Forest Health: A Congressional Perspective
by Congressman Larry LaRocco
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Thank you for inviting me to speak today on forest health, an issue which is rapidly coming to the forefront of public debate. As a Member of the House Natural Resources Committee, I welcome this opportunity.

1993 marks a watershed year for a major public policy shift in forest management. As in the past, watersheds are the result of widespread change in public attitudes, actions, as well as changes in natural conditions -- and require responsiveness on the part of policy-makers.

Past watersheds in forest policy

1. For example, a policy shift of the past occurred against the backdrop of widespread public perception that forests in the East and Midwest had been overcut and abandoned by private timber companies that had moved West. At that time, the Forest Reserve System was being managed by the Interior Department, which was, itself, suffering from a long history of scandal, including the Teapot Dome.

The father of professional forestry in the United States, Gifford Pinchot, was working in the Department of Agriculture. Pinchot shared the public's distrust of the Interior Department, and in 1905, convinced President Theodore Roosevelt and Congress that the forest reserves should be renamed "national forests" and moved from Interior to Agriculture where they could be properly managed under his bureau which was renamed the "Forest Service."

2. In more recent times, another shift in forest policy followed clearcutting on the Monongahela in West Virginia. Public outcry led to a lawsuit that correctly asserted clearcutting was illegal under the 1897 Organic Act of the Forest Service which authorized timber sales. The policy result -- enactment of the National Forest Management Act in 1976.

3. One final example involved changing and conflicting use patterns on national forests after World War II which led to a big change in national forest policy.

With an expanding affluence during the 50's and 60's, came a paralleled increase in leisure time, which lead to an explosion in outdoor recreation that has not abated.

Another changing use pattern occurring at that time, which was related to the baby boom and economic recovery, was an increased demand for wood to build houses. As a result, timber harvest on national forests tripled during the decade of 50's.

Three other related events included an attempt by the forest industry to obtain compensation for timber lands being flooded by federal reservoirs. Most companies preferred to be compensated by selecting national forest lands-rather than cash.

Also, ranchers were pushing for changes to the grazing system which would allow them greater influence over allotment management. And, in 1955 came the first attempt at enactment of a wilderness bill.

As a result of competing uses vying for more control over management of national forest lands, the Forest Service had a real need for striking a balance. Congress gave them a tool to accomplish that in the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act.

Today's changes

And now, in 1993, the stars seem to be realigning for yet another watershed change in forest management policy. And during the following few minutes, I hope to make the case for Congress and the Administration to move ahead, with the involvement of all affected parties, to direct land management agencies on forest health and ecosystem management.

One phenomenon foreshadowing a policy change is that many forest systems are on the verge of collapse due to years of over-effective fire suppression and turn-of-the-century logging practices. This pattern of historic use and management has been brought to a crisis by recent drought conditions.

1. Fire

Before fire suppression and intensive forest management, fire was nature's tool to maintain a balance. Fire naturally thinned our forests and maintained an optimum number of trees per acre, all competing for limited quantities of water, nutrients, sunlight and growing space.

But, those who settled the West concluded forest fires were a big threat to people and resources. The decision to suppress fires seemed the right thing to do. But the reduction of fire has had ramifications that reverberate throughout the forests today. Over time, without fire there was a steady change in the structure of our forests, species composition and the number of trees competing for limited resources.

Some of the gravest forest health problems in Idaho are occurring in ecosystems which historically contained mostly long-needled pines adapted to fires at short intervals. But these conditions have been altered by decades of fire suppression and management practices that selectively removed the commercially-valuable pines.

These same harvest and fire suppression practices favored high reproduction and growth of true fir and Douglas-fir species that are particularly susceptible to drought and pests on dry sites. In the past, periodic low-intensity wildfires kept these species in check while sparing the fire-adapted ponderosa pine and larch.

For example, in the mid-1800's, open stands dominated by Ponderosa pine and larch covered 70 percent of the Blue Mountain forests of northeast Oregon. Today, they cover only 30 percent, while dense stands of true fir, Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, and spruce dominate 70 percent of these forests.

Now, pest problems have increased due to the many weakened trees. And as trees continue to succumb to these attacks, forest become virtual tinderboxes ready to explode into disastrous wildfires.

In central and southern Idaho, the Payette and Boise National Forests are experiencing catastrophic damage from insect and disease attack. Both forests are dying significantly faster than they are growing. The statistics are startling and telling.

On the Payette's timber land, average mortality is 407 board feet per acre, while growth is only 248 board feet. Mortality figures on the Boise are even worse. Since 1988, the Forest has lost more than 400,000 trees on more than 1 million acres of affected forest.

While many scientists believe that low-intensity fires and prescribed burns should eventually become part of the management regime, the risk of using fire under current conditions is high. William Gast, who headed the Blue Mountain forest health study, told The Oregonian, "Because the fuel load is so high, a fire would burn so hot it could break down the structure of the soil and reduce soil productivity. That fact complicates letting nature take its course."

What are the dangers of high intensity wildfires?

