

FOREST NEWS

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The Peshtigo Fire



Inside

GUEST AUTHOR: CHRISTOPHER KETCHAM / OKEFENOKEE THREAT /
JET FUEL FROM WOOD / FSEE VICTORY IN BIGHORN NF

“If you don’t have a seat at the table, you’re probably on the menu.”

— Elizabeth Warren

It is no coincidence that the rise of collaborative groups described in Christopher Ketcham’s guest essay (p.7) followed the demise of the Forest Service’s logging-at-all-costs era. With visions of warring parties sitting around a fuels treatment singing Forest Service “Kumbaya” verses, the agency blandished potential collaborators with grant monies and the promise of access to its decision-making backroom, which only its traditional customers (ranchers, loggers, miners) had enjoyed previously.

Collaborative groups grew like invasive weeds. The Forest Service deftly side-stepped the Federal Advisory Committee Act, which mandates openness and representative participation, by outsourcing the formal convening of collaboratives to its trusted confederates, especially the National Forest Foundation, which incentivized participation by passing along federal dollars to environmental groups willing to take the bait.

To the Forest Service, collaboratives, as they came to be known, could be useful rubber stamps for the agency’s agenda. Participants were heavily weighted to local interests, particularly the same traditional customers who have always dictated the agency’s agenda. The conservation collaborators were chosen for their willingness to set aside litigation and politicking in favor of discussion and compromise.

Collaboratives have never represented the national interest, nor were they intended to. Participants overwhelmingly live in neighboring communities, and less diverse assemblages would be difficult to imagine.

Although the era of collaboratives is declining (hyperpartisanship is not fertile ground for consensus-building exercises), I expect it will continue on life-support for so long as the National Forest Foundation and the Forest Service find collaboratives to be useful cheerleaders. To date, however, few collaboratives have become self-supporting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in their own right. Many exist only in name, a website, a few diehard participants, and a flotilla of government agencies and bureaucrats who circle around the carcass wondering if there’s anything “there.”

Along with the gradual demise of interest-based collaboratives, the Forest Service’s reliance on one-on-one partnerships with NGOs grows steadily. Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards and Siskiyou Mountain Club maintain national forest trails and teach wilderness skills to young people. These partnerships serve well-defined needs that the Forest Service’s preoccupation with fighting fires has short-changed. Collaboratives are a failed experiment; the future is partnerships.

Sincerely,


Andy Stahl

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Cover: An artist’s rendering of people and animals seeking refuge in the river during the Peshtigo Fire (credit: Wisconsin Historical Society).

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A November sunrise at Ouachita National Forest creates one of those golden moments immortalized by Robert Frost in his poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay."

Featured Forest

Ouachita National Forest

The Ouachita National Forest is the oldest national forest in the southern U.S., encompassing 1,784,457 acres, six wilderness areas, and the largest old-growth forest in the contiguous United States. Most of the 800,000 acres of old-growth trees were never logged because they have little commercial value. The Forest is also home to more than 60 species of native trees, distinct freshwater ecosystems, endangered species, and a bioluminescent earthworm found nowhere else.

Most of the Forest lies in the Ouachita Mountains of Arkansas and Oklahoma, where the sedimentary rocks that form the mountains are among the oldest rock formations in the United States. Some areas contain

high-quality quartz crystals, and in the Womble Ranger District near Mount Ida, Arkansas, [visitors are allowed to collect loose crystals](#) for personal use and dig for quartz with permission of the district ranger.

The Forest gets its name from the Ouachita tribe of northeastern Louisiana. The tribe was loosely affiliated with the Caddo Confederacy, and "Ouachita" was the French spelling of the Caddo word (spelled "washita" in English) meaning "good hunting grounds." The first Europeans to explore the Ouachita arrived from Spain in 1541 when Hernando de Soto led an expedition into the mountains and eventually discovered hot springs that he thought might be the mythical fountain of youth. French explorers soon

followed, and after the purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803, English-speaking settlers began to arrive from the U.S.

Ouachita National Forest attracts visitors for its mountain views, picturesque streams, virgin forests, rolling hills, free-flowing rivers, and pristine lakes. The Forest provides abundant opportunities for outdoor recreation activities ranging from boating, sightseeing, and scenic drives to hunting, fishing, and camping. An extensive, multi-use trail system accommodates hikers, horseback riders, mountain bikers, and motorized users. The Forest also maintains an active timber-sale program "to provide an annual even flow of wood products to our customers."

In Depth

The Peshtigo Firestorm

On the night of [October 8, 1871, in Peshtigo, Wisconsin](#), “all hell rode into town on the back of a wind.” In two hours, the Peshtigo Fire decimated a swath of forest 10 miles wide by 40 miles long and obliterated the towns of Peshtigo and Brussels in northeastern Wisconsin. [According to the Peshtigo Fire Museum](#), the conflagration ultimately burned 1.3 million acres, destroyed 17 towns, and killed as many as 2,500 people. In spite of uncertainty about the exact number of lives lost in the fire, it remains the deadliest fire in U.S. history.

