

FOREST NEWS



The Newsletter of Forest Service Employees For Environmental Ethics

Winter 2019



The Politics of Wildfire

Inside

A FARM BILL WIN / NOT HAPPY IN THE WORKPLACE
BYE-BYE ZINKE / FIGHTING FOR THE TONGASS

A Farm Bill Victory—Thanks to You!

Last July, we asked our members to call their U.S. senators to deliver a simple message: “National forests are not crops!” The Republican-controlled House had just passed a timber industry wish list of anti-environmental provisions as an addendum to the 2018 Farm Bill. Our opponents thought the Farm Bill was the perfect vehicle for repealing environmental laws that protect our national forests. The farm bill is a must-pass piece of legislation because it funds food stamps and farm subsidies.

On paper, the House and Senate agriculture committees can claim jurisdiction over the U.S. Forest Service, an agency in the Department of Agriculture (which is one more reason for moving the Forest Service to the Interior Department). Rarely, however, do these conservative-leaning committees pay much attention to federal lands, preferring to focus on their top priority—farms.

Two weeks after our 8,000 postcards arrived in members’ mailboxes and your calls poured into Senate offices, the Senate leadership agreed to remove debate over national forests from the 2018 Farm Bill. By year’s end, when the bill became law, 64 of the House’s anti-forest provisions had been stricken.

In this internet age, spending \$4,000 to print and mail paper postcards might seem anachronistic. The fact is, few, if any, of our fellow environmental groups do so anymore. Their fundraising departments relegate snail mail to “asks” for money. The activist staff in these groups is limited to social media and email where the cost is pennies per thousand messages.

In our view, however, you get what you pay for. The cacophony of social media and overflowing email boxes ensures that few electronic messages can stimulate the kind of grassroots action needed to move the legislative needle. Plus, we know that legislators ignore constituent email and electronic petitions (too many fake addresses and Russian bots!). Phone calls and personal, hand-written letters (faxed for immediate impact) are the gold standard when it comes to influencing legislators.

Here at FSEEE, like the whistleblowers we represent, we’re willing to be contrarian. It’s our job to: 1) figure out the pressure point where our members can make the most difference; 2) distill complex information to key talking points, without compromising accuracy; and, 3) get that information into your hands in a way that galvanizes your effective action.

Together, thanks to you, we pulled it off with the 2018 Farm Bill. We’re ready to do so again this year.

Sincerely,



Andy Stahl

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Featured Forest

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Plumas National Forest

The Plumas National Forest is a place of transition. From north to south, the volcanoes of the Cascade Range give way to Sierra Nevada granite. From west to east, the temperate foothills of California’s Central Valley rise to the high country and then fall back again to arid slopes near the Nevada border.

The forest offers abundant recreational opportunities, including a 32-mile stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail. There are waterfalls, deep forests, silky-smooth snowfields. And, of late, there is controversy.

Portions of the Plumas burned during November’s Camp Fire, which decimated the town of Paradise, a few miles west of the Plumas. Seizing on the tragedy, President Trump and officials within his administration pinned blame on “radical environmentalists” for blocking forest-thinning projects in court. Never mind that, according to the Forest Service, just 25 of the agency’s thinning projects in California have been challenged in court over the past 10 years. None of those were in the Plumas.

This isn’t the first time the Plumas has been at the center of forest policy debates.

In the early 1990s, residents of Quincy, a town surrounded by the Plumas, launched one of the first attempts to forge a “collaborative” approach to national forest management—the Quincy Library Group. The idea was for longtime adversaries, including logging interests and environmentalists, to sit down and hash out compromises.

At the time, the effort was hailed as offering “a potentially transformative approach for federal lands management.” While the group had its share of accomplishments, it failed to achieve so lofty a goal.

But it did demonstrate how deeply people care about this northernmost chunk of the Sierra Nevada. The debates will continue.

In Depth

The Politics of Wildfire

As the weeks dragged on during the partial government shutdown, many media accounts focused on the impacts to furloughed employees, including Forest Service workers who struggled to find money for mortgages, childcare, healthcare, student loans and groceries. And much attention was paid to the impacts on national forests and other public lands—overflowing bathrooms, off-road vehicle infractions, toppled trees.

