

Timber Harvesting on Federal, State, & Other Public Forest Lands: An Essential Means for Sustaining Forests & Communities

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The position will expire on June 10, 2012, unless, after subsequent review, it is decided otherwise by Council

Position

The Society of American Foresters supports commercial and non-commercial timber harvesting as an appropriate objective and primary means for maintaining resilient and sustainable forests on federal and other public lands.

Experience around the world has shown that, to achieve sustainability, forested landscapes must provide a robust and mutually supportive complement of environmental, economic and social values. Although the relative emphasis of these values will vary among different types of ownerships and locations, it is essential that all be carefully considered as legitimate options in the management of public forest lands.

Most of these lands are governed by laws and other policies that allow or mandate sustainable timber harvest with appropriate resource management planning. Where fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, or recreation is a priority, timber harvest can be compatible and, in fact, support these values when carefully planned and supervised by professional foresters and other resource specialists. The use of renewable, recyclable, and biodegradable forest products from many public lands is imperative given our nation's increasing resource needs and sustainability concerns.

Issue

For many decades, timber harvesting on federal and other public lands in the United States has been an important source of socioeconomic benefits as well as a key means for professional foresters to meet diverse resource management objectives. However, policy and budget restrictions have greatly reduced public timber harvests in recent years, especially on federal lands. For example, harvests on our National Forests declined by 84% between 1986 and 2001, i.e., from 21.2 to 3.4 billion board feet (bbf; Smith et al. 2004). This is far below the long-term, sustainable capability of these lands (12.2 bbf), and well under targets (7.6 bbf) set by newer management plans that integrated major resource protection measures (Fedkiw 1998). Currently, harvest levels on national forest and other federal lands remain insufficient to maintain forest health, control epidemic levels of insect damage, reduce hazardous fuels to limit wildfire risk, or mitigate the effects of catastrophic wildfire.

Although widely adopted in international forest policy, there is still inconsistent recognition domestically of the need to secure economic, environmental and social values from forested landscapes in order to provide a sustainable forest resource. When appropriately scaled to geography and forest and community characteristics, these three value sets are mutually supporting. For example, economic returns provide funds and infrastructure to help maintain or enhance environmental and social values. Promoting environmental values such soil, water, air and

biological quality sustains the basic foundation of economic and social values. Social values such as extensive forest scenery, recreational access, and local employment create the enduring ties between people and forests that foster broad support for diverse values. These values can be viewed as three legs of a stool that is the complete system of sustainable forest resources. However, dramatic harvest reductions in many public forests have removed or greatly weakened one leg of the stool, in turn often directly or indirectly damaging the other legs. Thus, the socioeconomic well-being of many forest-dependent communities has been greatly impacted, while growing wildfire hazards and occurrences threaten a host of environmental values and dramatically alter forest landscapes and ecosystems.

Despite such concerns, some groups and political leaders continue to advocate major restrictions or even total bans on commercial timber harvest on public forestlands. Supporting arguments focus on environmental risks and the view that commercial activity on public forests is inappropriate, costly, and simply benefits large corporations. Some opinion polls and prior policy decisions to limit harvest on public lands are cited as evidence of support for such restrictions. However, increasing forest health and wildfire problems in many public forests where harvesting has been greatly reduced suggest that continued or expanded restrictions may simply exacerbate forest resource and socioeconomic concerns in affected areas. Similarly, demands for forest products continue to increase, and environmental impacts from the use of alternative materials or imported products can be significant.

Background

Our public forestlands are very extensive and productive

The United States has approximately 319 million acres of forestlands in public ownership (Smith et al. 2004), an area comparable to nearly all of the states in the Eastern Time Zone. About a quarter (77 million acres) of these lands has been designated as wilderness areas, parks, and other major reserves where harvest of commercial products is normally prohibited. However, nearly half (147 million acres) of our public forestland can grow wood products for commercial use; this represents about 29% of such land in the United States and includes some of the most productive forests in the world. About 110 million acres of these productive forestlands are in federal ownership, and 37 million acres are state, county, and municipal lands. Given the scope and productivity of America's public forests and their diverse uses and values, policies that significantly impact the harvest of commercial products can have broad effects that range from local to global.

