



# The U.S. Forest Service at a Crossroads

By Dan Quinn

For 900 million visitors a year, the 191 million acres of forest and grasslands controlled by the U.S. Forest Service are a vast playground for camping, hiking, and other outdoor activities. For conservationists, these lands are home to dozens of species of endangered plants and wildlife, as well as the headwaters for one-fifth of the country's fresh water. And for industry, the Forest Service's holdings contain a vast bounty of oil, minerals, timber, and land for grazing.

The U.S. Forest Service has long tried to maintain an uneasy truce among these competing interests. Its central mission, according to legislation passed in the mid-1970s, is protection of "the multiple use and sustained yield of the products and services obtained [on Forest Service land]"... and "the coordination of outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish, and wilderness."

In other words, the Forest Service is required to be all things to all people.

That daunting mission would change substantially if the recommendations of a recent advisory committee, appointed to review the Forest Service mission, are adopted. The report of the 13-member "Committee of Scientists"—which included RFF Senior Fellow Roger Sedjo—says that "ecological sustainability should be the guiding star for the stewardship of the national forests." Upon its release last spring it was immediately hailed as "a new planning framework for the management of our forests for the 21st century" by Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman, whose department oversees the Forest Service.

But Sedjo believes the committee has overstepped its charge. By giving preeminence to preservation of biodiversity, the committee tips the scales away from mining, grazing, logging, or other commercial activi-

ties in a way that is directly counter to the Forest Service's legislative mandate.

In a dissenting appendix to the report, Sedjo says that such a shift, if warranted, should not be decided by the committee of scientists but by the will of the American people, either through new legislation or some other means. And given the level of dissatisfaction on all sides about the agency's mission and performance, Sedjo believes Congress and the President should begin a dialogue that can help determine the public's will about the future direction of the Forest Service.

## Competing Interests

Originally hailed as a breakthrough in progressive legislation, the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 was designed to provide a venue for conflicting parties to air their differences and come to consensus over management of the forests. Armed with such a consensus plan for each forest, the agency could make a budget request to Congress for funding them. In practice, however, this planning process quickly got off track. Consensus was hard to find at many forests, and the ability to tie up implementation of a plan through a lengthy appeals process has left some areas without a management strategy for more than a decade.

Further complicating the agency's job has been a series of court rulings over enforcement of the Endangered Species Act, which have in many cases curtailed the commercial use of Forest Service property. The courts and recent federal policy hold that the requirements of the Endangered Species Act are overriding, so that if conflicts arise between the Endangered Species Act and an agency's other governmental statutes, the act must dominate.

Although it has not been formally articulated, Former Forest Service Chief Jack Ward Thomas says that the mission of the Forest Service has evolved over time to the point where "public land managers now have one overriding objective for management—the preservation of biodiversity." This has created a gap between the Forest Service's statutory mandate and the nature of its actual management and activities. Underlining this contention is the fact that the amount of timber harvested from national forests is about one-fourth of what it was at its peak in the late 1980s.

Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman appointed the committee of scientists in late 1997 and charged them with helping guide USDA's revision of its 155 forest plans, as is required every 10 to 15 years. This is a critical time in that process, as more than 150 million acres are scheduled for plan revisions within the next five years.

The committee called for the Forest Service to develop more collaborative relationships with local communities and interest groups throughout the planning process; to use scientific assessments to inform the public and land managers in making decisions; to strengthen the connection between science and management by adapting land management practices in response to results from scientific monitoring of land conditions; and to integrate the budget more fully into forest plan implementation.

But beyond these specific issues, Sedjo believes the Forest Service needs a new, better-defined mission and an answer to long-term budget questions that were not addressed in the committee's report.

### A new mission?

An overriding emphasis on biological preservation may signal the end for the Forest Service, Sedjo believes. Without a role to support the tangible industry that is now part of its mandate, the Forest Service's budget may lose some of its support in Congress. It is doubtful that the goal of biological preservation could



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command the kinds of budgets that the Committee of Scientists' report calls for to manage such a program. If the budget erodes, the Forest Service may be forced to scale back from active management to custodial management and protection, Sedjo says.

One promising area is recreation, however. With a more aggressive program of user fees in place, recreational users of the national forests could provide major revenue support for management of the forests. A successful user fee program may allow Congress to reduce its support for forest programs, however, and there is no guarantee that emphasizing recreation will quell the arguments over the agency's role. Some recreational uses may not mesh with other objectives for the forests, including preservation of biodiversity.

Another option may be to combine enhanced user fees with a system that cedes more responsibility for managing national forests to local officials. Such an approach could give greater voice to local residents in making management decisions. Some national environmental groups oppose such a plan, however, believing that decisions about the use of such national assets rightly reside in Washington.

Although the right direction is not crystal clear, "it is clearly time to rethink the role and mission of the Forest Service," Sedjo says. Congress and the Administration should begin a national dialogue that engages the public in helping to provide a future direction for the national forests.

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