Drawing less attention was this: The shutdown offered a telling glimpse into how politicians, special interests and the general public perceive the Forest Service. Reactions to the shutdown from both Republicans and Democrats demonstrated how thoroughly the agency is now viewed as a Fire Service rather than a Forest Service.

And those reactions made clear that politicians of all political stripes share a common assumption: Public forestlands, especially in the West, pose grave threats to nearby communities. They are overstocked with tinder-dry trees, beetle-ravaged stands, parched undergrowth. They are wildfires waiting to happen.

And how should those perceived risks be mitigated? Through logging, thinning and other types of “active management” and “restoration” activity.

Consider a letter sent in mid-January to Trump, signed by 12 senators, all Democrats.

“The failure to reopen the government puts peoples’ lives at risk by undermining their ability to respond to wildfires and will only serve to delay critical forest restoration and safety projects,” they wrote.

There seems to be little daylight between the position of the Trump administration and that of Democratic lawmakers from Western states when it comes to wildfire policies and the perceived need for widespread logging, thinning and clearing.

In December, just before the shutdown took effect, Trump signed an executive order calling for the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to ramp up logging as a way of lessening the threat of “catastrophic” wildfires. Most conservationists condemned the move. The governors of California, Oregon and Washington—all Democrats—had a different take. They emphasized their eagerness to partner with the Trump administration on forest management projects. In a letter sent on January 8, they argued that

Trump didn’t go far enough.

“We are encouraged by Executive Order 13855, which you signed on December 21, 2018, promoting active management of America’s forest, rangelands and other federal lands to improve conditions and reduce wildfire risk,” Govs. Kate Brown, Jay Insley and Gavin Newsom wrote. “However, it is constrained by current appropriations. We all must acknowledge that without significant additional federal investment, these partnerships have too little impact on changing the catastrophic reality of wildfire season on the West Coast.”

To be sure, Democrats in both chambers of Congress helped stymie many anti-environmental proposals during the first two years of the Trump presidency. The House passed a version of the Farm Bill that was larded with forest management provisions designed to require widespread clearcutting with little or no environmental review and little or no opportunity for public input. Democrats in the Senate held firm and those provisions were dropped from the final version. Likewise, Trump administration efforts to eviscerate landmark environmental protection laws such as the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act largely failed.

The courts, too, provided a key check to the Trump administration’s worst impulses. Judges stopped a wide variety of proposals, from clearcuts in Alaska to pipelines in the Appalachians.

Democrats, who are now in control of the House, can be expected to offer even more resistance on a wide variety of issues, including environmental

ones, during the final two years of Trump’s first term. And they have promised vigorous oversight. But will that resistance and oversight extend to logging and thinning proposals purportedly designed to protect communities from wildfires?

The partial shutdown of the federal government ended, at least temporarily, shortly before Forest News went to the printer. But as Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management employees get back to work, the question remains: What will be their marching orders? What lies ahead in the next two years, with Trump in the White House and Democrats in control of the House of Representatives? Is it possible that consensus—that rarest of commodities in Washington, D.C.—will be reached between Democrats and Republicans over the need for active forest management to mitigate wildfire risk?

Does it matter that there is little evidence that such an approach will work?

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On the surface, the notion that thinning forests and removing dead vegetation reduces the risk of wildfires makes common sense. But fire ecologists say the issue is much more complicated than that. A much-cited 2008 paper comes right out and says it:

“Given the right conditions, wildlands will inevitably burn,” wrote Forest Service fire researchers Elizabeth Reinhardt, Robert Keane, David Calkin and Jack Cohen. “It is a misconception to think that treating fuels can ‘fire-proof’ important areas.”

Those “right conditions”

include periods of high temperatures, low humidity and high wind. That kind of “fire weather” produces the largest blazes—the ones that attract the attention of politicians and media outlets. And those major fires account for the vast majority of acres that burn each year. Most fires burn a small area and then go out on their own.

When fire conditions prevail, the largest blazes are impossible to stop. High winds drive embers miles ahead of a fire front. Those embers are fully capable of jumping rivers and lakes, let alone hastily constructed fire lines.

Such fires also burn right through areas that have been thinned. In fact, thinning can actually increase the intensity of large fires. A relatively open environment allows winds to blow without obstruction. And highly flammable shrubs quickly grow as much more sunlight is allowed to hit the forest floor.

