

# Allegheny Forest Alliance

## Fall 2002 Newsletter

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### AFA Action Alert.....

**BE ALERT to requests from the Forest Service for public input regarding the following and be prepared to express your thoughts verbally and in writing.**

The U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires that all national forests develop a management plan every 10-15 years. The Allegheny National Forest (ANF) is scheduled to begin its new planning cycle in October 2002. This process is extremely important, particularly for those living in and around the ANF.

Federal laws such as the **Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960** direct national forests to provide wood to meet public demand. This must be done without compromising the sustainability of the forest. Clearly, this must remain Priority #1 for the Forest Service. Favorable water supply, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, and wilderness require consideration as well.

Critical issues for consideration include:

**ASQ (Allowable Sale Quantity):** the maximum amount of harvesting permitted under the forest plan while maintaining sustainability.

- The current plan calls for 94 mmbf (million board feet) considering the ANF is regenerating 108 mmbf annually.
- Harvesting capacity estimates by the FS for the years 1995-2005 were judged to be 53.2 mmbf.
- The average timber harvest for the last three years has only reached 19.2 mmbf.
- The decline can be directly attributed to appeals by preservationist.

**Division of Management Areas (MA):** how will the 513,000 acres be divided for management purposes?

- There are no fewer than 11 management prescriptions used in the current plan.
- Approximately 82% of the total acreage has a management objective that calls for timber harvesting (420,000 acres.)

- Increases in the size of a management area causes proportional decreases in others.

**Road Density:** the amount of forest service roads per square mile.

- This figure will have a direct impact on harvesting (traditional vs. helicopter logging).
- Density level is well within the current plan requirements.

**Wilderness:** prudent and justifiable acreage needs to be considered.

- Is Congressional designation advisable or can MA 5.0 continue to suffice?
- Is an additional 42,000 acres necessary (currently 9,031 acres)?
- Less than 1% of the U.S. population recreate on wilderness land.
- Wilderness like art “differs in the eyes of the beholder.”
- Ecosystem stability is threatened in wilderness land.
- Wilderness cost taxpayers well over \$100M annually for maintenance with little or no revenue benefit.
- DCNR maintains 228,609 acres of wilderness (wild and natural areas) just east of the ANF.
- The ancient forest of the area was not what wilderness advocates envision.
- Congressional designation restricts ALL activity except limited foot travel.

**Trails:** the amount and kind of trail miles must be considered.

- Public demand is probably growing the fastest in this area.
- Consideration includes hikers, bikers, snowmobilers, skiers, equestrians, ATVs, etc.
- Summer motorized trails are about 1/3 of the planned proposal.
- Winter motorized trails are slightly ahead of planned mileage.

**Motels/Lodging/Convention:** accommodations for year around visitors to the ANF.

- Motel/Convention center on the Allegheny Reservoir.
- Cabins with and without amenities located at various sites.

*BE ALERT to requests from the Forest Service for public input regarding this process and be prepared to express your thoughts verbally and in writing.*

## **Politics, Down and Dirty**

*By Jack Hedlund, AFA Executive Director*

On August 2, a group of bipartisan Senators issued an important news release. Plans are underway for the development of a comprehensive national strategy to curtail forest fires and “address the troubling forest health conditions plaguing our federal forests.” Why has it taken them so long to hear what any number of forest supervisors, past and present, have been telling them for a decade or more? This effort follows on the heels of Senator Daschle’s unilateral action in mid-July to pass vigorous fire protection initiatives for the Black Hills National Forest in his home state of South Dakota.

To date this year, 15 firefighters have lost their lives, 1,800 homes and other structures have burned, nearly \$1 billion of taxpayer money has been spent, and an area the size of Rhode Island and Connecticut has been totally scorched. And, there are two more months left in the fire season. The bipartisan coalition is citing the “paralysis of the administrative system,” which by the way they helped create, for failing to reduce fuel loading and insect infestation. Local and regional supervisors as well as forest consultants across the country have been singing that song for years only to have it fall on deaf years in the halls of Congress.

So, why now? Simply put, these Senators are doing what they do best, reacting to the emotions of their constituents; those constituents are now seeing their homes burned and are choking on all of the pollution.

The shame is that these Senators prefer to be guided by emotions rather than the advice of trained professionals. Decisions continue to be made to remove land from scientific management, leaving it to the whims of Mother Nature. Never, and I emphasize NEVER, since man’s arrival on this continent have our forests been left to the whims of Mother Nature.

