

“Abolish The Forest Service,” Forbes magazine, September 18, 2000

By Robert H. Nelson

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THIN OUT SMALL TREES TO PROTECT FORESTS FROM fire. fire. Not a bad idea, as recently floated by the U.S. Forest Service, but too late when so much of the western U.S. is already burning. This is only the latest example of the misjudgments perpetrated on the American public by the U.S. Forest Service.

Here's another idea: Thin out the federal government. Get rid of the U.S. Forest Service. Give or sell its mismanaged assets to state governments and private industry.

Forest fires have consumed 6 million acres and more than 500 homes so far this year, and are still raging across Montana, Idaho and other western states. These fires are not random acts of nature. They have been disasters waiting to happen.

The leading culprit is the U.S. Forest Service. The Los Alamos fire started at Bandelier National Monument, but soon spread to the Santa Fe National Forest. Much of the area now burning in the West is national forest land.

Smokey Bear was the leading symbol of the Forest Service for decades, teaching us that forest fires must be prevented at all costs. It turns out that Smokey was wrong. Suppressing forest fire does not eliminate the threat of fire but postpones it. As wood volumes build up, any fire that results will burn much more intensely, creating large risks to lives and property and the forest environment. Barry Hill, associate director of the U.S. General Accounting Office, said as much two years ago.

This was not the first such warning. In 1994 the National Commission on Wildfire Disasters foresaw fires "so hot and fast-moving that control by human means is impossible." The Forest Service, nonetheless, has been sharply reducing its timber harvests--from 12 billion board feet in 1989 to less than 3 billion per year today. By the Forest Service's own estimates, 60% of its lands nationwide are today in an unhealthy and fire-prone condition. They are going to get more unhealthy. The Forest Service recently announced a moratorium on road building on 43 million acres, which will further limit the ability to reduce excess wood loads.

At first the agency's solution to the problems it has created was a much-expanded program of "prescribed burning." But a prescribed burn that got out of control caused the Los Alamos fire. Prescribed burning is also expensive and causes air pollution.

Now there is a tree-thinning plan, which would cost \$825 million a year. There is something terribly wrong here. The thinning is desperately needed, but forests are a valuable asset and should be yielding a return to the taxpayer in timber royalties and recreational fees. But under the Forest Service they are losers, even without this latest spending plan. In 1998 the Forest Service took in \$788 million in revenue while spending \$2.3 billion to manage its assets.

Things have been getting worse. For many decades the Forest Service sought to maximize the value of recreation, timber, water and livestock grazing on their lands. In the 1990s, however, the agency adopted "ecosystem management." The goal is now a so-called natural forest that corresponds to ecological workings prior to European settlement. By the Forest Service's own calculations, not only has the level of timber harvesting fallen precipitously, but the total economic value of all human uses of the forest--including recreation--has also declined by more than 60%.

Many people in the West reject the idea that the national forests should become an enormous nature preserve. These forests include 192 million acres, almost 10% of the U.S. In Idaho they make up 40% of the state.

A private owner would better protect their precious assets not only from fire but from economic depredation. In the 1980s the government caved in to loggers who welshed on contracts for cutting rights for which they had overbid. No private owner would sit still for this. Nor would a private owner spend millions building logging roads in order to collect much less in cutting fees--the kind of mischief that has characterized many Forest Service timber sales over the years.

Many nations today are privatizing their failing state-owned enterprises, or at least handing them off to more-accountable state and local government units. Let's do the same. Abolish the U.S. Forest Service and give its responsibilities to state governments and the private sector.

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