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## Restoring Federal Forests in Oregon's Future

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Comments made at Oregon's Society of American Foresters Meeting, Bend, OR, Oct. 13, 2011

My 3 key themes:

- The problem---current situation not sustainable in any way; federal forests are becoming a substantial liability to the state, its rural communities and American taxpayers.
- The inadequacy of current legislative approaches---too timid and halfway; do not address larger problems of governance dysfunction and long-term sustainability of new directions. The trees just keep growing and dying, victims of climate change, invasive species, uncharacteristic wildfires, insect outbreaks and insufficient funds or social license to change course.
- A way forward -- Sooner or later society must confront the consequences of federal forestland management dysfunction, e.g., declining land health, rising costs and a poverty stricken rural America hanging on through federal welfare checks because the nation refuses to empower the responsible agencies to sustainably use publically held resources to generate wealth and jobs. Try experiments:
  - technical/managerial, e.g., Franklin/Johnson;
  - governance, e.g., Kemmis;
  - convene Presidential Commission with broad authority to suggest major change (like the recent Entitlements/Deficits Commission);
  - clarify statutory purpose and clear roadblocks to effectiveness;
  - give the lands to someone else to manage without federal policy hurdles.

Longer text:

Oregon has lived with federal management of more than half its forestland estate for over 100 years. Those forests have shaped much of what Oregonians and others think about the state, not all, of course, but much. Federal forests have always been the state's preeminent watersheds; this will continue far into the future. They also are and will continue to be some of the state's richest habitats for native plants and animals, prominent among them, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, aspen, Oregon white oak, madrone, myrtlewood, salmon, steelhead, trout, elk, deer, bears and an occasional owl or two. Over time, federal forests have lost a few native species, such as gray wolves which are now returning and they have become significant recreation and tourism assets. For a brief interlude, from around 1950-1990, Oregon forests delivered ¼ of the nation's softwood lumber and panel production, half from federal forests, and they supported hundreds of local rural communities and tens of thousands of jobs related to forest resources. Many, but not all, of these economic, environmental and community benefits from federal forests remain; timber supply and its associated jobs and wealth creation are greatly reduced. But now, because of lack of sustainable wealth creation from renewable resources, rising costs of fire management, threats to private forests from insect and pest outbreaks and loss of wood processing infrastructure, federal forests are becoming a substantial liability to the state, its rural communities and American taxpayers.

The current costs of holding federal forests as a government managed public trust far exceed the revenues generated, and expenses related to fire management exceed all other investment needs. Who pays the bills? Every American taxpayer does. Who bears the impacts? Mostly local people and communities in areas near the forests. This is hardly an equitable condition and certainly out of alignment with the social contract between urban and rural America that began eroding in the 1980s. Counties across the west are left begging for a federal welfare check in lieu of revenues from sustainable economic activities on federal forests and they do not get federal timber-related jobs and indirect businesses with the welfare check. Meanwhile, the trees keep growing and, in fire-prone forests dying, victims of climate change, invasive species, uncharacteristic wildfires, insect outbreaks and insufficient funds or social license to change course. See the web message from State Rep. Richardson if you think I am the only one who sees it this way.

Federal forests in Oregon are simply not sustainable on their current trajectory; they are not ecologically, economically or socially sustainable. Absent course correction, the situation will only worsen, leaving political leaders at national, state and local levels literally hamstrung for viable options, to wit, the notion that we can just thin our way to economic vitality or sustainability. To me we, as a society, are ignoring the fundamental issue: what is/are the purpose(s) of lands held and managed in the public trust by agencies of the federal government? Marion Clawson wrote a still relevant book on this in 1975: *Forests for Whom and for What*. That is still the question. Recent bills in Congress, some authored by members of the Oregon delegation, offer two potential answers: one would say their purpose is to sustain wildlife favored by the absence of human action, the other would propose to restore some jobs, some renewable energy and some reduction in fire, drought and insect risk. Some bills split the baby and offer a bit of each.

Three laws define the purpose(s) for national forests, two for Public Lands (BLM). Other laws have overlaid purposes not meshed with these organic statutes: ESA, CWA, CAA. Equal Access to Justice Act and Administrative Procedures Act give advocacy groups essentially a free ride to use those other laws to subvert the statutory purposes of federal forests, with taxpayers footing their costs.