I fail to be convinced we need any more wilderness or national monuments setting aside land by Congressional action or Executive order, never to be managed again. Apparently, this prestigious coalition of bipartisan Senators is reluctantly coming to the same conclusion. With a little luck, other elected politicians will grasp the wisdom of this decision as well.

## **Mission Going Astray**

*An AFA Position*

There is little doubt in this region, indeed the entire nation, that the United States Forest Service is under intense pressure to discontinue timber harvesting. Terrorist activity, endless lawsuits and bureaucratic red tape are making it virtually impossible for the Forest Service to fulfill its mission. In fact, we believe the USFS is being coerced in another direction as the following comparative analysis suggests.

- The mission of the U.S. Forest Service is “to have a healthy, vigorous forest providing wood products, watershed protection, variety of wildlife habitats, and recreational opportunities for everyone.”
- The mission of the U.S. Park Service is “to preserve the scenery, the natural and historic objects, and the wildlife of the United States, and leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

De-emphasizing “wood products” and other controversial activities “to preserve the scenery and leave them unimpaired” does in fact create a park. Keep in mind that parks typically provide service while accruing little or no revenue. Just recently a suit was filed in California seeking elimination of all fees for use of parks and public lands.

Government services do not come cheaply. Regardless of whether it is transportation, defense, health, welfare, parks or whatever, the taxpayers must foot the bill. The burden is particularly difficult for rural Americans because income is typically lower and taxable resources far less.

One exception to the tax dilemma should be our national forests. The system is well stocked with mature trees, particularly so in the Allegheny National Forest. If left to be professionally managed, this prolifically renewable and magnificent resource has and will continue to supply wood thereby providing tax-free revenue for

the federal government. In addition, wildlife continues to benefit from successional forest habitat while clean water and recreational services are provided. Does this sound like a win-win situation?

Let the USFS do the job it was created to do under the law, a job for which its employees are superbly qualified to fulfill. Do not corrupt the issue by melding their mission with that of the parks.

## “The Wilderness Myth”

*by Douglas Carlson, Forest County Conservation and Planning District Executive Director*

Having served Forest County residents as a conservation officer for a large part of my life, I have been keenly interested in the history of the Allegheny Plateau. In my quest to find out more about this great region, I ran across some interesting studies done by individuals following the same path. Dr. Thomas M. Bonnicksen, Texas A&M; Dr. Gerald W. Williams, historical analyst for the USFS; and Dr. Charles E. Kay, Utah State University, have researched and written extensively about ancient continental forests from the Ice Age to the present and the role fire management played in the evolution of the forests. The research indicates the forest type that existed on the Plateau for thousands of years was far different than that being portrayed by the wilderness zealots.

Studies indicate the Plateau was moderately populated by rather sophisticated Native Americans who actively managed the forest for a variety of purposes. The land was a mosaic of grasslands and forests of all successional types. Fire was used extensively to shape the land for multiple benefits. Shade intolerant species, popularly associated with the current wilderness movement, were in fact only a very small part of the total ancient forest.

So what about my perception of the current wilderness concept? I see it as a myth, born out of a very narrow historic window from approximately the Age of Discovery to the early 1800s, having European roots and ignoring the Native American influence. It bears no resemblance to the ancient forests that existed for several thousands of years following the Ice Age. In fact, I firmly believe that if the ANF received the attention it deserves and the Forest Plan directs it would be remarkably similar to those ancient forests. Locking the forest up in wilderness designation may result in old decaying and diseased trees, but it would not restore our ancient forest heritage. In fact, this romantic fiction would create quite the opposite effect.

## Commonwealth Issues of Note

Often, we are so overwhelmed with national forest issues we pay little attention to commonwealth issues. A case in point is a "Statement of Policy" passed earlier this year by the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR).

This policy establishes conservation areas out of donated land that will be restricted to "passive, non-motorized, low-density outdoor recreation and environmental education."

Many questions remain unanswered regarding this program that could have a significant impact on state taxpayers. First and foremost, the donated land stands little chance to yield any monetary benefit except perhaps to the donor for IRS purposes. Assumed control will undoubtedly increase state forest/park budgets and if the Bureau of State Parks administers the land, it becomes tax exempt.