Even if forest thinning projects were effective in stopping the largest wildfires, odds are slim that a blaze would hit an area during the window of time when a treated area retains the desired fire-resistant conditions. Maintaining those conditions requires continuing active management, such as clearing brush and conducting prescribed burns. Those projects are labor-intensive and produce little if any merchantable products.

Several communities around the West, such as Flagstaff, Arizona, and Ashland, Oregon, are undertaking large-scale, multimillion-dollar thinning projects in the forests immediately surrounding their boundaries. The jury is still out on whether those projects will prove effective in protecting those cities from wildfires. If they do, those millions would be well spent.

All sides of the debate, including forest ecologists and conservationists, agree that removing vegetation in the immediate vicinity of homes—and taking steps to fireproof those homes, such as installing metal roofing and clearing debris out of gutters—is indeed an effective way to protect lives and property.

Such nuances, however, are rarely acknowledged in the broad debate over wildfire policy. And they seem to resonate not a bit with the individual who sits atop the executive branch of the federal government. Trump weighed in on the issue in a January tweet threatening to withhold aid to victims of last year’s wildfires in California:

“Billions of dollars are sent to the State of

California for Forrest (sic) fires that, with proper Forrest Management, would never happen. Unless they get their act together, which is unlikely, I have ordered FEMA to send no more money. It is a disgraceful situation in lives & money!”

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At 35 days, the partial government shutdown was the longest in the history of the United States. The panoply of stalled government projects affecting public lands included many of dubious environmental merit. Those included new logging sales, some of which are at least on paper designed to lessen wildfire risks. The shutdown also interfered with immediate preparations for the upcoming fire season, including firefighter training programs.

In the weeks and months that follow the shutdown, the dynamics of the newly divided government regarding environmental issues will become clearer.

Expect Democrats to fight the Trump administration on environmental policies that share broad consensus in the party—mainly, issues about energy. A December statement from Arizona Rep. Raul Grijalva, who will be the new chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, regarding the departure of Ryan Zinke as Trump’s secretary of interior, made clear the majority’s feelings on the subject.

“A well-managed Interior Department—one that puts the public good ahead of fossil fuel and mining industry demands—can be a boon to the entire country,” Grijalva said. “The next Interior Secretary should respect the American people’s desire for strong environmental standards and an end to corporate favoritism.”

Much more uncertain is how newly ascendant Democrats will respond to the largest issue facing the Forest Service right now—preparing for and managing wildfires.

The science of wildfire is one of intense complexity. Scientists and researchers who devote their careers to the subject approach it with a sense of humility. They recognize there are no easy answers. That complexity stands in sharp contrast to the general public’s visceral understanding of the issue: Wildfires are dangerous. Wildfires are tragedies that can and must be stopped.

A key challenge over the next two years will be to instill an appreciation for those complexities among elected officials of all political stripes.

Opposite page:

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Disease Threatens Beech Trees

A mysterious disease first detected seven years ago is attacking beech trees in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Scientists are scrambling to find the cause as the disease spreads rapidly.

Beech leaf disease has been detected in 11 counties in Ohio, eight in Pennsylvania, and also in the Canadian province of Ontario. A recently published study in the journal *Forest Pathology* warns that the disease has also affected European and Oriental beech trees in nurseries, meaning it could attack species of beech throughout the northern hemisphere.

“It’s hard at this point to say where this disease will go, but it has all the hallmarks of something like emerald ash borer or sudden oak death, threats to trees that start slowly and quickly pick up speed,” said Ohio State University researcher Enrico Bonello, one of the study’s authors. “We seem to be in that rapid expansion phase right now.”

Affected trees first show dark bands in their leaves. The leaves

then become crinkly and shrunken, and the afflicted tree eventually dies.

Scientists suspect that the cause of the disease is a microbe rather than an insect. They are comparing the DNA and RNA of affected trees and healthy trees in an attempt to pinpoint the cause.

The paper estimates that the cost of losing half of Ohio’s beech trees would be about \$225 million. Beech forests offer valuable habitat for a variety of wildlife. Beechnuts are also an important food source.