[Before settlers arrived](#), the entire northern half of Wisconsin was covered by forest. Many of the trees were hundreds of years old. Pine trees grew to heights of 120 feet with 3-foot diameters. By 1871, Peshtigo had become the principal settlement in the region, and timber fueled the town’s economic engine. The woodenware factory in Peshtigo was the largest in the world. The sawmill was one of the largest in the U.S. Both were built by William Ogden, former mayor of Chicago, who bought thousands of acres of Wisconsin forest, established a barge line between Peshtigo and Chicago, and fostered construction of railways to bring lumber to his sawmill.

The timber industry played a leading role in [setting the stage for the firestorm](#). Lumberjacks would clear an area and set fire to the remaining debris or leave piles of woody fuel to dry into tinder. Farmers also set fires to clear their fields or moved in after the land was cleared by loggers, burning stumps to prepare for plowing. Railroad crews set fires to clear debris, and steam engines spewed sparks and cinders from their smokestacks. Many of the fires were left to die out on their own, often burning underground, fed by tree roots and peat, so fires were common around Peshtigo at the time.

The fall and winter of 1870 were dry, followed by an even drier spring. The summer of 1871 was one of the driest on record. Local tribes couldn’t use canoes to gather wild rice in the dry marshes. River flows were so diminished that logs couldn’t be transported and remained



A period illustration of the Peshtigo Fire.

stacked on the river banks, awaiting rain. [Peshtigo was already a tinderbox](#). Almost all of the buildings in the town were made of wood, from floor joists to shingles. Firewood was stacked next to houses for winter. Wooden boardwalks served as sidewalks. Roads leading in and out of town were surfaced with split logs. Streets were paved with wood chips, and mattresses were stuffed with sawdust.

When Oct. 8 arrived, small fires were already burning in the forest. By 10 p.m., a change in the weather sealed the fate of Peshtigo. A massive low-pressure cell moved in from the west, bringing high winds that whipped up the flames of the small fires until they merged into the historic conflagration. A column of hot air rising above the fire produced stronger winds in a vicious cycle that led to hurricane-force gales, creating a literal firestorm with winds in excess of 100 mph.

[Father Peter Pernin](#) survived the fire by spending over five hours in the frigid Peshtigo River, where some died of hypothermia. That night he first noticed, “above the dense cloud of smoke over-hanging the earth, a vivid red reflection of immense extent,” followed by “a distant roaring, yet muffled sound.” The sound “grew into a roar ... like a freight train or huge rushing waterfall. Suddenly,

big sheets of flame blew out of the forest. Everything in the fire's path was instantly consumed. ... High winds blew people to the ground, and the hot air burned people's lungs. Dust and smoke blinded them as they ran for shelter or to the river."

The Peshtigo disaster prompted the federal government to adopt new [forest management programs](#), convinced in part by early conservationists like Franklin Hough and Bernhard Fernow, who cited the Peshtigo Fire to support their argument that forest fires threatened commercial timber supplies. By 1876, [Congress had created the office of Special Agent](#) in the Department of Agriculture to assess the quality and conditions of U.S. forests. In 1881, the office was expanded into the Division of Forestry. Hough became its first chief, and Fernow was the third person to lead the division, laying the groundwork for establishment of the Forest Service. In 1889, the [Santiago Canyon Fire](#) burned more than 300,000 acres in Southern California, and by 1891, Congress passed the [Forest Reserve Act](#) to protect timber supplies and watersheds.

The legislation authorized the President to designate forest reserves on public lands, which were managed by the Department of the Interior [until 1905](#), when President Teddy Roosevelt placed the reserves under the management of the Department of Agriculture's new Forest Service. Just five years later, a series of forest fires known as [The Big Blowup](#) burned 3 million acres in Montana, Idaho, and Washington. Forest Service officials convinced themselves that, with sufficient men and equipment, they could have prevented the devastation of these fires.

They also convinced a worried nation that only total fire suppression — carried out by the Forest Service — could prevent catastrophic wildfires. [From 1920 to 1938](#), William Greeley, Robert Stuart, and Ferdinand Silcox served as successive Forest Service chiefs. All three men had fought the 1910 fires, and all three maintained a policy of total fire suppression. They even opposed "light burning," which was favored by many ranchers, farmers and timber managers, who recognized the practice as beneficial. But for the Forest Service leadership, all fire was bad because it destroyed timber. The "Big Blowup" of 1910 cemented for a century the policies that the Peshtigo Fire had first inspired.