* With current fuel loads, wildfires are capable of setting the ecological clock back to zero. Even the most fire-resistant old-growth ponderosa pines, currently mixed in with ailing firs, are at risk, particularly if flames climb to the top of the trees and race through the crowns.

* In areas where the ground is covered with large amounts of dead, dry fuel, fire can scorch the earth, destroy soil organic matter and even "fire" clays in the soil into lifeless ceramic bricks.

* Under current conditions, fires pose a tremendous hazard to the many communities, homes and people that have located in forested areas in recent years. On one windy day, alone, in 1991 the more than 90 wildfires destroyed 112 homes in the Inland Northwest.

* Insect-damaged riparian areas, which provide habitat for native fish and threatened salmon, carry enormous fuel loads and face the potential of extreme post-wildfire erosion.

2. Drought

And, according to Sunday's Spokesman-Review, fire officials say that although many places in Idaho experienced a long winter and wet spring, this does not mean an end to the six-year drought. The snow that buried the Panhandle for nearly three months was great for skiing, but contained only half the typical moisture content. And the wet spring has given North Idaho a good crop of nice, green grass that will be good fuel as it dries in the summer.

3. Spotted owl, ESA, and Ecosystem Management

Another factor aligning with forest health concerns to precipitate a policy change is the evolution of the spotted owl debate and the listings of large numbers of fish and wildlife under the Endangered Species Act.

And, converging with the unraveling of forest systems of the West is the development of ecosystem management, which may be more a consequence of change than a cause. As multiple-use was to the 60's, ecosystem management is being explored as a solution to today's natural resource management problems. Ecosystem restoration action is needed to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, and to repair watersheds and restore the natural dynamics and resilience of forest systems.

I've heard many people say ecosystem management sounds great in theory, but what does it really mean? In a recent National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee oversight hearing on Rehabilitation, Reforestation and Reinvestment on National Forests of the Pacific Northwest, I took the opportunity to ask Forest Service Chief Dale Robertson for a definition of ecosystem management. He said, "Ecosystem management means sustainability of all uses and values of the forest, and we will manage these forests for healthy, productive, biologically diverse ecosystems over time."

He went on to explain, "We are going to get out of the plantation forestry business and try to maintain very much of the diversity that exists in a natural forest such as big trees and a diverse canopy. It means our people on the ground are making some different kinds of decisions so that this forest will look different then it has in the past. You will not see these big square clearcuts or plantation forestry."

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The Natural Resources Committee continues to explore the parameters of ecosystem management. On May 16, I attended a workshop at the Black Butte Ranch south of Bozeman, Montana. The workshop brought together scientists and Members of the House Natural Resources Committee to explore informally the issues and challenges associated with ecosystem management in the Northern Rockies.

There was a consensus among these scientists that land and water resources are currently managed in a fragmented manner, and that coordinated and comprehensive management is highly desirable. They also agreed that, because ecosystem protection necessarily involves management, it cannot be completely equated with wilderness, and that the human dimension -- stable communities founded on sustainable resources -- is a viable component.

Similar workshops and hearings will help the Committee identify steps that Congress may wish to initiate to overcome the legal and institutional barriers to sound ecosystem management.

5. Clinton Administration

And finally, I would like to emphasize the importance of the Clinton Administration in establishing a critical mass for change. The American people finally have in place an Administration with a strong desire to govern and to listen to science.

Furthermore, with an Administration friendly to the leadership in Congress, there is reestablished a trust which has been absent for years. For example, if the Natural Resources Committee believes the Administration should go first in addressing the spotted owl situation of the Northwest, Congress will wait for the Administration to take the lead and accomplish what it can.

And, when it does come time for legislation, with this new spirit of cooperation, bills which move through Congress will actually be signed into law by the President.

National Forest Health Act

Last year, as many of you are aware, I introduced the National Forest Health Act of 1992 to bring focus to and begin a dialogue on the issue of forest health. With the bipartisan co-sponsorship of 30 members of the House of Representatives I was able to steer that legislation through the full Agriculture Committee. And, this Congress, I continue to stir the pot by reintroducing that bill approved by the Agriculture Committee as H.R. 229.

My bill authorizes the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior to carry out forest health improvement programs, in consultation with state and federal fish, wildlife and cooperative forestry experts, in an effort to reduce further damage to forest resources and promote management of sustained, diverse, and healthy forest ecosystems.

These lands are to be recognized as a forest health emergency for a specific length of time, until conditions favorable to forest health are restored. And, at the request of the Governor of an affected state, adjacent state and private lands can be included in the emergency areas and become eligible for federal assistance to address forest health problems.

1. **Stewardship Contracts:**

Another measure included in my bill is a provision for multiple-year contracts where the focus is on long-term outcomes, not outputs. The fiscal year `92 and `93 appropriations bills for the Forest Service directed the agency to test this new "land stewardship contract" approach to federal timber sale contracting on several western national forests including the Idaho Panhandle. And the agency is experiencing success.

The appropriations bills directed that stewardship contracts be used to "help the private sector promote the Forest Service ecosystem management initiative ...and to give contractors an incentive to become as concerned with sustaining ecosystems as with sustaining trees."