American beech trees are found throughout the eastern portion of the United States.



Legislation Backs Northern Minnesota Mine

In his first bill introduced as a member of Congress, Rep. Pete Stauber (R-Minn.) is pushing for a land exchange that could clear the way for a massive copper and nickel mine near Lake Superior in northern Minnesota.

PolyMet Mining, Inc., wants to exchange 6,690 acres for 6,650 acres in the Superior National Forest.

The Forest Service approved the swap two years ago. Conservationists promptly sued, saying the 528-acre mine would pollute the region’s waterways and destroy important habitat for Canada lynx and gray wolves.

“Like all Minnesotans, I treasure our state’s natural beauty,” Stauber said. “With 21st century technology, responsible

mining and preserving the environment are not mutually exclusive. We can and must do both, and I am proud that my first piece of legislation will help unleash the economic engine in our state.”

Conservationists are also challenging permits issued to PolyMet by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.



Utah Seeks Roadless Rule Exemption

Utah is joining Alaska in seeking a state-specific exemption from the Trump administration to the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

With the backing of the state’s Republican governor, Gary Herbert, Utah officials plan to submit a petition to the Department of Agriculture seeking an amendment to the 2001 rule. More than 4 million acres of national forests in Utah are currently protected from road-building and logging under the rule, which protects nearly 60 million acres of national forests across the country.

Earlier this year, state officials in Alaska submitted a petition for an independent application of the roadless rule for their state, which the Trump administration promptly granted. The Forest Service plans to unveil a new roadless rule specifically for the Tongass National Forest in 2020.

Herbert said the roadless rule should be amended in Utah to allow the Forest Service to pursue thinning and other types of active forest management designed to lessen the risk of wildfires.

“This petition will give us more tools to proactively manage forest health and reduce the conditions that result in wildfires that negatively impact wildlife, air and water quality,” Herbert said.

Conservationists counter that the state’s leadership is using the public’s fear of wildfires in a cynical effort to increase logging on public lands in the state. They say that road-building and logging would increase the risk of wildfires, since the majority of fires are sparked by humans.



Job Satisfaction Drops Among Forest Service Employees

The Forest Service is among the least popular agencies to work for in the federal government, according to an annual survey of public employees.

Just under 53 percent of Forest Service employees are satisfied with their jobs, according to the 2018 “Best Places to Work in the Federal Government” report. That’s a drop of more than seven percent from the 2017 survey.

The Forest Service ranked 361 out of 415 federal agencies that are housed under larger departments. The Forest Service’s parent agency, the Department of Agriculture, logged the largest decline among 17 large government agencies. Job satisfaction in the department dropped from 65.9 percent in 2017 to 59 percent last year.

The survey was conducted from April through June by the nonpartisan Partnership for Public Service. The rankings were released in December, before the partial government shutdown began.

Overall, 59 percent of nearly 500 agencies surveyed reported a drop in job satisfaction. That’s a marked decline from the previous three surveys, all of which logged improvements in employee morale in more

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doi.gov/tourists/get-a-pass

than 70 percent of federal agencies.

Many top government positions remain vacant under the Trump administration. The lack of leadership is a key component in the decline in job satisfaction, according to Max Stier, president and CEO of Partnership for Public Service.

“One part of our government has agencies with committed leaders who are fostering high and improving levels of employee engagement,” Stier said. “The other part of our government is handicapped by a lack of leadership that has led to static or declining employee engagement.”

Other land management and wildlife agencies also saw declining morale in 2018.

Job satisfaction among U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees dropped more than 4 percent. The Bureau of Land Management logged a drop of just over 1 percent, as did its parent agency, the Department of Interior.

Fishers Released in North Cascades

With a little help, fishers are returning to the Pacific Northwest.

In December, six of the carnivorous, cat-sized weasels were released in the North Cascades of Washington state, where they are listed as an endangered species.

The animals, including five females and one male,

were captured in Canada as part of an effort to restore fisher populations in Washington. Fishers disappeared from the state decades ago due to excessive trapping and habitat loss.

Dozens of fishers have previously been released in Washington's Olympic and Mount Rainier national parks, as well as the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. Those populations have fared well, with several producing offspring. Working with a variety of partners, federal biologists hope to release about 80 fishers to the North Cascades in coming years.