Sustainable commercial harvest is allowed or required

The 147 million acres of unreserved, productive public forestlands in the United States have been established and managed under laws that typically allow or mandate sustainable commercial harvests. For example, the Organic Act of 1897 directs federal forest managers "to improve and protect the forest, ... [secure] favorable conditions of water flows, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of the citizens of the U.S." Such laws also direct a significant proportion of the revenue from such harvests to local governments. Similarly, many state and local policies require that public forestlands be managed to produce sustainable revenues to counties, schools, and local taxing districts. In addition, state laws requiring prompt reforestation and maintenance of forestland productivity directly promote the sustainability of forest resource benefits.

Policies and practices protect other values

Although the U.S. and many other countries have actively promoted the sustainable forest concept abroad, this approach for integrating environmental, economic and social values is not consistently applied to domestic public forests, and it is strikingly absent in federal forest policy. Commonly, the public is presented with a conflict model that suggests that economic and environmental and social values are mutually exclusive. Timber harvest planning and practices have improved greatly in recent decades and continue to respond to both evolving knowledge and public concerns and laws for protecting diverse resource values. On federal lands, directives such as the Northwest Forest Plan focus on conservation of important fish and wildlife habitat. On state forest lands, in addition to other regulatory requirements, updated management plans often prescribe measures to maintain or improve habitat for key species. Such directives typically restrict harvest in sensitive areas and add to the costs of operations on public lands. However, economical harvest usually is possible with careful planning and when extensive delays from intentionally obstructive legal appeals or unlawful protests are avoided.

Commercial timber harvest is a key land management tool

America's forests are constantly changing. Trees and other vegetation grow, shed branch and foliage biomass, compete for space and nutrients, and eventually die from crowding or insect or disease infestations. This dynamic nature of our forests makes timber harvest an important management tool for both forest products and other values. On both federal and state lands, teams of professional foresters and other resource specialists carefully plan and supervise harvests to protect or enhance diverse resource values, including fish and wildlife habitats and recreational opportunities. Important work such as improvements to fish habitat, recreational areas, and roads are facilitated by the income, equipment, and skilled personnel made available by local commercial operations. Resource professionals recognize that harvest plans must vary widely among diverse management areas and objectives.

Economic benefits are large and broad

Commercial timber harvests provide significant economic benefits, including helping to pay for management for diverse values. America's forest products industry generates substantial income and employs about 1.7 million workers, a level comparable to the nation's auto and truck service and repair industry (US Census Bureau 2006). Forest products employment remains significant even in some of America's urban areas, but it is especially important in rural communities where other high-wage jobs are few. Basic industries like forest products also generate significant wealth both directly and far beyond the industry itself through a strong "economic multiplier." Given their location, productivity, and size, public forestlands often have a key role in timber production and employment throughout a state or region, even where other values are emphasized. Commercial timber harvest is widely recognized as an essential component of sustainable forestry and local communities near forests.

Forest products are an important, sustainable resource

Overall, the United States is a net importer of wood products (Shifley 2006). And because domestic demand for these products continues to rise, major harvest restrictions on public land result in an increase in harvesting in other ownerships, regions, and countries, including many that have far less stringent environmental standards or are much less productive (i.e., more acres must be harvested for similar yields). The rising cost of forest products, partly due to restrictions that add to

production costs and reduce market supplies, also increases the use of alternatives such as steel, plastic, and concrete. These materials pale in comparison to forest products in terms of fundamental sustainability, i.e., none is regularly produced with less energy (Glover et al. 2002) from an active air pollution cleanser (trees) while also being exceptionally renewable, recyclable, and biodegradable. The substantial environmental impacts that arise indirectly from broad harvest restrictions are rarely considered in opinion polls or politically motivated policy decisions.

Active management is widely needed

Where major concerns for other values are identified by site-specific assessments and collaborative planning, timber harvest can be locally restricted on public lands. In contrast, broad prohibitions provide no flexibility and do nothing to address such serious concerns as America's rapidly expanding forest health and wildfire hazards. Ironically, such prohibitions would trade manageable risks for the largely uncontrollable and violent forces of nature, with potentially far greater costs (e.g., Mason et al. 2006) and environmental damage to the values that are the focus of "protection." Former Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber, his fellow western governors, and the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) are among the notable leaders that have studied and stressed the need for very extensive active management to reduce these widespread forest health and wildfire problems. The large scope of this work makes commercial harvest an important tool and revenue source for management while also providing environmentally friendly products and economic benefits to local communities, including the extensive and resilient forests that attract both visitors and businesses.

References

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