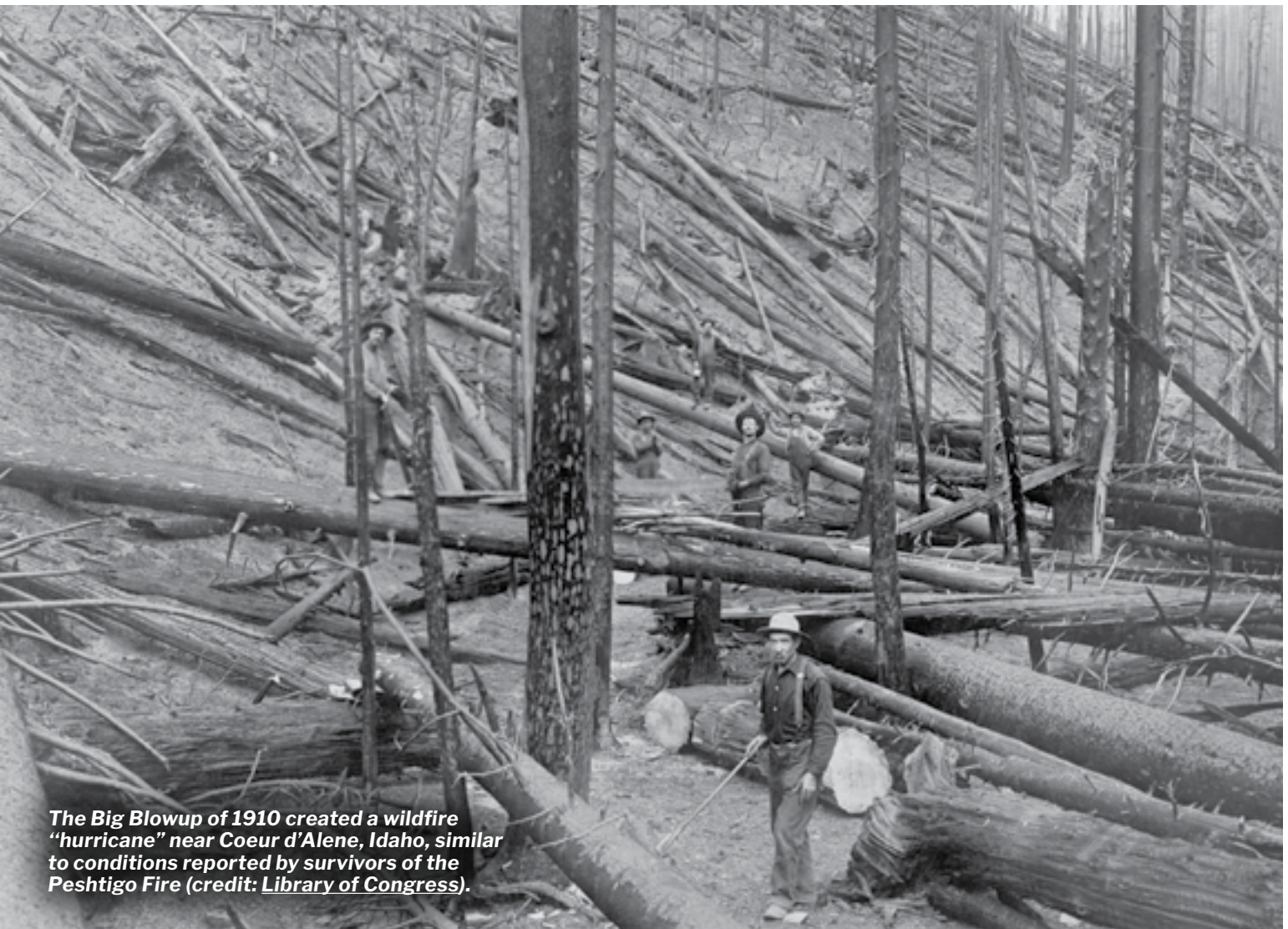
A wildfire creates a large fire vortex or "fire tornado." Survivors of the Peshtigo Fire reported multiple fire tornadoes spawned by the fateful firestorm.

This [fire-suppression policy](#) led to construction of fire protection infrastructure, including forest road networks that contributed to fracturing wilderness. [The Forest Service leaders also promoted the Weeks Act](#). Its passage in 1911 empowered the agency to provide financial incentives for states to fight fires, ensuring a dominant Forest Service role in directing fire policy across the country. Over the ensuing decades, fire suppression efforts incorporated new technologies and techniques — airplanes, smokejumpers, fire retardants — and demanded ever larger budgets for land managers obsessed with suppressing fires.

[During the 1960s](#), scientific research began to show that fire

played a critical role in forest ecology, and that research eventually led to changes in Forest Service policy. The agency began to allow natural-caused fires to burn in wilderness areas. As the “let-burn” policy took shape, the Forest Service began to recognize the need for prescribed fire to maintain forest health and resilience. But [agency missteps](#) and larger fires in recent years have generated pushback from a populace with legitimate concerns and perhaps convinced by past “wildfire education” efforts that all fire is bad. Increasing residential sprawl into the [“wildland-urban interface”](#) has also complicated fire issues, putting more lives and property in more areas where ecosystem health depends on fire.

The [Peshtigo Fire is still studied](#) as an example of bad forestry practices and the power of catastrophic wildfire. The fire did help to inspire better natural resource management, including less wasteful timber-harvesting techniques, as well as today’s conservation and environmental principals. Ultimately, the historical thread that started with the Peshtigo Fire leads to [today’s Forest Service firefighting efforts](#), which represent [more than half of the agency’s entire budget](#). And this deeply ingrained commitment to fire suppression limits funds available for the kinds of land-management activities that can help restore forest health and prevent catastrophic wildfires.



