

What are the options for a once-elite agency now in search of a mission?

Does the Forest Service Have a Future?

BY ROGER A. SEDJO



THE FOREST SERVICE IS IN DEEP TROUBLE. ITS MISSION IS NOT unique, it is deeply politicized, and it lacks a serious supporting constituency. Historically, the agency's mission

has been fairly well defined. The 1897 Organic Act gave three purposes to the forest reserves:

- Preserve and protect the forest within the reservation.
- Secure favorable conditions of water flows.
- Furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of the people of the United States.

Before World War II, timber harvests were modest, but in the postwar boom, the harvests increased markedly. Gradually, the Forest Service's mission was expanded to include recreation, wildlife habitat, and wilderness—and the conflicts have increased. With the advent of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and its increasingly interventionist interpretations by the courts, the agency's focus has shifted dramatically from timber to other outputs, especially biodiversity. In the past decade, timber harvests have plummeted, while recreation, wildlife habitat, and wilderness have increased markedly.

The most recent comprehensive forest legislation, the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976, man-

dates that the Forest Service provide for "multiple use and sustained yield of the products and services obtained therefrom, . . . and, in particular include coordination of outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish, and wilderness."

The legislation appears clear and unequivocal. The Forest Service must provide for the sustainable production of the seven products and services explicitly mentioned. The outputs are clearly identified, as is the requirement that they be produced on a sustainable basis. So, why does the Forest Service need "a clarification of mission"?

The problem is that court rulings about ESA and the regulations written to implement NFMA give biological and ecological considerations priority over other goals. The regulations developed to implement NFMA, for example, require the Forest Service to ensure the widespread maintenance of viable plant and animal populations. The result has been a serious disconnection between the directives of the agency's statutory mandate and the nature of its activities and management.

This article identifies some potential missions for the National Forest System (NFS): as a biological reserve or a provider of forest recreation. A potential paradigm could be that of the Quincy Library Group, which has received separate congressional funding and a unique management

Roger A Sedjo is a senior fellow and director of the Forest Economics and Policy Program at Resources for the Future of Washington, D.C. He has served as a member of the Department of Agriculture's Committee of Scientists. This article draws heavily from a chapter in a forthcoming Resources for the Future book, *A Vision for the Forest Service*.

mandate for a set of national forests in California. The feasibility of these alternative missions and paradigms will be examined, including budget and constituency support.

This article also examines the Forest Service's past and present situations and tries to provide a contemporary perspective. First, it briefly covers the agency's history, most of which is well known. Next, it describes and characterizes the position in which the Forest Service finds itself, including a discussion of the major problems and challenges. Finally, it outlines a number of possible scenarios for the agency, suggesting some of their strengths and weaknesses.

HISTORY

IN RESPONSE TO PUBLIC CONCERNS OVER WATER CONDITIONS and future timber supplies in the latter part of the 19th century, large areas of public lands were designated as part of the nation's "forest reserves," later to be called the

instructed the Forest Service to produce multiple outputs, including timber, range, wildlife, recreation, water, and (less explicitly) wilderness. The "trick" was to produce these outputs jointly and to produce the appropriate mix to satisfy the various constituencies. In addition, the laws required that these outputs be produced in a sustainable manner. Given this general mandate, a forest-planning process was created that was intended to allow all of the interested parties to participate in management and output decisions. The assumption was that the planning process would provide a vehicle for the various interests to work out their differences and reach a consensus forest plan with a broadly acceptable mix of actions and outputs. Also, it was implicitly assumed that if a consensus on the forest plan were reached regarding the goals of forest management in a particular forest, Congress would provide the budget to implement those objectives.

In the two and a half decades since NFMA enactment, little of what was envisaged has come to pass. Although the periodic resource assessment has been undertaken regularly, the planning process has largely been a failure. For example, it has not generated the desired consensus. In the first 125 forest management plans, there were about 1,200 appeals and over 100 subsequent lawsuits. Some appeals have

been in process for almost a decade without resolution. Even when plans were approved, budgets were generally not forthcoming to allow faithful implementation. There is little connection between the budget that emerges from the congressional political process and provides funds on an aggregate programmatic basis and the various forest plans developed through the decentralized planning process created by NFMA.