During the latest release, a crowd of more than 100 gathered along a trail to watch the animals dart

from wooden boxes. The group included government officials, members of the media and representatives from several area tribes.

"Watching the fishers return to their native forests of North Cascades National Park Service Complex after a long absence was inspiring," said Karen Taylor-Goodrich, the national park's superintendent. "It was an honor to have the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe, the Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe, Lummi Indian Nation and Nooksack Indian Tribe attend, bringing their blessings and songs."

The animals were outfitted with radio transmitters to allow biologists to track their movements.

Zinke Out

He rode in on a horse named Tonto. He left with something less of a flourish.

Ryan Zinke's tenure as secretary of interior lasted less than two years. He leaves behind a legacy of slashed national monuments, freewheeling fracking and a slew of scandals that promise to follow him back home to Montana.

Zinke faces more than a dozen ongoing investigations, including one involving a land deal near his hometown of Whitefish, Montana, that has been referred to the Department of Justice for possible criminal investigation.

He blamed his exit on "vicious and politically motivated attacks."

A former Navy SEAL and Montana congressman, Zinke's departure, announced in a tweet from President Trump in December, came just days before Democrats took control of the House of Representatives.

Raul Grijalva, the Arizona congressman who will chair the House Committee on Natural Resources, has promised vigorous oversight of Zinke and the Interior Department he has led. In November, Grijalva called for Zinke's resignation. In a tweet, Zinke responded by insinuating Grijalva drinks excessively, writing "It's hard for him to think straight from the bottom of a bottle."

In addition to slashing the Bears Ears and Grand



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Staircase-Escalante national monuments in Utah, Zinke led efforts to scuttle hard-won protections for sage grouse and ramped up oil and natural gas drilling on public lands as part of the Trump administration's energy dominance agenda.

Deputy Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, a former oil and gas lobbyist, took over as interim secretary after Zinke's departure. Bernhardt has played a key part in efforts to roll back environmental protection measures during his tenure at the Interior Department under Zinke.

Book Reviews

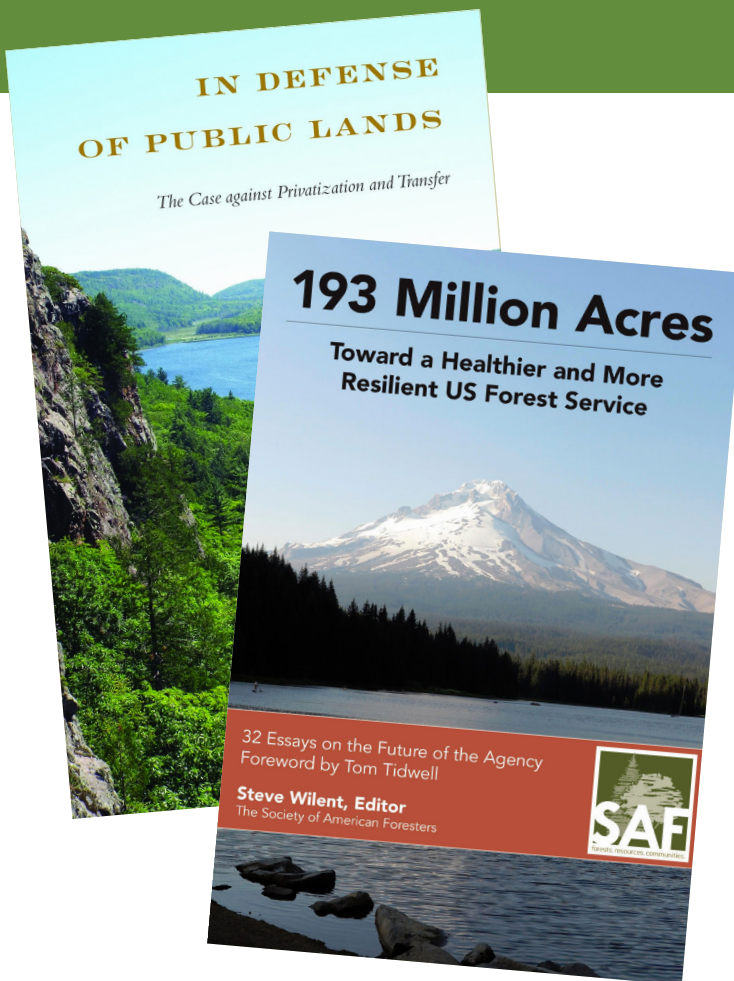
“In Defense of Public Lands” and “193 Million Acres”