The Big Blowup of 1910 created a wildfire “hurricane” near Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, similar to conditions reported by survivors of the Peshtigo Fire (credit: Library of Congress).



Tumalo Falls in Deschutes National Forest is a popular destination for day users and a jumping-off point for backcountry hikers. Guest author Christopher Ketcham highlights threats to the Deschutes facilitated by “collaborative restoration” (Forest Service photo).

Guest Column

Excerpted from *This Land* by Christopher Ketcham

When Congress passed the 2009 Omnibus Public Land Management Act, one of Barack Obama’s major public lands initiatives, it included a provision for a new program of management of national forests that promised “collaborative, science-based ecosystem restoration” of what were deemed “priority forest landscapes.” In a speech announcing the founding of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP), which was funded at \$40 million annually through 2019, Tom Vilsack, Obama’s secretary of agriculture, warned that “the effects of our changing climate have resulted in an increasing number of catastrophic wildfires and insect outbreaks.” It was time “for a change in the way we view and manage America’s forestlands with an eye towards the future.” Vilsack said the CFLRP offered “a new approach that engages the American people” in conserving the national forests.

On its face, collaboration was an attractive model for

green groups who hadn’t the stomach for fighting industry. The CFLRP trumpeted that conservationists and the Forest Service working together would find “consensus” on environmental issues. Under this new paradigm, the greens opted to abandon the most effective historical means to compel public lands regulators to follow the law — litigation — in order to build “working groups” of “local stakeholders.” Their goal was harmonious relations with the despoilers, to the point that the loggers and enviros, as the collabo-greens liked to say, “can go out for a beer at the end of the day.” Tasked with drafting management recommendations, each collaborative would labor together on issues in specific national forest areas to advise the agency on policy. The ultimate function of these collaboratives, as we will see, was to greenwash development of the forests for private industry profit.

This intention was no secret at the Forest Service, where for years the collaborative model had been



Despite the beauty of the landscape in the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest, a patchwork of light and dark green reveals significant logging activity. The lighter green areas have been logged more recently (photo by Edward Capovani).

percolating. “When local environmental groups and timber representatives learn to reach consensus,” said former Forest Service Chief Jack Ward Thomas in 1997, “that will marginalize extremists.” The “extremists,” as a former assistant secretary of the Department of the Interior under George W. Bush put it in 2002, were “the people who want to litigate.” Within a year of the establishment of the CFLRP, two former biologists at the Forest Service who had witnessed the program in action, Al Espinosa and Harry Jageman, drafted a letter to Congress to air their concerns about it. They wrote to Sen. Maria Cantwell, the ranking Democrat on the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, to warn that collaboration was “being used to circumvent existing environmental laws and give control of the management of our National Forests to local special interests.”

One of the working groups established under the CFLRP was the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project, its area of claimed expertise was the 1.8-million-acre Deschutes National Forest in Oregon’s Cascade Range, west of Bend. George Wuerthner, an ecologist and author in Bend, began attending the open meetings of the Deschutes collaborationists in 2012. The group, totaling about 25 people, boasted of the ecumenical approach to public lands management, the joining of seemingly antagonistic parties. “We are environmentalists, businesspeople, professional foresters, loggers, outdoors lovers, private landowners, elected officials, tribal members and government policymakers.” The stated ambition in this singing of “Kumbaya” was to “restore our forests to a healthier, more resilient condition through balanced,

science-driven restoration projects.” Deschutes typified the groups funded under the CFLRP.

From the outset Wuerthner had a bad taste in his mouth. Over the course of his career as a journalist and activist, he had edited or authored dozens of books on the myriad environmental threats and crises facing the public lands, everything from logging, wildfire management, grazing, and roading to biodiversity collapse and the depredations of the energy industry. (Wuerthner, who is in his early seventies, briefly worked for the BLM as a young man; his exposés of the public lands livestock industry first prompted me to look at the ecological catastrophe of grazing.) Lately, he had taken an interest in wildfire ecology, and he brought this knowledge to the meetings of the Deschutes collaborative. “It quickly became clear that the group was buying the crap about how logging would restore the forest and preclude wildfires,” Wuerthner told me.

The environmentalists in the collaborative, in Wuerthner’s account, had little understanding of fire. They nodded along as representatives from the Forest Service and timber companies dominated the discussions. Week after week, month after month, the Deschutes collaborationists met. Ecologists under the pay of the Forest Service were given long hours for presentations that favored logging. Independent ecologists with differing ideas were not welcomed, told repeatedly this wasn’t the place to ask troublesome questions. The Deschutes group predicated its discussions on the assumption that the national forests, threatened with wildfire, were “sick” and needed to be “treated.” Were the forests actually sick?



