

# ***Allegheny Forest Alliance***

## ***Spring 2006 Newsletter***

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### **TRUTH IN SCIENCE**

Having spent thirty-six years as a professional educator, I learned to respect science-based decisions. As it relates to forest management, however, the picture is not quite so clear. I sit in forest planning meetings listening to both sides cite scientific “fact” supporting both sides of the harvesting issue. So, what exactly is the truth?

To illustrate this issue more specifically, consider the battle going on within the Oregon State University's College of Forestry (CoF). Recently, a graduate student published a study he and his colleagues conducted on the Biscuit Fire range, which has become a lightning rod for scientific controversy. You may recall the Biscuit Fire raged from July, 2002 until late October of that year. It scorched 500,000 acres of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest. Since that time there has been intense scrutiny about how to deal with the aftermath – scientifically speaking.



Graduate student Daniel Donato and his colleagues concluded in their study that salvage logging on the Biscuit did more damage than good. He found it not only left six times more tinder on the ground than was found in areas left unmanaged, it also destroyed 71% of the seedlings sprouting naturally after the fire. The study was published in *Science* magazine and was widely publicized. Donato concluded the reason for salvaging the dead wood was purely economic and not for any scientific benefit. He contends the region would have been better left alone.

A prominent professor at OSU took exception to the report and offered evidence to refute Donato's conclusions. Dr. John Sessions notes that the intense fire resulted from zero management of the area for 60 years culminating in fuel overload. Left unmanaged for 20 years post fire, “high hazard” conditions will be reached caused by an abundance of woody debris (dead trees) on the forest floor which will far outweigh the tinder conditions described in the Donato report.

More importantly, the seedlings currently sprouting will never mature to a size necessary to withstand the next fire regime, which is a matter of when not if. He states a tree must be 18” in diameter to avoid significant damage caused by fire, and it will take 160 years for the species to naturally reach that size. He concluded there will be no debate over post fire salvage after the next fire because there will not be anything left standing.

So, whose science do we believe? Mr. Donato claims his science is more ecologically friendly and devoid of economics, which warms the hearts of the preservationists. Dr. Sessions' science on the other

hand, suggests an absence of management will not only result in an economic loss, but will require centuries for natural recovery.

As I write, the *Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act* (FERRA) is making its way through the House. It calls for active post-catastrophic management. No doubt the debate at OSU is fostering discussion in Congress about the truth in science as well.

## SMOKEY BEAR'S LEGACY

The legend of Smokey Bear is well known across America. *"Only you can prevent forest fires"* was the battle cry for three quarters of a century as forest service personnel at all levels did their best to stamp out forest fires. The effort was quite successful, but many contend the net effect has not necessarily been a good thing for our forests.

Following many years of fire suppression, forests throughout the land are in perilous condition. They are over stocked with undergrowth that stretches to the forest crown, a perfect scenario for devastating and deadly infernos. Dense vegetation also serves as a breeding ground for insects and disease. Well over half of our national forests suffer from this malady, which is viewed by most forest practitioners as a serious to a severe threat to sustainability.

Marvin Brown, a state forester in Oregon and national president of the Society of American Foresters recently wrote an article about this very issue. He defines sustainability as: *"the use, development and protection of resources in ways that meet today's needs while providing that future generations also can meet theirs."* He goes on to state:

*"...forests as a whole must offer a full set of economic, environmental and social values. These values aren't in competition. We must sustain all of them to sustain any of them. If forests cannot generate revenue, we cannot afford to keep them and enjoy their environmental benefits, such as clean water and wildlife habitat, or their social benefits, such as recreation and support for schools and other important services."*

*If forests' environmental values aren't protected, we jeopardize the basic soil, water and biological elements that underpin economic value. And if forests don't deliver social value, society will withhold permission to manage them, putting all the benefits at risk."*



Smokey Bear's preservationist mantra set forest management on a course that threatens sustainability. Not only did it suppress fires, known for centuries to be a benefit to forest management, but perhaps more importantly, it induced the USFS into believing preservation was a more desirable management strategy than production. The net result is our forests generally are failing to meet today's needs and show little sign of doing so in the future.