By Andy Stahl

I read two forest policy books over the holidays (yes, I need to get a life). One, “In Defense of Public Lands,” by Steven Davis, I recommend. The other, “193 Million Acres: Toward a Healthier and More Resilient U.S. Forest Service,” to which I contributed a 10-page chapter, not so much.

A political scientist at Edgewood College in Wisconsin, Davis “unapologetically” has an agenda. He seeks to expose the privatization movement as little more than 19th-century robber barons dressed in free-market economic liberalism clothing. His summary of libertarian-inspired privatization proponents John Baden, Richard Stroup, Randal O’Toole, Robert Nelson and others (all familiar names at Cato-sponsored conferences) makes for good inside-baseball reading, although he gives their thinking more coherence than it warrants. To cut to the chase, privatizers don’t like government. Not for health care, transportation, education, or the environment. To his credit, Davis distinguishes between those who advocate deposing federal land agencies, dramatized by the Bundy crew, versus those who want to tinker at the edges with changes in governance (put locals in charge of federal land) or budgets (finance everything out of user fees). To Davis, however, these differences become slight when seen through the lens of public ownership’s environmental benefits like carbon storage and biodiversity preservation.

Davis doesn’t gainsay that political management of public lands is messy; it is. Wouldn’t it be so much simpler if Adam Smith’s invisible hand, instead of legislatures, judges and civil servants, got to decide between logs and owls? But it is precisely the messiness of political process, of democracy, that Davis promotes. For it is in messiness that political diversity thrives. The public forests of blue-state Oregon are not managed to the same ends as those of red-state South Carolina. The majestic Yellowstone is for recreation and wildlife, while the arid and remote Powder River basin is exploited for its coal. Both are federally owned lands in