No matter. The point of the interminable meetings and the questionable science was to agree always on the need for more logging. If you cared about ecological health, if you questioned the cutting of trees, you were sidelined. Wuerthner did not stay quiet about what he saw. “The Deschutes Collaborative,” he wrote in a September 2018 op-ed in the Bend Bulletin, was “degrading our forest ecosystems.”

**

In the hydra-headed complex of collaboratives that the CFLRP spawned across the West, it wasn’t hard to find whistleblowers who had seen collabo operations from the inside. I talked, for example, with Karen Coulter, who participated, to her regret, in the Ochoco Forest Restoration Collaborative and the Blue Mountains Forest Partners collaborative in eastern Oregon. Coulter, who co-founded the nonprofit Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project in 1991, wrote me an account of her experience. The Forest Service, she said, “was using the collaborative process to rubberstamp their greatly escalated pace and scale of heavy logging over tens of thousands of acres.” She said that “local rural communities” were “desperate for jobs, so it was all too easy for the Forest Service to control the collaborative process under the guise of agency expertise, playing on the public’s fear of fire and using ‘logging reduces fire risk’ and ‘logging is restoration’ rhetoric.”

Echoing Wuerthner, Coulter told me that collaboration members who represented environmental groups “lacked on-the-ground field experience,” “bought into the Forest Service narrative without being familiar with the local ecosystems,” and accepted the service’s “limited and biased

selection of science at face value without investigating the full range of the best available science.” Outdated assumptions about logging and wildfire, she told me, were used to convince the enviros in the collaborative to support massive timber sales under the veil of “ecological restoration” that was “actually highly destructive.” Crucially, the Forest Service was “not disclosing or analyzing a growing body of science that refutes most of their assumptions.”

Another one-time participant in CFLRP collaboratives in Idaho, Barry Rosenberg, who as an independent activist had been filing legal challenges to Forest Service logging projects since the early 1980s, told me, “These collaboratively approved timber sales have nothing to do with ‘forest health,’ but are all about jobs and corporate wealth.” Rosenberg said that the collaborative movement that began with the CFLRP was “a significant contributor to the most catastrophic Forest Service logging program that I have witnessed in 37 years as a forest advocate.”

Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, the Democrats from Oregon, have been some of the staunchest supporters of the CFLRP in Congress. Merkley cited his visits to the Deschutes National Forest as proof positive of “the valuable progress that is made when communities work together to manage our forests.” (George Wuerthner sent me a photo of the Deschutes, “so you can see the kind of sanitized and impoverished forests that Merkley is glowingly talking about.”) The Democratic senators boasted of the 23 CFLRP projects in 14 states that they claimed had produced more than 2.5 billion board feet of lumber and \$1.4 billion in local labor income. They



An unlogged area protects freshwater resources in Deschutes National Forest (Forest Service photo).

did not mention that the right-wing, pro-extractionist, anti-conservation Western Governors' Association also publicly backed the CFLRP — which should tell you how bad for the land the collaborationist program really is. CFLRP proponents asserted proudly that logging facilitated under the program had reduced the risk of megafires on almost 3 million acres. This was a lie. There was no evidence of it whatsoever.

To figure out what was really going on with the CFLRP meant following the money, and for that I called up a former logger turned public lands activist named Keith Hammer. Hammer had been a tree feller and chainsaw operator

for a timber outfit during the 1970s and worked briefly for the Forest Service doing trail maintenance. At once curious about the collabos and disgusted with them, Hammer took it upon himself to investigate the financial incentives of environmental groups in the collaborationist game. His report, self-published in 2015 as a pamphlet, was a devastating indictment. It turns out that collaborationists operate under a system of generous tax-dollar-funded reimbursements from the Forest Service through their participation in the CFLRP. To Hammer it looked like systematized, legalized corruption.

Let's say you're a member of a group we'll call the Southern Crown Umbrella Movement (SCUM)

advocating for the bioregion known as the Southern Crown of the Continent, which encompasses the spine of the Rocky Mountains in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. (It's a real thing, the bioregion of the Crown of the Continent, though SCUM is not.) You're a member of SCUM, and you participate in a collaborative with the Forest Service. You put in time for meetings of the collaborative — long endless meetings full of parleys, seeking of consensus, sharing of concerns, always with the goal that everyone gets along and at the end of the day a beer is shared. You go out in the field to look at areas to be "thinned" and "restored." Maybe you do some field monitoring of conditions in the area where the

loggers will operate, check out stream conditions, examine roads that might be decommissioned to prevent the sedimentation of streams. These are in-kind, non-cash donations that you as a member of SCUM provide to the collaborative. You put in your invoice. And behold, the Forest Service, via the CFLRP, will reimburse SCUM up to four times the value of the donated time and effort. According to Hammer, one nonprofit, Trout Unlimited, received \$2.5 million in federal funds for its non-cash, in-kind contributions of \$903,000 under the CFLRP.