In terms of procedure, this system would allow the Forest Service to contract for an array of ecosystem management and ecological restoration services as part of a total land management "package deal" with a single contractor. The contractor would be compensated for these services by receiving credit toward the amount owed to the Forest Service for timber harvested as part of the contract activities. This approach is essentially the same as the "purchaser credit" system used for many years to compensate timber purchasers for road construction and maintenance associated with a timber sale.

On the Panhandle, representatives of the Forest Service, timber industry and environmental community are closely involved in shaping a land stewardship project which is not too complicated, to increase the chance of success. Some of what is being considered is helicopter logging, logs being cut to length by a forwarder, some conventional logging, stream course rehabilitation, addressing road and water quality problems, and fencing for grazing.

In addition to the potential for enactment, the introduction of legislation generates spin-off benefits which bring focus and clarity to an issue, which has certainly been the case with my forest health bill.

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2. **Report results from hearings:**

In response to my legislation, the Subcommittee on Forests, Family Farms and Energy of the Agriculture Committee held three hearings on forest health, one in Coeur d'Alene on Memorial Day of last year. The testimony received during those hearings should not, in my judgement, be lost or set aside because it continues to provide a foundation upon which to build.

For example, primarily in response to hearings on my legislation, a forest health report was released in May by the Chief of the Forest Service. The introduction to the report states, "During the hearings, members of Congress asked how the forests recently damaged by drought, pest epidemics, and wildfires will be restored and how similar damage will be prevented elsewhere."

The report further states, "The strategic goals and actions in this plan support the new emphasis on ecosystem management in the National Forest System, ... will help strengthen Forest Service cooperative programs and provide for better coordination and assistance on forest health problems, ...and will lead to better integration of forest health considerations into agency planning and decision making."

3. **Changes in green slip program:**

An additional benefit was that, throughout the hearing process, I learned about changes which need to be made to my bill -- information that will be invaluable in improving any legislative package.

In Coeur d'Alene, small logging operators urged an increase in the number of small sales on national forests and a return of the "greenslip" program.

In a follow-up letter to the hearing, Chief Dale Robertson stated, "Reductions in the Region's large sale program have also reduced the contract work available to many of the small, independent operators. Because of this, the operators have shown increasing interest in securing small sales, as well as salvaging dead, dying and blowdown timber. The result has been a demand for both small sales and salvage sales that the Ranger Districts cannot meet, and the need to advertise the sales that they can offer."

The Chief went on to provide valuable information which identified barriers the agency faced in regards to green slip sales including their limited application, inadequate resource protection, legal requirements of the agency to offer sales under competitive bid, and the high unit cost for preparation and administration of these sales in a time when there is increased emphasis on cost efficiency for the agency's timber sale program.

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4. Obstacles from environmental community:

Also, in response to questions raised at the Coeur d'Alene hearing, the Forest Service indicated that in FY91, 28 percent, or 270 million board feet of the 980 million board feet of timber to be offered for sale in Region One was affected by appeals. Of that, 26 percent, or 70 million board feet of the timber sale volume appealed were salvage sales.

But, from the environmental community, I heard concerns about <u>any</u> attempt to stymie public participation or short-cut environmental documentation.

So, over the months following the hearings, with the help of Neil Sampson and his capable staff at American Forests, I worked closely with environmental, timber, and labor leaders for a balanced and equitable process which would allow public participation, but within a time frame sensitive to the rapid deterioration of timber in the forest. With this attempt to resolve the forest health issue in the 102nd Congress, it was the first time in many years that leaders of the Audubon Society, The Wilderness Society, the National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club, the American Forests and Paper Association, and the Brotherhood of Carpenters, met in the same room together. And,while we were not completely success, I am hopeful that through symposia and other similar forums, we will develop a solid solution.

As nothing more than an observer, I believe the environmental community had become muscle-bound as a result of 12 years of the Reagan/Bush Administration. Members of conservation groups had developed much distrust and were afraid to move forward with virtually any public policy.

They had spent the past 12 years trying to prevent the erosion of past environmental accomplishments which had been written into law, as they watched the executive branch move with its own agenda, which clearly did not mesh with theirs.

It was clear that when a legislative initiative such as mine was introduced the first reaction of the conservation community was to pull back rather than to move forward, as their political agenda had became more defensive rather than offensive. The groups were acting independently instead of with one voice and coordination among groups had decayed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, health problems on western forests are complex, have developed over decades, and many predict it will take decades to solve the problems. Both natural conditions and public opinion play a role in formation of new forest management policy, scientists will keep finding new ways to address these concerns, and public officials and decision-makers should not be afraid to heed science and govern.

Inaction can be the worst enemy and is not a solution because options become reduced and human suffering and environmental damages continue to increase. As President Clinton stated at the Portland forest conference this Spring, we cannot stop the process of change, but there is a need to manage that change so that both people and the land are given a fair chance. The job for Congress, the Administration, and constituent groups is to recognize the convergence of forces in society and nature and work together for a solution.