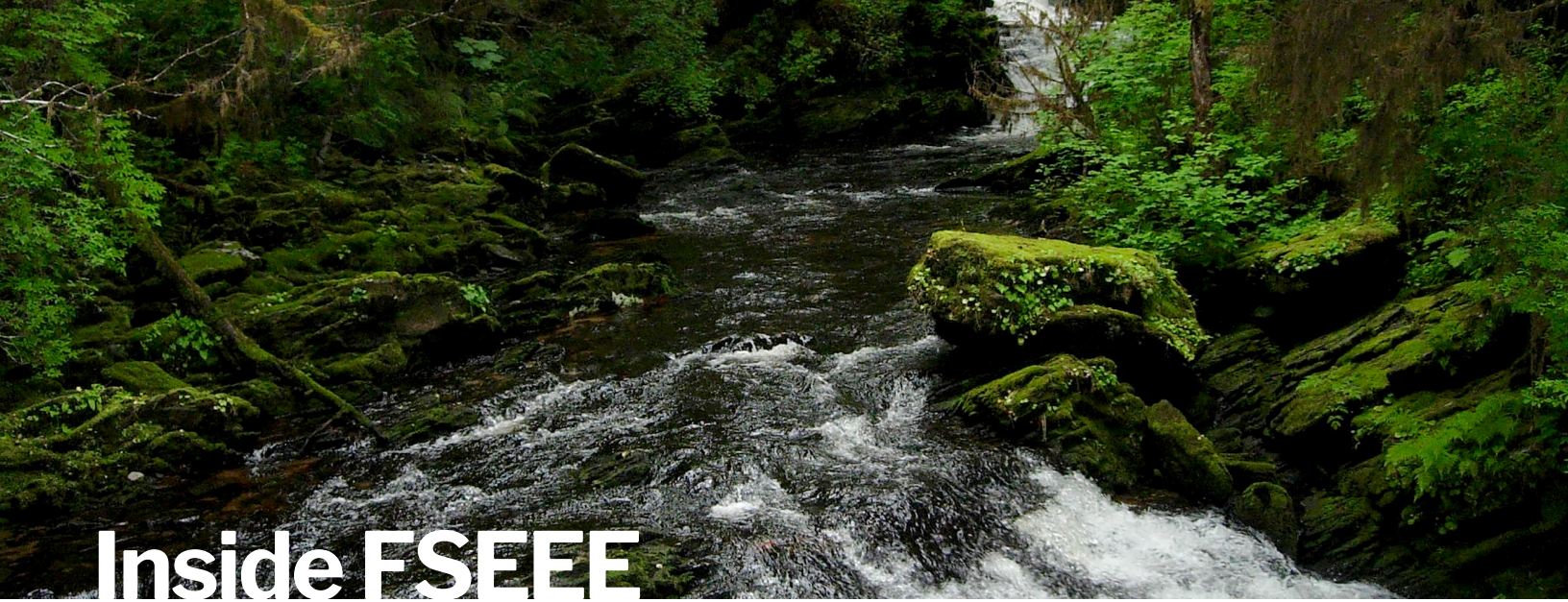


Wyoming. Yet their management policies, a result of federal political processes, could not be more different. “Vive la différence,” says Davis.

“193 Million Acres” is a sprawling, undisciplined 650-page dirge published by the Society of American Foresters. Its 32 essays (at 100 pages, one is book-length in its own right) enlist former Forest Service workers, interest group activists, and assorted gadflies to fix what’s wrong with the Forest Service. More logging is a common remedy. As is more local control over agency decisions.

The tome begins with a paean to the past — five men (including one deceased) reflecting on how good things used to be in the old U.S. Forest Service. So what went wrong? Here, SAF and Davis agree. Judges enforced Congress’ environmental laws, which derailed the Forest Service’s timber mission. Women also arrived in the workforce, to which the book devotes five essays under the heading “Dealing with Discrimination and Sexual Harassment.” It’s a dirty job, but someone’s gotta do it.

As for my short chapter (“From Timber Service to Fire Service”), drop me a line and I’ll email it to you.



Inside FSEEE

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Fighting for the Tongass

FSEEE is gearing up for a major fight over the future of Alaska's spectacular Tongass National Forest in 2019.

For years, Alaska state officials have tried to obtain an exemption for the Tongass from the Roadless Area Conservation Rule of 2001. The rule, which FSEEE helped enact, protects 58.5 million acres of National Forests across the country from road-building—and from logging, mining and other extractive industries. That includes more than half of the Tongass—9.5 million acres.

Last year, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, who oversees the Forest Service, granted Alaska's request to reconsider the roadless rule for the Tongass. He directed agency officials to draft a new, state-specific rule for Alaska. "The National Forests in Alaska should be working forests for all industries," he said.

Hogwash. The highest and best use for these pristine forests is to provide clean air, clean water and abundant wildlife habitat.

Protecting the Tongass has been a priority for FSEEE ever since our founding three decades ago. We played a key role in bringing an end to decades of anything-goes logging.

Those who are pushing to rescind the roadless protections yearn for a return to the "glory days" of logging on the Tongass. But logging these magnificent stands never made sense, for economic as well as ecological reasons. Over the years, the government spent billions of taxpayer dollars to turn pristine

forests into pulp that was shipped to Japan.

Those days of anything-goes logging on the Tongass are, thank goodness, over. Logging is down 96 percent from its peak in 1991. The real economic engines in Southeast Alaska now are recreation and tourism. In 2017, the "visitor industry" generated more than \$230 million and supported thousands of jobs. Those visitors don't come to Alaska to see clearcuts and logging roads.

Trump officials know that the only chance they have of opening these now-protected stretches to logging and road-building is to ram a new rule through as quickly as possible with as little opportunity for public involvement as possible. They want to have the new rule in place by June of next year, before the end of Trump's term.

FSEEE is laying plans to make sure those efforts fail. When Perdue made his announcement, Republicans controlled both chambers of Congress. That, of course, is no longer the case.

We will work with our allies in Congress to find a legislative solution that ensures the roadless rule protections remain in place. And we will bring public pressure to bear on decision-makers to make sure they do the right thing.

Over the coming year, we will keep our members up-to-date on this critical issue. And we will ask our members to contact legislators at key moments as the process unfolds. We've won key battles over the Tongass before. We're determined to win this one, too.



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