AFA Executive Director Jack Hedlund was one of 45 individuals and/or entities to submit comments late last fall. Unfortunately, the majority favored the program and it moved forward.

## Decision on East Side Project Expected Soon

*By Susan Swanson, Executive Director of Allegheny Hardwoods Utilization Group*

In the ongoing litigation on the Allegheny National Forests East Side Project, the final responses have been filed. The decision, which will be made by Judge William Standish, is expected fairly soon.



Having originated in 1996, this project has been under continuous attack by the Allegheny Defense Project with pro bono representation by lawyers from the University of Pittsburgh Law Center. The latest brief submitted in the case was done so by Thomas Buchelle, the Law Center's director, on behalf of the plaintiffs. It was in response to objections filed earlier by lawyers representing the defendants (USFS and interveners) regarding the recommendations submitted by Magistrate Judge Ila Sensenich.

The East Side Project, originally intended to address severe mortality conditions within large

areas of the forest, has been labeled an 8,000-acre clear cut by the ADP. In fact, the project calls for less than 200 acres to be clear-cut in non-contiguous plots throughout the entire project area. A variety of management options are prescribed to address reforestation needs, all of which have been opposed by the ADP.

The East Side Project has probably been one of the most maligned forest service timber sales in the country. Last year the ADP and others proclaimed the ANF the most endangered forest in the nation, primarily in response to this project. Most forest professionals consider the inability of the Forest Service to complete management objections as a threat to the health and productivity of the forest. Not only is forest health imperiled, but so too are wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities, all of which are part of the overall project.

Ila Sensecich's report to Judge Standish was extremely critical of the Forest Service's management plan and was viewed by the defendants as being highly subjective and lacking in legal credibility. The Department of Justice on behalf of the USFS as well as Crowell and Moring, representing the interveners filed strong opposition to her recommendations. District Court Judge William Standish must now weigh all arguments and issue his decision.

## **A View on Prescribed Fires**

*A reprinted commentary by Dr. Thomas M. Bonnicksen*

COLLEGE STATION, Texas -- **T**he drumbeat for "prescribed fire" has never been louder -- despite the fact that 32 large out-of-control wildfires are raging throughout the United States, destroying billions of dollars of prime timber and private property.

The Sierra Club and other environmentalists say deliberately set fires are the best way to solve today's wildfire crisis. Their simplistic reasoning: fire is natural and therefore good for forests. Yet, ironically, the Sierra Club also has a "zero cut" policy. It wants to protect trees from loggers, but it does not mind killing millions of trees with fire.

Environmentalists cannot have it both ways. Are they tree huggers or eco-arsonists? Widespread burning would make sense in a different century, but it's 2002, not 1802. If we could look back 200 years, we would see fires burning regularly in about 91 percent of our forests. These were mostly gentle fires that stayed on the ground as they wandered around under the trees.

You could walk over the flames without burning your legs.

In a historic forest, gentle fires burned often enough to clear dead wood and small trees from under the big trees. They might flare up in a pile of logs or a patch of thick trees, but would quickly drop back to the ground. Such hot spots kept forests diverse by creating openings where young trees and shrubs could grow.

These were sunny forests that explorers described as open enough to gallop a horse through without hitting a tree. Open and patchy forests like this also were immune from monster fires like those that scorched Arizona and Colorado this year.

Our forests look different today. They are crowded with trees of all sizes and filled with logs and dead trees. You can barely walk through them, let alone ride a horse. That is why the gentle fires of the past have become the ravenous beasts we know today.

Environmentalists blame foresters for creating thick forests by putting out fires. However, environmentalists want thick forests. They lobbied for years to convert forests to old growth, which they define as dense, multi-layered, and filled with dead trees and logs.

Now they also want to keep 58 million acres of forest roadless and unmanaged. They are using tree-hugger arguments to set up our forests to burn. Then they use fire-hugger arguments to justify the infernos they create. It is naive to believe we can have thick forests and gentle fires. Even carefully planned prescribed fire is unsafe in today's forests.

Each 20,000-acres of "prescribed burn" is likely to produce one escaped fire. That means there could be as many as 243 escaped fires a year. This is unacceptable, when you consider there are 94,000 homes at risk in fire-prone areas in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains alone.

Environmentalists also overlook what it was like when fires burned freely. Explorers often complained in their journals about the pall of smoke hanging over mountains and valleys. Today, health hazards and air pollution restrictions make extensive burning difficult and unpalatable.

