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The Future of Forestry on Public Lands in the Interior West

by Marlin Johnson

An article in the February 2000 Journal of Forestry predicts an end to tree cutting on the National Forests. Tree cutting is one of the mainstays of stand tending that the forestry profession has used for centuries, and for the public lands of the United States for about a century. While cessation of this means of stand tending may seem a little extreme to many of us, in reality we are closer to that point now than you think. Throughout most of the twentieth century net growth rates have far exceeded removals. Recent figures show that, for Forest Service Regions One through Four, net growth is more than three times removal rates; now nearly everywhere you look forests are being choked to death by too many trees.

Why did I start with this scenario, and how does it affect the future of Forestry? First of all, the decline in wood removal tells us something about the public. They are largely of the urban background, thinking that milk comes from cartons and boards from the hardware store. They don't make a connection between their use of resources and the need for land management activities. They also have time on their hands, time to get involved in decision making processes on public lands. They have found out that the current laws under which National Forests are managed give them almost unlimited power to halt and delay activities. They are also affluent and have time to enjoy the forest for recreation.

Foresters working in this environment will need new skills in dealing with people, and new understanding of legal concepts. All lands are managed to meet the desires of the landowner, within the capabilities of the land. On the public lands this gets very complex, as there are nearly 300 million "landowners". Figuring out the often-conflicting desires of the part of these landowners that are interested in management of a given forest will take skill and understanding of society that few of us have today.

The dense forests I mentioned earlier will bring about other

changes that foresters will need to deal with. Skills in fire management, insects and disease will become increasingly important as these disturbances go to un-natural levels in the increasingly un-natural forests. As the next drought comes to the Interior West we will see extensive areas devastated by one of these agents. When insects or disease come first, they will usually be followed by fire.

Some meteorologists who study pacific currents say a multi-decade drought is upon the southwest now. Regardless of when it comes, it will bring levels of fire unheard of in recent decades and in intensities that many forests have never seen before and cannot recover from on their own. Watersheds, soil horizons and many species of plants and animals will be destroyed or damaged. This will bring a need for skills in rehabilitation and reforestation in some very difficult circumstances.



Marlin Johnson at the SAF Convention

The September 1999 Journal of Forestry has some excellent thoughts on skills needed by new professionals (including some by yours truly). Challenges in the 21st century will require foresters to maintain traditional technical skills and ecological knowledge. They will also need to be good team players and negotiators, and they will need to know how to work with diverse public with many different and often conflicting values. They will need to be lifetime students, learning from study, from doing, and

from their peers. Finally, they will need to stay connected through their professional society, the Society of American Foresters. This will give them representation on Capitol Hill where many decisions are made that affect forestry, and it will allow them to maintain networks, learn from their peers and sharpen their skills as they face the challenges of the new millennium.

Marlin Johnson is an alumn of Iowa State University and is currently the Assistant Director of Forestry for the Southwestern Region and lives in Albuquerque, NM. Marlin is seen in the SAF Convention.