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National Forest System. However, even in that early period, there were alternative perspectives and philosophies of the objectives of forest maintenance. The pragmatism of the conservationists, as represented by Pinchot, was reflected in their concept of the "wise use" of resources. The philosophy of wise resource use was pitted against the views of preservationists, such as Muir and, perhaps, Thoreau. The American people wanted water and future timber, but they were also concerned about preserving naturalness, wildness, and wilderness, which were, even then, recognized as part of the American heritage.

Although these two philosophies vied for dominance in that early period, the on-the-ground conflicts between them were small, largely because the Forest Service assumed primarily a custodial role. The public forest provided only modest amounts of timber, allowing preservation of the vast majority.

With the advent of World War II and in the subsequent postwar period, the national forests took on a new importance as a source of timber. They met the needs of the war period, subsequently produced substantial volumes of timber for the postwar housing boom, and continued high levels of output into the late 1980s.

Agency's Mandate Expanded Environmentalists and others thought NFS's emphasis on timber was too great and should also include other forest outputs. A series of legislative acts (Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960, Resources Planning Act in 1974, and NFMA in 1976)

No Longer an Elite Agency Traditionally, the Forest Service had been viewed as an elite agency. This perspective emerged out of the ties between Pinchot and President Teddy Roosevelt and the prevailing progressive philosophy that placed confidence in technocratic solutions (see *Rethinking Scientific Management* by Robert H. Nelson). Consistent with the positive view of progressivism and scientific management, the Forest Service was able to recruit the best and the brightest foresters trained in new European techniques. This was a new agency with a highly trained and committed professional staff. The view of professionalism was maintained for many years. Until the early 1990s, the chief of the Forest Service was still essentially a nonpolitical position drawn from the ranks of its senior professionals.

The Forest Service made the most of its positive image. In the early 1960s, Herbert Kaufman wrote his famous book *The Forest Ranger*, in which the Forest Service was used as an example of how a large public government agency should function. He argued that, unique among large organizations, the Forest Service had been able to maintain its

focus, its discipline, and its esprit de corps.

The high esteem in which the Forest Service was held was not limited to the public; it carried over to Congress, which gave it large budgets and autonomy. In his book *Public Lands Politics*, Paul Culhane argued that the Forest Service had successfully been able to maintain a high degree of autonomy as the various interest groups competed against one another. The groups he examined—timber interests, environmentalists, and recreationists—all provided the agency with constituencies that supported its budget requests and programs. In return, the Forest Service provided the outputs desired by each group. Because the interests were so diverse but relatively balanced, the Forest Service had decision-making autonomy: it could justify an action undesirable to one of the groups by arguing that it was necessary to pacify one of its other constituencies—which wanted even more. Furthermore, when the time for budget decisions arrived, these groups could still be relied on to support the various facets of the agency's budgets.

Today, few would view the Forest Service as an elite agency. Local users of national forest lands are highly disenchanted and discouraged. Recreationists, environmentalists, and timber users also voice major complaints. It seems that nobody is happy with the Forest Service.

A quintessential example of the general disillusionment is the experience of the Quincy Library Group, a small informal group that met in the library in Quincy, California, to discuss issues relating to the management of several national forests in the region. This group, which had given up on the "process," undertook direct political action with what appears so far to be great success. Bypassing the Forest Service entirely, the Quincy Library Group appealed directly to the California delegation in Congress for a separate management charter and separate funding. Legislation to this end recently passed. With the help of the new legislation, the group hopes to have both greater control over activities on local Forest Service lands and a federal appropriation with which they can manage these lands in greater accordance with local desires and objectives. How effective an approach this will ultimately turn out to remain to be seen, but it is certainly an experiment worthy of careful monitoring.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

THE FOREST SERVICE'S HAPPY SITUATION IN EARLIER PERIODS has seriously eroded over recent decades. I believe that the system has broken down because the fine balance among the various competing constituencies gradually disappeared. The battles among these groups—particularly the environmentalists and timber interests—compelled Congress to pass NFMA to try to restore order and the balance. However, that was not to be. The environmentalists have swept the field. The NFMA planning process provided a

vehicle to challenge plans that were viewed as undesirable, even if a group did not participate in the planning deliberations. Additionally, a host of environmental laws and their evolving judicial interpretation forced both a reduction in harvest levels and a rethinking of policy. Timber harvest levels, which peaked in the late 1980s under the still-existing NFMA legislation, have since declined to less than one-quarter of their peak levels.

