prone to catastrophic fires. In other words, changes in policy that deemphasized timber production and failure to provide funds for stand management produced a situation that now makes wildfire containment less rational.

In addition, warming trends have led to drier conditions and longer fire seasons. This, combined with increased fuel loadings, produces hotter fires over larger areas and results in increased environmental problems. Costs associated with fire-related management efforts have exploded to nearly 50 percent of a steadily decreasing budget at the expense of other programs.

Governmental organizations and programs exist to meet perceived needs and are politically sustained by constituencies both inside and outside government. The primary supporters for national forests were the timber industry and states and counties that profited from increased employment, payments, and tax revenues—which collapsed with the dramatic decline of the timber program. Potential constituencies related to recreation, fish and wildlife, and water, in large part, chose to remain adversaries rather than morph into supporters. They won the conflict over the management focus of the national forests but have yet to come to grips with consequences of their victory. Many wander the old battlefields bayoneting the wounded. As a result national forests have become an ever heavier economic and political albatross in the eyes of many.

Nationally, we must face up to long-ignored economic problems such as exploding health care costs, looming insolvency in Social Security, a depleted military capability, spiraling balance of trade deficits, burgeoning national debt, and many other problems. Addressing such problems will cost dearly, while politicians running for President promise tax cuts. As a result, there will be increased pressures to shed federal liabilities—or to turn liabilities into assets; national forests will not escape scrutiny.

National Forests could be transferred to the states for management under state laws—usually producing revenues for schools. Such management of state-owned forest lands has been, on the whole, successful and relatively non-controversial. Alternatively, lands with high timber value and low recreation value could be sold gradually into private ownership. Such lands would go on local tax roles and increase steadily in value. This would simultaneously eliminate

federal payments to counties in lieu of taxes and subsidies to former timber-dependent communities impacted by the collapse of the FS timber program. High elevation lands, less productive for timber production and grazing, could be added to the system of national parks that charge entry and user fees and have effective streams of funding.

Such transfers seem likely to have long-term positive impacts on the overall economy. These lands would be subject to changes in ownership and use in the ongoing search for their “highest and best use” related to economic value.

Or, the national forests could be retained in federal ownership and managed to capture revenue from currently “free” uses. National forests provide more recreational use than national parks. Yet, except for user fees from developed campsites, the FS captures no revenue from users. Those users impose significant and growing costs for management, not to mention adverse environmental impacts. Such uses—and their impacts—will only increase along with the population.

As the lands of former timber companies are subdivided and sold (and then further subdivided and resold), “No Trespassing” signs will blossom. National forests will become more important as reservoirs of fish and wildlife habitat—and will be among the last places where the public can interact with wildlife. As the demand for these areas increases, hunters and fishers and other wildlife aficionados will increasingly look to the national forests for more management, but more management equates to higher costs to the agency.

Those who roam forests, woods, and backcountry—whether on foot, horseback, trail bikes, four-wheeled vehicles, snowmobiles, or all-terrain vehicles—will find themselves more and more limited to national forests. Costs for regulating use, monitoring conditions, enforcing laws and regulations, providing facilities, and dealing with environmental impacts go hand-in-hand with increased use. Simultaneously, resources to deal with such use are declining. Why?

Simply, these activities produce no revenue. As a minor percentage of the overall population, users enjoy, and expect to continue to enjoy, their “free lunch.”

## USER FEES ARE A GOOD BET

For those who want to retain national forests in public ownership, user fees are a good bet. There could be a general, public land-use stamp, good for all public lands, with revenues distributed to federal land management agencies via information derived from user surveys. Additional fees could be charged for recreational uses that are “consumptive,” such as hunting and fishing, or ones that

## Policy Push—National Forests

### “USER PAYS” CONCEPT

National forests provide more recreational use than national parks but capture virtually no revenue from users who impose significant management costs. The best long-term mechanism to preserve public forests is a targeted application of “user pays” concepts.

have “significant environmental impacts,” such as motorized recreational vehicles and use of horses.

Forest Service operations are more expensive, complex, and time consuming than necessary. This is the result of confounding and overlapping laws, mixed messages from a series of Administrations and Congresses, and continued revisions made necessary by frequent and poorly coordinated court decisions. An overhaul of laws and mandates is overdue. Clearly stated management directions, streamlined management, increased revenues producing enhanced management capabilities, and proactive constituencies could positively alter the outlook for national forests.

Alternatively, selective land disposal would free the federal government of increasing fiscal and political liabilities. This option will become more attractive as corrective action continues to be delayed.



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