Green groups that ride this gravy train seldom if ever criticize the Forest Service or object to its timber sales for fear of being denied payments in future collaborative projects, for it is obvious that taking a stand against logging would dry up the federal money stream fattening the groups. In short, this is a system by which the government is essentially turning nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) into federal contractors. Via the CFLRP and collaboration, the Forest Service gets to groom and select its contractors while maintaining the illusion that these are examples of nonprofit public support. For you see, in the public eye, these are independent NGOs that just happen to support the Forest Service on behalf of the public environmental interest, when they are in fact on the Forest Service payroll. What's really going on here is Congress dividing and conquering the environmental movement, literally purchasing segments of it with CFLRP money. Get those groups dependent on federal dollars, then watch them condemn other enviros for refusing

to rubberstamp the Forest Service agenda of “restoring” the forests for the timber industry.

**

On an autumn day a few years ago, a man named Dick Walker waited on a runway in Orofino, Idaho, with his Cessna single-prop to take me for a bird's-eye look at logging in the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest. With Walker was Gary

Macfarlane, the executive director of a nonprofit in Idaho called Friends of the Clearwater, who had arranged the flight. Macfarlane, soft-spoken and ponytailed, had been a forest activist since the 1990s, participating in direct actions against the Forest Service and logging companies that included getting himself arrested for blockading roads on public lands.

We ascended over the vast forest



In Deschutes National Forest, logs from timber-salvage logging are loaded for transport to sawmills (Forest Service photo).

district, which covers some 4 million acres. It was a landscape of rugged hills, folded ridges, and deep ravines, but everywhere its pine and fir forests were mottled with logging cuts of various ages that resembled mange on a sleeping green giant. Some of the logged areas were recovering from decades ago, the trees young and short, and some were new, stripped clean of life.

“Jesus,” said Walker. “They’ve hit this country hard.” I asked about his experience in the Forest Service, where he started working in 1962, first as a fire lookout and then as a forester, meaning he identified trees for cutting. He quit after just a few years, appalled at the service’s views of forests as mere timber farms. Walker reiterated what so many former Forest Service employees had told me. “Almost everything we do in forestry management is for the economic now, maximum income,” said Walker, “not timber growth, and certainly not protecting wilderness.”

Walker banked the plane north and east, further into the reaches of the forest, where beyond the cuts there were still hundreds of thousands of acres of unlogged old-growth forest, where there were no roads, where the streams ran clear of sediment. “This is the best of the best of forest habitat remaining in the Lower 48,” Macfarlane told me. Outside of Alaska, it was one of the last redoubts of spawning grounds for genetically pure steelhead trout, and though scientists were uncertain of it, for the last of the genetically pure Chinook salmon runs. It was where black bears, lynx, wolverines, pine martens, and fishers had healthy wild habitat.

Over 100,000 acres of it — roughly a billion board feet — was proposed to be roaded and logged for projects developed by the Forest Service and a collaborationist

“Almost everything we do in forestry management is for the economic now, maximum income,” said Walker, “not timber growth, and certainly not protecting wilderness.”

group called the Clearwater Basin Collaborative (CBC). The CBC’s members included representatives from the Nature Conservancy, the Wilderness Society, and the Idaho Conservation League. When retired Forest Service biologists Espinosa and Jageman laid out the broad problems of collaboration in their 2010 letter to Senator Cantwell, they focused their concerns on the CBC. The two biologists had spent much of their careers in the Nez Perce-Clearwater trying to preserve fish and wildlife habitat, and they regarded the CBC as a direct threat to land they had come to love. The group, they said, offered “a lot of flowery language about restoration, fire prevention, rural community protection, and fish and wildlife habitat improvement,” language which they interpreted as “code-speak for taxpayer-subsidized logging.” They charged that the CBC operated in secrecy, “outside of the ‘public eye,’” with “no public meetings, newspaper announcements or any other public notification regarding any of their work.” About its intentions for the Clearwater, however, the CBC was hardly secretive. In its own literature it stated one of the chief goals of the group was “to work administratively

to significantly increase the amount of timber being harvested within the Clearwater Basin.”

Espinosa and Jageman worried that the CBC, as a creature of the Forest Service crafting policy in back rooms, was operating in violation of two of the most important laws governing national forest policy, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the National Forest Management Act of 1976. NFMA and NEPA mandated that the Forest Service open its land management decision-making process to broad public participation and comment. In 2011, Gary Macfarlane petitioned Agriculture Secretary Vilsack to investigate the CBC. He alleged that the CBC operated “in clear violation of the public trust by catering to special interest groups.” Vilsack did not respond (nor did Sen. Cantwell ever answer Espinosa and Jageman’s entreaty).

“We already have a public democratic process for overseeing the national forests, and that’s through NEPA and NFMA,” Macfarlane told me. He described the collaborationist movement as “part of a neoliberal agenda” — but one that has proceeded under a green cover. “Collaboration is a devolution of public lands management to local vested economic interests. Its real end,” he told me, “is privatization.”

Christopher Ketcham has been a freelance journalist for more than 20 years, publishing in *Harper’s*, *National Geographic*, *The New Republic*, and many other magazines and websites. [*This Land: How Cowboys, Capitalism, and Corruption are Ruining the American West*](#) was published in 2019 and is the product of 10 years of sojourning and research on the public lands of the American West.