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Whatever its past "sins," in recent decades, the Forest Service has truly been given a "mission impossible." It is being asked to reflect the will of the people when, in fact, we are deeply divided. There is no shared vision of the role of public forestlands. Attempts to "reinvent" the role of the Forest Service continue to be frustrated by a lack of consensus. Furthermore, attempts to formulate new legislation to impart better-defined implicit property rights to the contenders are going nowhere. The Democratic administration resists calls for new legislation in the face of a Republican Congress, whereas the proposed legislation of the Republican Congress governing the agency is unlikely to move ahead before the impending presidential election.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

LET US EXAMINE THREE POTENTIAL CANDIDATES FOR A Forest Service mission and constituency: biological preservation, recreation, and local control.

Biological Preservation Recently, a committee of scientists was assembled by the secretary of agriculture to "provide scientific and technical advice to the Secretary of Agriculture and the Chief of the Forest Service on improvement that can be made in the NFS Land and Resource planning process." In its report, *Sustaining the People's Lands*, the committee decided to provide the mission statement that the Forest Service has lacked. Casting aside concerns about whether it is appropriate for the committee to dictate a mission for the agency, the committee boldly declared that the binding charge has been sustainability and recommended, in essence, that the Forest Service manage for ecological sustainability. Apparently, the committee was less concerned than was Forest Service Chief Jack Ward Thomas about the necessity of having a legislative directive from Congress and the president to provide mission clarification. Furthermore, an articulation of what the focus of management "should" be is clearly not a scientific question but a reflection of a set of personal values. Thus,

in addressing the issue of what the objective of management should be, the committee went well beyond what its scientific credentials could justify. In fact, several committee members asserted that the manager's obligation to provide for species viability and ecological integrity is "morally" appropriate.

Having asserted a mission for the Forest Service that Congress and the administration were reluctant to state, the committee then suggested ways in which this objective might be accomplished. The committee's report argued that sustainability was paramount and, in essence, the legislative multiple-use mandate should be replaced de facto by an alternative objective—that of maintaining what is essentially ecological sustainability.

In my view, such an approach is, in effect, an obituary for the Forest Service as we know it. In the absence of significant tangible outputs, it is doubtful that sufficient public support exists to generate serious budgets for a pro-

tial portion of the budget for various forests from recreational user fees. Certainly, many forests have the potential to raise substantial funds from recreational user fees. Some forests near urban centers have demonstrated the ability to generate substantial amounts in user fees. However, such fees are often difficult and costly to collect. Nevertheless, it has been argued that for many national forests, the recreational benefits far exceed the timber and other traditional output benefits. If this is true, user fees could well provide major revenues for many, but surely not all, national forests. In this context, Forest Service budgets could be, in substantial part, financed from recreational receipts and supplemented by more modest allocations from Congress. Of course, such an approach would require that the agency have some control over the user fees it generates.

If funding were dependent on recreational use, there would be powerful incentives to provide the types of outputs desired by recreationists. Furthermore, the role of federal funding and the ability of a constituency to support the Forest Service budget in Congress become less important if the agency can cover a substantial portion of its costs with user fees. Finally, it should be noted that the various recreational uses may conflict, and recreational use could well lead to conflicts with other

desired outputs and services, including biodiversity. Thus, although this approach appears to have much to commend it, there is certainly no guarantee that future conflicts between the various user groups can be avoided.

Local Control A third option would be to move toward more localized input into the management of the national forests in the spirit of the Quincy Library Group. In Canada, after all, the respective provinces control the forests. Perhaps Congress should consider budgeting individual national forests or groups of national forests, in a manner akin to the separate budgeting of the national parks. This arrangement could allow management to be customized—to a degree not previously seen—to the needs and desires of the local people. Some combination of user fees and customized management could provide both for adequate funding and for the emergence of powerful local constituencies. This approach could allow a level of local participation that has not been experienced in decades. It should be noted, however, that many national environmental groups oppose this approach. Shifting power to the local community implies reducing the influence of national groups on local situations.