In addition, most forests require thinning before prescribed burning, and 73 million acres need such treatment. The initial treatment would cost about \$60 billion during the first 15 years. And

maintenance costs of about \$31 billion for subsequent 15-year periods would continue ad infinitum. That figure does not include the vast amounts of money spent to fight escaped fires, rebuild destroyed homes, control erosion and plant trees to replace burned forests.

Taxpayers will not pay this enormous cost. Likewise, the public will not stand for smoky skies from prescribed fires and burned homes from inevitable escapes. We must find a better solution.

Restoration provides the best hope for returning health to our forests because it uses forest history as a model for management. The forests that explorers found were beautiful, diverse, filled with wildlife, and resistant to monster fires.

Restoring historic forests is easy, but success requires working with the private sector. People who make their living from forests have the skill and desire to help. It would take little public funding since restored forests would come close to supporting themselves from the sale of carefully harvested wood products. Restoration is a cost-effective and safe way to protect our forests and solve the wildfire crisis.

*Dr. Thomas M. Bonnicksen, a member of the advisory board of the National Center for Public Policy Research ([www.nationalcenter.org](http://www.nationalcenter.org)) is a professor of Forest Science at Texas A&M University and author of "America's Ancient Forests: From the Ice Age to the Age of Discovery."*

## “Land of Many Uses”

The recently released Allegheny National Forest Annual Report for 2001 includes two very important points about how the ANF is used for recreation. First and foremost, wilderness use represents only 1/10 of 1% of all recreation use on this “Land of Many Uses,” clearly showing it is far less favored among recreational activities and in fact limits more desirable uses. Secondly, motorized recreational activity overwhelmingly outweighs non-motorized (99%- 1%).

This information is readily available on page 16 of the report. The unit of measurement used to calculate recreational use is *Recreational Visitor Days* (RVD). As defined in the current Forest Plan glossary, RVD is “Recreational use of National Forest System land which aggregates twelve hours. It may consist of one person for twelve hours, two persons for six hours, or any equal combination.” The “2001 ANF Report”

measures the totals in thousands of recreational visitor days or MRVD.

RVD result from activities divided into several categories including **developed recreation**, **dispersed recreation**, and **wilderness** as well as hunting and fishing. For purposes of this analysis, hunting and fishing RVD are not included. Again, the Forest Plan glossary provides definitions for the pertinent categories.

- **Developed Recreation** requires “facilities that result in concentrated use of an area. Examples are campgrounds and picnic areas. Facilities might include roads, parking lots, picnic tables, toilets, drinking water, and toilet buildings.”
- **Dispersed Recreation** “are the lands and waters under Forest Service jurisdiction which are not developed for intensive recreation use. Dispersed areas include general undeveloped areas, roads, trails and water areas not treated as developed sites.”
- **Wilderness**, as defined by the “National Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964,” is an area affected primarily by the forces of nature, where humans are visitors who do not remain. It possesses outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. It is managed to retain its primeval character.

Aggregate numbers for the past 16 years of the Forest Plan are as follows:

- **Developed recreation** has had 18,106,300 RVD.
- **Dispersed recreation** has had 24,010,100 RVD.
- **Wilderness** has had 45,000 RVD.
- Motorized access has had 41,570,900 RVD
- Non-motorized access has had 590,500 RVD

Conclusions are many, but these clearly stand out. First, while wilderness occupies 2% of the ANF, recreation use only represents a pitiful 1/10% (.1%) of all RVD, far less than even the 1% annual average nationwide. Therefore, there is no legitimate demand for additional wilderness on the ANF as existing use is not commensurate with the demand for other uses. Secondly, areas conducive to motorized use are far more heavily visited than those for non-motorized (99% to 1%).

One can only imagine the economic ramifications of following a course that leads to more wilderness and fewer roads. It will not only reduce recreational opportunities, but will also reduce other multiple uses, such as wood for homes, oil and gas for heat,

and wildlife habitat for species whose numbers are rapidly declining. These and other problems need earnest consideration when forest planning moves forward in 2003 and the motto “Land of Many Uses” is proclaimed.

## **Annual Meeting Plans Underway**

The annual meeting of the **Allegheny Forest Alliance** will again be held in January. A letter will be sent to **AFA** members regarding pertinent meeting information.

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