I cannot help but wonder whether mounting pressure to "withhold permission to manage" will appreciably affect the new forest plan for the Allegheny thereby risking all future benefits.

## RIGHT OF EXPECTATION

As many of you know, the Allegheny National Forest was created in 1923 and at the time was dubbed a “brush heap.” Much of the landscape had been logged over around the turn of the century and little but saplings remained.

The Forest Service has done a creditable job managing the land and its resources, nurturing their development over the years to a point where a new growth of timber has matured. Fortunately for the USFS and to local residents in particular, the new forest is rich in Allegheny Hardwoods, which are revered worldwide.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Congress fully realized that federalizing land caused undue burden for local taxing agencies. To compensate, the **1908 Act** was passed forfeiting 25% of all receipts accrued from the forests annually to assist with roads and schools maintenance.

For more than 60 years on the ANF, the 25% payments never climbed to double digit numbers in millions of dollars shared, which was quite understandable given growth rate of the new forest. The corner on forest maturity was not turned until the late 80’s at which time some 40 plus managing recipients began to receive substantial benefit. Ten years later, however, the federal government yanked the rug out from under the agreement by pulling the plug on timber harvesting.

Townships and school districts throughout the region waited patiently for over eighty years to profit from a mature forested condition. With a 60% maturity rate currently existing across the forest, the time has finally arrived only to have the brakes applied to the process. Most local residents would agree that townships and school districts have a right to expect more from their perceived “good neighbor.”

## ECONOMICS 101

My father taught me never to buy anything I could not afford. As a result, I am not keen on credit cards or the like because they offer a false sense of worth. I am forced to carry one only because society demands it. Americans are rarely afforded many goods and services these days with good ol’ cash.

Such is not the case with the government. It has no problem spending what it does not have. It simply applies the plastic and keeps on spending what it does not have. Those within the system who would follow my father’s fiscal advice are often criticized for their effort. The following is a case in point.

Congressional leaders and the administration embrace the Secure Rural Schools legislative concept. You will recall this law provides safety-net funding directly from the U.S. Treasury for roads and schools maintenance in lieu of 25% payments. Since timber production on our national forests fell 80% over the last decade and a half, it became necessary to compensate counties and schools. A more viable funding solution was to be found over the six year life of the law, but alas never materialized. Now the executive and legislative branches are struggling to reauthorize the law under a shroud of reconciliation.



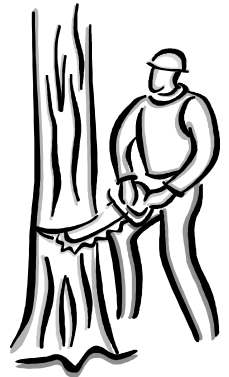
I remember my father being faced with a similar dilemma and his solution was to collect and sell junk metal. Similarly, the administration suggested reconciling reauthorization by selling useless assets that are a burden to taxpayers. The assets in question are 300,000 plus acres of unmanageable national forest land. Although this pay as you go philosophy would have warmed my dad's heart, it incensed the plastic pushers in DC whose solution is quite novel, just tax!

Unfortunately, the best solution of all to the funding shortfall is hardly ever discussed, at least in public. It would have made my father most proud. Simply cut some more trees. In many places safety-net funding would be unnecessary as 25% money would suffice. In addition, it would provide for a healthier forest and would help level the balance of payments. Rather than consider this obvious means of reconciliation, however, it is easier and less controversial for the demagogues to simply swipe the plastic card and tax the public.

## A TALE OF FOUR SALES

A Forest Service issued a report recently that reveals some very interesting numbers regarding black cherry on four relatively small sales on the ANF. The analysis focused only on that species in sales both on the Bradford and Marienville Ranger Districts. The numbers are startling to say the least.