Briefly

Victory: Forest Service Retracts Herbicide Plan

FSEEE called foul when Bighorn National Forest proposed aerial spraying to kill native larkspur and sagebrush under the guise of controlling invasive weeds. Larkspur can *sometimes* be toxic to cattle, and cattle won't eat sagebrush.

Given the cozy history between Bighorn National Forest officials and local livestock interests, it was obvious that the Forest Service was doing the bidding of the livestock industry at the expense of the Bighorn Mountain ecosystem.

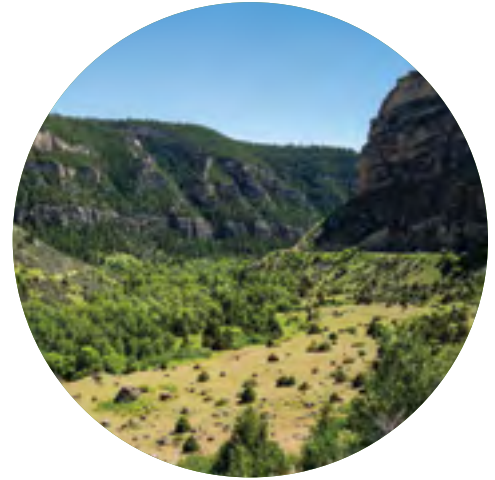
FSEEE filed a formal objection pointing to research showing that larkspur is not

always poisonous to cattle and its toxicity in the Bighorn Mountains is “unknown.”

FSEEE also pointed out that tebuthiuron, the herbicide that the Forest Service wanted to spray on sagebrush, is already present in local residents' wells. Spraying more would compound drinking-water contamination.

The Forest Service did an about-face on both proposals.

The Forest Service will not subject native plant species to aerial herbicide spraying in Bighorn National Forest locations like Tenmile Canyon.



Sheriff Arrests Forest Service 'Burn Boss'

Rick Snodgrass, a Forest Service “burn boss” was arrested after a prescribed fire he was supervising in Malheur National Forest spread to private property in Grant County, Oregon. The local sheriff, Todd McKinley, charged Snodgrass with reckless burning.

The sheriff's office said the fire burned about 20 acres on the Holliday Ranch, and Malheur National Forest officials reported that their crew put out the spot fire in about an hour.

Steve Ellis, chair of the National Association of Forest Service Retirees,

expressed concerns about “this regrettable situation,” which he characterized as “troubling on multiple fronts.” Threats of criminal charges would complicate and impede overdue fires, he said, and “the result would be more high-intensity, devastating wildfires threatening lives, destroying properties and livelihoods, and damaging ecosystems.”

Fire is a natural component of the high-desert to alpine climate zones of Malheur National Forest, and prescribed fire is needed to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire (Forest Service photo).



Oregon High Court Rejects Timber Lawsuit

The Oregon Supreme Court rejected an appeal in a \$1 billion lawsuit that sought to define the “greatest permanent value” of forests as timber revenue.

The 13 counties that brought the lawsuit gave forestland to the state in the 1930s and '40s. Oregon manages the land and funnels timber revenue to the counties. The counties alleged that the state was not maximizing logging.

A jury decided in favor of the counties in 2019 and awarded more than \$1 billion in damages, but an appeals court

struck down that verdict. By leaving the appeals court ruling in place, the Oregon Supreme Court ends a six-year legal battle over logging practices on 700,000 acres and affirms that Oregon can manage forests for a range of values other than logging — e.g., water quality, recreation, and wildlife habitat.

Fir trees tower above state land in Oregon. By declining to hear an appeals court ruling, Oregon's high court affirmed that state forests have value beyond timber revenue.



Biden Creates Monument in National Forest

The Camp Hale-Continental Divide National Monument, the country's newest monument, lies within the White River National Forest in Colorado and will be managed by the Forest Service.

Using his authority granted by the Antiquities Act, President Biden designated 53,804 acres as a new monument:

"The rugged landscape serves as a living testament to a pivotal moment in America's military history, as these peaks and valleys forged the elite soldiers of the famed 10th Mountain Division — the Army's first and only mountain infantry division — which

helped free Europe from the grip of Nazi control in World War II. The area is also foundational to preserving and interpreting the story of 10th Mountain Division veterans who, after their return from World War II, applied the skills they learned in Camp Hale and the Tenmile Range area to establish America's skiing and outdoor recreation industry."

The WWII-era concrete walls of the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division barracks still stand near the Continental Divide in White River National Forest. The site is the nation's newest national monument.



Jet Fuel From Wood

Writing for *Greenwire*, [Marc Heller reports](#) that Enviva, the world's largest wood pellet producer, has inked a deal to turn forest products into aviation fuel. The deal will send up to 750,000 metric tons of "forest thinnings" to a new production facility to be built by Alder Fuels.

