

US Forest Mismanagement Policy Jerrad Pierce 10/2003

Background

American public policy has long been tied to the abundant resources of this continent, and its forests in particular. North America was colonized at a time soon after the great European forests had been reduced to a meager fraction of their former extent. In fact, a primary motivation for the establishment of American colonies was mercantilism; the extraction of natural resources from a dependency for use in the home land. Britain sought New England's eastern white pine for ship masts in the expansion of its fleet and decreed that all suitable trees were property of the Royal Navy. In so doing Britain extended the legacy of over-exploitation to the New World. Colonists cleared such vast expanses of forest for harvesting, farming, grazing and construction that less than 40% of New England remained forested by the mid-eighteenth century and 20% by the early 1800's (Foster, 2002).

Gifford Pinchot became head of the USDA Division of Forestry in 1898. The Division of Forestry became the Forest Service (USFS) in 1905 under Theodore Roosevelt with Pinchot still at the helm. Pinchot "believed that fighting every fire was not a good idea because fuel on the forest floor was left to burn later, creating even larger fires" (as cited in Gottschalk, 2002). However, the Big Burn of 1910 sent public opinion reeling as 3 million acres of forest were scorched and 85 lives lost under the watch of the fledgling forest service. President Taft had dismissed Pinchot in 1910 (on unrelated matters) and USFS policy soon became "total suppression" i.e.; that no fire should go unfought and if possible be contained by 10 AM the next morning.

Prior to the 1950s "most national forests were proud of the fact that they used only selection cutting to remove timber", and they were making a profit on timber sales from this system as well. However the USFS had largely converted to clear cutting by the 1970s on which the American people lost money, despite its convictions as shown by documentation from the 1930s portraying clear-cutting as "improper cutting practice" (O'Toole, 2002).

Problem

1994 was a record setting fire season in fire fighting costs until 2000 and subsequently 2002, at \$845 million, \$1.3 billion and \$1.7 billion respectively. Furthermore the 2000 season consumed 8.4 million acres, the most in 50 years (National Interagency Fire Cent, 2003). The sky-rocketing costs of fire suppression, increasing property damage and higher visibility of conflagrations have impressed forest and fire management upon the national consciousness. There is a general consensus among government agencies and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that these trends are largely due to a failure of total suppression, as foreseen by Pinchot. However there are a few who dissent or who feel there are concomitant factors such as urban encroachment; this latter view is largely held by environmentalists whom are typically anti-sprawl.

"The large fires of recent years are not due to accumulated fuels but to droughts. Forest Service firefighting strategies that emphasize firefighter safety over minimizing acres burned also contribute to larger fires. The high expense of recent fires is partly due to the increasing number of homes in the wildland-urban interface." (O'Toole, 2002)

Supplemental trends which have been observed as a result of total suppression are a decrease in biodiversity, low renewal rates of select species, and shifts in representation of species (including encroachment by invasives). It has been determined that many species, notably the ponderosa pine and giant sequoia, are highly dependent upon fire in their lifecycles as are several south-eastern forest systems. These same trends are also associated with the stigmatized practice of clear-cutting.

An entirely different situation exists in the north-east where the land continues to reforest and many species that had all but vanished from the country side are returning; New England once again boasts a large deer population as well as moose and bear. However this cornucopia has been accompanied by a drastic reduction in many meadowland species particularly birds (Foster, 2002).

Solution

While most parties seem to agree on the problems there are differing views concerning solutions. These differences are largely dependent upon the manner in which the problem is framed e.g; what are viewed as the root causes of the problems or confounding factors that undermine adoption of effective solutions. This framing may in turn be a consequence of a party's political views.

It became apparent in the mid twentieth century that forest health was declining and “prescribed burns” also known as “controlled burns” were proposed by a variety of actors as a means of emulating natural processes and restoring natural conditions. (Controlled burn is arguably a misnomer as it is never possible to manage a wildfire with certainty.) Prescribed burns were slow to be adopted, and the reasons proffered range from the concept being antithetical to total suppression, to worry over destruction of commercially viable timber (O'Toole, 2002). The USFS eventually adopted, even if unofficially, a policy of “let it burn” to be determined on a case by case basis.¹ Several high-profile incidents involving “let it burn” (Yosemite 1988) and prescribed burns (Los Alamos 2000) instigated public outrage at property damage, lack of control, and “destruction” of beloved parkland.