A total of 4,981 black cherry trees are scheduled for harvest totaling 1.8mmbf. That comes out to around 361bf per tree. Here is where the story gets interesting. The net worth of each tree is \$1,045 or roughly \$2,900 per thousand board foot. The entire four sales only cover 88 acres, an average value per acre of \$31,592. It certainly isn't hard to understand why none of the 300,000 plus acres on national forests across the US considered for sale is coming from the ANF.



The report illustrates the bountiful condition of the ANF. In large part, the forest is biologically and economically mature, fully ripened so to speak. Like a strawberry in early summer, the mature trees need to be harvested or they will fall to the ground and be of little value to anyone or anything. The window of opportunity is now open as indicated by the four sales cited above. All that needs to happen is for the Forest Service to act responsibly.

## SPRING '06 BOARD MEETING SCHEDULED

The AFA Board meeting will be held on May 9 with a full agenda for discussion. Topping the list will be gearing up for the disclosure of the *Draft Environmental Impact Statement* (DEIS) for the new forest plan scheduled to be rolled out sometime in May. It will be important for the Alliance collectively and its members individually to step forward and make their opinions known regarding the projected alternatives in the DEIS.

Among many other things, the Board will also address reauthorization of **PL 106-393**, commonly to as Secure Rural Schools Act or safety-net legislation. It is currently working its way through the halls of Congress and has received support from the administration. The coalition will need to determine the extent to which it will support this legislative effort and what if any step will be taken to do so. Determining just how reauthorization will affect the local landscape will need to be discussed.

## STRUGGLE FOR REAUTHORIZATION

As most of us know, the *Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self Determination Act of 2000*, commonly called **PL106-393**, is in its final year of authorization. Funding year 2006 marks the end of safety-net funding and signals to return of 25% payments - that is unless the law is reauthorized.

Folks in DC and around the country are in a frenzy over this issue, and for many rightly so. The law has provided several states with a rather handsome subsidy for the last six years in lieu of the traditional receipt payment dating back to 1908. Much effort has been and will continue to be spent marshalling support among congressman on both sides of the aisle for reauthorization.

Without a doubt, the path to re-up **PL106-393** has become far more difficult this time around for several reasons. This fact was made quite clear by Under Secretary Mark Rey at the National Forest Counties & Schools Coalition (NFCSC) conference held early in April in Reno, NV. You may recall Mark Rey helped author the original bill when he served on Senator Larry Craig's (R-ID) staff back in the late 90s. Few know more about all aspects of the law than he.

Undersecretary Rey offered several cogent points as to why reauthorization is not a slam-dunk. They include:

- The original legislation was time limited requiring a more permanent solution within the six year window of the law.
- Current timber receipts actually equal payments made to counties and schools prior to 1980.
- Safety-net payments for many counties are greater than what the traditional average was over a longer time span. (Example: The ANF safety-net average has been \$6M per year for the past five years while the previous 20 year average for 25% payments was only \$3.7M)
- The payment formula is grossly inequitable nationwide.
- Resource Advisory Committees (RACs), an integral part of the law, have not caught on nationwide, existing in only 27% of the counties.
- Viable alternatives for funding roads and schools were only sought by a few counties over the six years, causing benefactors to simply "punt."
- If counties can raise money for easements and the like, why not for roads and schools?
- On a national scale, this issue is far less compelling than issues like Katrina, the war, and the national debt.
- Before the budget resolution is finalized, what other national issues may emerge?

I remain convinced reauthorization will move forward and am committed to do my part to see that it does. We on the Allegheny, however, must be assured the new law includes an annual opt-out clause because we are among the fortunate few that did arrive at a better solution, namely increasing timber receipts as the **1908 Act** originally intended.

Your membership contribution for 2006 is due. Payment ensures you are represented in advocating for multiple-use management and a sustained yield on the Allegheny National Forest. Thank you.

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