Nevertheless, the Quincy Library-type solution offers promise in that it addresses the budget and constituency challenges facing the Forest Service in a way other approaches do not. And local authority could judge the health of the forest and the desirability of various remedial approaches.

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gram focused primarily on maintaining ecological sustainability. Although many people may support such an approach in concept, it is doubtful that this support could develop into a constituency with the power to generate substantial and continuing budgets for these types of management activities. The services rendered through the activities would be difficult for the public to perceive on a regular basis, and the major direct financial beneficiaries would be the biologists and ecologists employed in the process.

Although major environmental groups support facets of an ecological mission, many of them oppose timber harvesting of any type, including that necessary to meet other objectives (e.g., wildlife habitat). Indeed, many favor an essentially hands-off approach to "management." Because of their persistent distrust of the motives of the Forest Service, it is doubtful that these groups would enthusiastically support the large budget necessary to manage ecological sustainability. The likely outcome would be the erosion of the agency's budget as custodial management and protection supplant active management.

Recreation Perhaps the major constituency that could emerge to lead in supporting the Forest Service is the recreationists. The National Forest System provides many types of outdoor recreation. Although recreational users are far from monolithic in their interests and the services desired from the agency, their numbers are large. Perhaps most intriguing is the possibility of generating a substan-

A decentralized approach has substantial merit in “returning” much of the effective control of forest management to local people, who could then customize management to the needs of the region. In many cases, such an approach would also provide local communities with additional revenues for financial management and other local needs. However, it seems unlikely that all the national forests can expect the national financial support likely to be received by the Quincy Library Group.

Department of Natural Resources? Perhaps the most fundamental issue is whether to retain a separate Forest Service at all. Arguments for the coordination of land management are now louder than ever and played a prominent role in the Committee of Scientists’ Report.

The original rationale for a forest service focused on the desire to create an elite organization that had technocratic prowess and a degree of independence from the bureaucratic and political processes so that it could “do the right thing” based on its professional judgment. The Forest Service is no longer an elite organization. Although it still retains many highly trained and competent people, the Forest Service is no longer unique. In fact, it is probably more wracked with confusion than most agencies from the many years its mission has lacked clarity or has been highly ambiguous. It is also no longer insulated from the ravages of the bureaucratic process and crass politics. In fact, former Forest Service Chief Thomas stated that “the entire process is becoming increasingly politicized through orders which originate above the Chief’s level,” and where the “exact source of those instructions is sometimes not clear.” The fine balance among constituencies, which Culhane saw as the core of the agency’s ability to fend off crass political pressures, no longer exists. Furthermore, its ability to supply services to various constituencies is minimal. It is now beholden to a single group in society rather than to a host of groups.

Today, there may be a compelling reason to integrate federal land management agencies. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the proposals of the Carter administration, which called for a unified department of natural resources that would include the Forest Service. Perhaps it is time to merge the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management into one agency. Surely, the rationale for such integration becomes more compelling as the Forest Service loses both its unique mission and its unique ability to perform any mission in an outstanding manner.

CONCLUSION

THIS ARTICLE IS INTENDED TO BE PROVOCATIVE. PERHAPS IT is time to “think the unthinkable.” The Forest Service has been an unusually successful organization for much of its history. That is no longer the case. Today, the agency finds itself highly politicized. Under three legislative acts, it has a multiple-use statutory mandate while, at the same time, it is covered by the single-purpose ESA. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of public consensus. Until this deadlock is broken, the Forest Service will be in the limbo

described by Thomas. However, if the agency is converted into a biological reserve, it may no longer be politically viable as a separate institution. At a minimum, it is clearly time to rethink the role and mission of the Forest Service.

In many cases, a doable mission needs to reflect the views of a cross section of many Americans, rather than the values of a single interest or a small group with a unique set of values. A major dialogue is needed among the American people, together with a clear direction provided by Congress and the administration. Furthermore, the dialogue should be expanded to seriously consider whether the federal land management problems of the 21st century may not require the creation of new, streamlined, integrated organizations—or perhaps even the application of new and different types of institutions—to replace the outmoded agencies of the past century.

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