The Bush administration views the increased public and NGO resistance to prescribed burns as a problem in itself; minimizing the viability of burns as a solution to the perceived threat of fuel build up necessitating the development of alternatives. In particular the administration criticizes the 1994 Northwest Fire Plan (NFP) as unnecessarily and unintentionally stalling economic development while elsewhere lauding the intent of the same legislation.”The complexity of the Plan has created administrative gridlock due to expensive and burdensome processes and analysis requirements that go beyond legal

1. The author was unable to find references to an official policy of “let it burn”, although there are numerous examples of forest service representatives discussing the matter on record. Some believe “[t]here had been no let-it-burn policy. On the contrary, the scope and severity of the fire was caused by years of fire suppression”, quite probably much to the chagrin of O'Toole (Perry, 1999).

requirements” (Executive Office of the President [EOP], 2002).² Therefore Bush proposes “[r]emoving needless administrative obstacles and providing authority to allow timber projects to proceed without delay when consistent with the Northwest Forest Plan” (EOP, 2002). These results stem either from a lack of foresight, incomplete comprehension of the act and issues, or improper drafting by Congress and is not unlike the circumstances surrounding the Endangered Species Act 1973.

Despite the apparent consensus between government agencies, industry, a variety of NGOs and the public it is not clear that the government and industry are sincere in their pursuit of forest preservation. Industry and conservative elements of the government may simply accept or perpetuate the public/NGO stance as an exploitable view and convenient cover for an agenda of exploitation and development. This cynicism may be warranted given one of the administration’s key criticisms of the NFP has been that the yield of a billion board feet of timber per year under the NFP has not been realized (EOP, 2002).

The proposed solution of the “Healthy Forests” program is manual extraction; thinning and removal of underbrush, snags (dead trees), and culling within exceedingly dense areas. Oddly enough this is the preferred solution of opposing lobbyists. However, environmental groups have several qualms about the proposed thinning, to be performed by commercial enterprise, and believe it should be a government project. “[T]he problem for the timber industry is that the small-diameter trees that choke public forests after years of fire suppression have little commercial value. Without strict controls, ‘thinning’ regimens could simply encourage logging of mature trees as well” (McManus, 2000). An extension

2. In “Healthy Forests” (EOP, 2002) the administration argues that federal agencies often expend unnecessary funds and man-hours developing rigorous cases in support of planned actions in preparation for any lawsuit which may be filed to contest the plans. Since these preparations are not legally required, and clearly consume resources they must be unnecessary. This view would seem to ignore the fact that “[b]etween January of 2001 and July of 2002, 48 percent of all Forest Service mechanical fuels reduction projects were appealed” (EOP, 2002). This high rate of appeal arguably indicates the process is in fact necessary, either to allow public involvement or force sufficiently thorough examination of the situation. Despite claims that “[r]equirements for environmental analysis go well beyond what is required for fully informed decision-making” it is not clear why analysis sufficient for “fully informed decision-making” would be insufficient to stand for itself in a court of law (EOP, 2002).

of this argument to forbid commercial involvement is to facilitate monitoring, similar to the justification of the ban on interstate exchange of protected species under the Lacey Act.

O'Toole does not weigh in on the matter of manual extraction directly. He suggests that the USFS be revamped including reincentivizing the agency to no longer promote high cost suppression. Further O'Toole recommends decentralization, and self-sufficiency of USFS divisions which would quite probably entail some form of logging/extraction to mitigate costs. An argument of O'Toole's for decentralization coincides with the popular depiction of current policy as "one size fits all" forestry. The United States is arguably so diverse in ecology that no national policy can adequately address local conditions. On the other hand Foster (2002) indicates that many environmental organizations may be espousing just that in their pursuit of prescribed burns to maintain unnatural open spaces and the dependent biodiversity in the northeast.

Skepticism of other aspects of the federal and industrial agendas are prevalent amongst NGOs and some highlight evidence indicating "Healthy Forests" may merely be a wolf in sheep's clothing. A myriad of hollow justifications are routinely given by the timber industry that are intended to ring true with the public agenda including economic development, and environmental justice/national resource independence (Hanson, 2000). "Healthy Forests" proposes compliance with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) which is notoriously difficult to implement and tends to focus on short-term benefits (Van Horn, Baumer & Gormley, 2001). The administration's goal of "[d]eveloping guidance for weighing the short-term risks versus long-term benefits" (EOP, 2002) is disheartening in its neglect of the countervailing consideration of long-term risks versus short-term benefits. Application of the GPRA may lead to difficulty in monitoring and evaluation by watchdog groups. Finally the use of statistics concerning the extent of burned lands as supporting evidence for "Healthy Forests" begs the question "How is this view of counting acres different than total suppression? Is this program really so different from prior art?"

To view wildfire as solely destructive ignores the key role it plays in the ecosystem and subsequent flurry of regeneration. Experts may have imperfect knowledge of an issue leaving the public even more ignorant thereby complicating already contentious policy. Therefore intentions matter, and yet they do not, in the realm of policy. Total suppression may have been pursued with the best of intentions, however that does not help the potential crisis our forests face. Disparate groups have come to the same conclusion regarding this crisis and the question of motives has resulted in an impasse.

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