The two companies claim their process could eventually supply 37 million gallons of jet fuel per year. Supporters of intensive forest management contend the new use for low-value biomass will make forest thinning more cost-effective. They also cite studies suggesting biomass-

based aviation fuel will significantly reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

Laura Haight, U.S. policy director at the Partnership for Policy Integrity, disagrees. "Logging and burning forests for fuel ... emits more carbon pollution than fossil fuels per unit energy," she said. "It will be devastating to our forests, which are already overexploited and degraded."

A conveyor at an industrial timber operation delivers wood chips for conversion to biofuels. A new facility to be built in the southeastern U.S. will be designed to turn low-value biomass from forest thinning into aviation fuel.



Forest Service Completes Prescribed Fire Review

After the Forest Service ignited a prescribed fire that became the largest wildfire in New Mexico history, Chief Randy Moore ordered a national review of the agency's prescribed fire program. Published this fall, the review identifies 52 recommendations.

Seven recommendations are for immediate implementation — mostly bureaucratic requirements for additional approvals, more oversight, and increased internal communication. The review calls for nine recommendations to be implemented within six months and the remaining recommendations to be implemented in the longer term.

Among the recommendations are additional training in the use of fire, especially in the drought-prone West, and placing more emphasis on evaluating the effects of climate change during environmental reviews.

The review also calls for a more streamlined environmental review process, including exemptions from Clean Air Act requirements in certain areas.

The National Prescribed Fire Program Review, ordered by Chief Randy Moore, was published in September. Recommendations focus on bureaucratic oversight and climate change while ignoring institutional shortcomings.



Mining Proposal Threatens Okefenokee

If approved, a proposal to mine titanium and zirconium in southern Georgia will threaten the integrity of the [Okefenokee Swamp](#), designated a [Wetland of International Importance](#) through the [Ramsar Convention](#). Ninety percent of the massive wetland lies within the [Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge](#), which encompasses 353,981 acres of designated wilderness. The [Osceola National Forest](#) guards the southern flank of this invaluable ecosystem at the Florida state line. Combined, these federal lands protect 600,000 acres of wetland forests that are home to multiple endangered species.

Alabama-based [Twin Pines Minerals](#) withdrew its original proposal to mine 8,000-acres within a few hundred feet of the Okefenokee when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers determined that the National Environmental Policy Act requires an environmental impact statement (EIS). The mining company then submitted a proposal for a 582-acre “demonstration” project to avoid the more stringent EIS review.

The Trump administration subsequently rescinded Obama-era wetlands rules, stripping federal protection from much of the wetlands in question and relegating permitting authority to the [Georgia Environmental Protection Division](#). The state agency is expected to initiate a 60-day comment period soon, after which it will make its final decision on the proposed strip mine, which would dig into Trail Ridge about 3 miles from the national wildlife refuge. Trail Ridge acts as a semi-porous dam along the eastern edge of the Okefenokee, holding the swamp in place but allowing complex water flows through layers of soil dating to the Pleistocene Epoch, sometimes called the Ice Age, which began almost 2 million years ago.

In addition to recognizing the hydrologic complexity of this ancient wetland, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) touts the value of the

Okefenokee’s extensive peatlands, which extend to depths of 15 feet, storing more than 95 million tons of carbon dioxide and representing almost 10,000 years of natural evolution. The [FWS also notes](#) that peatlands cover just 3% of the world’s land area but “store more than twice as much carbon as the world’s forests. ... When peatlands dry, carbon dioxide is released into the atmosphere, so it is critical for these areas to remain waterlogged.”

Opponents believe that the strip mine would irreparably alter the geology of Trail Ridge and drain thousands of acres, thereby destroying critical fish and wildlife habitat and releasing millions of tons of carbon dioxide when the peat dries out. One opponent, [Defenders of Wildlife](#), has documented Twin Pines’ track record of “flagrant disregard for environmental safeguards” and the company’s illegal construction of staging areas for the proposed mine.



Bald cypress trees and water lilies grow in the Okefenokee Swamp, a wetland of international significance that could be irreparably damaged by a proposed strip mine.



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Take Action

The Colonel Bob Wilderness Area in Olympic National Forest protects old-growth forest adjacent to the proposed Moonlight Dome Wilderness Area. A wilderness designation for Moonlight Dome would preserve an additional 9,000 acres of old-growth trees (Forest Service photo).

We have an important window of opportunity to protect new national forest wilderness areas. In fact, this may be our last, best chance to secure these important wilderness designations so that places like Washington's Moonlight Dome receive the permanent protection from logging that they deserve.

Please call both of your U.S. Senators today and urge them to support the Protecting America's Wilderness and Public Lands Act, H.R. 803, which has already passed in the House. When contacting your senators, first tell them who

you are and, "I support H.R. 803, the Protecting America's Wilderness and Public Lands Act." Mention two or three reasons why protecting wilderness is important, like:

- Wilderness areas protect our sources of clean water.
- Wilderness sequesters carbon and protects against the effects of climate change.
- Wilderness promotes biodiversity.
- Wilderness reminds us that humans rely on the natural world for survival.

The Congressional switchboard phone number is 202-224-3121, and it can connect you to your senators' offices. Thank you for helping us preserve our natural treasures!