Pioneering conservation leaders of the late 1800s and early 1900s championed federal land tenure to promote protection and conservation of wild places and wild life and the shared, sustainable and ethical uses of natural resources. Looking at its conceptual evolution, conservation meant something different in 1890s and early 1900s than it appears to mean now. Along the evolutionary course of conservation on federal forests several "grand experiments" have been carried out. This is 2011, so I'll give you 11 that come to my mind.

- (1) governance by scientifically trained managers in consultation with local, state and legislative leaders,
- (2) curtailment of the worst forms of domestic livestock grazing,
- (3) eradication of top predators,
- (4) suppression of wildland fire,
- (5) development of recreation infrastructure,
- (6) dedication to domestic timber supplies,
- (7) creation of no-development wilderness and de-facto wilderness, i.e., roadless,
- (8) engineering of waterways for flood, irrigation and hydropower control,
- (9) preservation of at risk species at the unintended expense to other human needs and wants and in ignorance of ecosystem dynamics and function,
- (10) protection for wildlife that favor undisturbed areas, and lately
- (11) limited collaborative governance and widespread judicial enforcement of the narrowly defined goals of single resource legislation, e.g., ESA, CWA, and CAA, at the expense of multiple-use sustainability mandates, e.g., MUSY, NFMA, O&C Act, and FLPMA.

During the course of these "experiments" our human population grew threefold and migrated from rural to urban settings, the climate changed, economies and technologies changed, and policies and social norms enabled a highly consumptive culture fed by non-domestic resource production. This does not fit my definition of sustainable.

Are we as Oregonians or as Americans satisfied with this situation? If not, can we do anything to change it? What outcomes would we favor? How might we act to further those outcomes? These questions call for more than legislative proposals to address limited technical or managerial challenges. They call for what USFS Chief emeritus, Jack Ward Thomas and the National Commission for Science on Sustainable Forestry called for: Congressional action to clarify purposes and processes for more efficient and effective stewardship of some of the world's most remarkable natural land and resource assets. They may also call for experimentation with more effective and equitable models of governance for federal lands, as called for by ex-Speaker of the Montana House of Representatives Dan Kemmis. Politicians appear unwilling or unable to go there at this time but sooner or later society must confront the consequences of federal forestland management dysfunction, e.g., let me repeat, declining land health, rising costs and a poverty stricken rural America hanging on through at-risk federal welfare checks because the nation refuses to use its publically held resources to generate wealth and jobs.

A couple of my academic colleagues, Norm Johnson and Jerry Franklin, are proposing an experiment in fire-prone forests on O&C lands that could be one option in changing course. They propose a combination of restoration of stress-resilient forests through thinning and structural class diversification through modest regeneration harvests that would produce commercially viable timber sales. Jobs and wealth would be created by both, though not in the magnitude of management activities of the mid to late 20th century. It is worth trying. But it may not be the only option. Other, well-thought proposals perhaps should also be tried, if someone will be bold enough to create and present them. I suggest that these so-called "pilots" not be ad hoc, anecdotal efforts; they should be well designed experiments to test ecological, managerial and governance hypotheses. Are political leaders bold enough to go that far? So far, it does not appear so. But one can always hope, for the future is not very bright for the lands, communities, people or agencies if we stay on the current paths.

This is not a rosy picture for Oregon's federal forest future. But it is a sober reality check and perhaps a wake-up call. It's not too late to change course. It's never too late. But the longer we wait the greater the challenges will become and the higher the costs will be for future generations. Simply stated, we cannot thin our way to sustainability for federal forests. So far, resistors won't let it happen fast enough, large enough or heavy enough to make much of a dent in disturbance vulnerability. And if they did, one must ask, ok, then what? Where's the money going to come from to sustain mixed-use management when the federal treasury is drained every year by defense, health care and social security payments?

When I was a kid my grandpa used to tell me money doesn't grow on trees, you have to work to earn it. He was only half right, got the work part right. Oregon's forests not only grow money, they grow jobs, productive wildlife, and the greenest, most renewable raw material on earth. Well, let me clarify that. Some of Oregon's forests do this. It is time for its federal forests to re-start doing their share for the future well being of our state, our nation, and our rural communities, and, yes, even for the health of our federal forests. I am convinced the federal agencies would love to chart a more sustainable course for their future.