



FOREST NEWS

The Newsletter of Forest Service Employees For Environmental Ethics

Winter 2025



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Bridger-Teton National Forest

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Time to Jump Ship

Transferring the U.S. Forest Service to the Department of the Interior

When the Titanic was taking on water, the survivors didn't hesitate to abandon ship. Staying aboard a sinking vessel wasn't an act of loyalty; it was a death sentence. The Forest Service, steaming along under the USDA's flag, has been taking on water for years. It's time for Congress to abandon this foundering bureaucracy and transfer the agency to the Department of the Interior.

The Forest Service's problems are no secret. The agency is chronically underfunded, overburdened, and bogged down by outdated administrative structures. Forests burn, watersheds erode, and infrastructure crumbles while the agency dithers with paperwork and bureaucratic inertia. The Albuquerque Service Center, the Titanic's engine room, has become a punchline among Forest Service employees who joke that it can't even process basic hiring paperwork, let alone propel the agency toward modernization.

Meanwhile, the Interior Department fleet sails by — National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service — agencies that manage public lands with missions more consistent with the Forest Service's core responsibilities. Unlike the USDA, whose primary focus is agriculture, the Department of the Interior has expertise in conservation, recreation, and natural resource management. This is the lifeboat the Forest Service needs.

The Forest Service's placement within USDA was a historical accident rather than a logical choice. Created in 1905 during Theodore Roosevelt's administration, the Forest Service was housed in the USDA because of its original focus on timber production. At the time, forests were seen primarily as crops to be harvested, but the agency's responsibilities have shifted dramatically. Today, the Forest Service's mandate revolves around ecosystem health, wildfire management, watershed protection, and recreation — missions that align far more closely with Interior.

Take wildfire management, for example. The Forest Service spends over half its budget fighting fires, yet it struggles to coordinate effectively with Interior agencies that oversee neighboring lands. Wildfires don't respect administrative boundaries, and neither should our federal

response. A unified approach under the Department of the Interior would streamline decision-making, improve resource allocation, and eliminate duplication of effort.

Similarly, recreation and tourism — key drivers of rural economies — suffer under the current system. Hikers, campers, and hunters don't care whether they're visiting a national forest or a national park; they just want well-maintained trails, accessible facilities, and clear information. Yet the bureaucratic silos between the USDA and Interior create confusion, inefficiency, and missed opportunities to better serve the public. Consolidating the Forest Service with Interior's recreation-oriented agencies would create a seamless experience for visitors while allowing the federal government to manage public lands more holistically.

Opponents of this idea may argue that such a transfer would disrupt the Forest Service's culture and traditions. But let's be honest: the agency's current culture — defined by rigid hierarchies, chronic understaffing, and a growing reliance on outsourcing — isn't worth preserving.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has acknowledged the limitations of the current system, lamenting the Forest Service's inability to staff its own positions. The agency increasingly relies on private contractors and nonprofits like the National Wild Turkey Federation to handle jobs once performed by career civil servants. If USDA can't keep the Forest Service afloat, it's time to transfer the agency.

Jumping ship isn't an admission of failure; it's a recognition of reality. The Department of the Interior has the expertise, resources, and mission alignment needed to steer the Forest Service toward calmer waters. Congress should act now before the Forest Service Titanic sinks completely, taking our nation's forests — and its trust in federal land management — with it.

Sincerely,



Andy Stahl

Cover:
Breccia Cliffs,
Bridger-Teton
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Elk over-winter on the National Elk Refuge with Teton National Forest in the background. The Elk Refuge extends critical elk winter range between Teton National Forest and Teton National Park.



Featured Forest

Bridger-Teton National Forest

The Bridger-Teton National Forest encompasses a significant portion of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, the largest intact ecosystem in the contiguous United States. The Forest is home to scenic views and abundant wildlife, including grizzly bears, black bears, wolves, coyotes, bison, moose, mule deer, bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope, beavers, mink, and elk ... lots of elk. The Forest also provides habitat for 355 species of birds, including bald eagles, golden eagles, sandhill cranes, and trumpeter swans, the largest waterfowl in North America.

Three wilderness areas lie within the Forest. Designated in 1964, the 428,087-acre Bridger Wilderness Area extends along 80 miles of the Continental Divide in the Wind River Range and includes 13,810-foot Gannett Peak, the highest point in Wyoming. Bridger Wilderness also contains the

headwaters of the Green River and more than 600 miles of trails.

Also designated in 1964, the 585,238-acre Teton Wilderness lies to the south of Yellowstone National Park. Wyoming's second largest wilderness area provides critical undisturbed wildlife habitat. Four hundred and fifty miles of trails provide access to hunting and fishing opportunities on mountain meadows, timbered slopes, and alpine plateaus. Two Ocean Creek splits along the Continental Divide in Teton Wilderness, sending water to both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Designated in 1984, the Gros Ventre Wilderness Area encircles 317,784 acres of wildlands north and east of the town of Jackson. Numerous geological features characterize the Gros Ventre Wilderness Area, including one of the world's largest concentrations of landslides. In June 23, 1925, the mile-wide Gros Ventre Slide

rushed down Sheep Mountain at 50 mph. Within three minutes, the landslide blocked the Gros Ventre River, forming 5-mile-long Lower Slide Lake. In addition to its unique geology and abundant wildlife, the Gros Ventre Wilderness serves as headwaters for three Wild and Scenic rivers.

Other notable features on the Bridger-Teton include Periodic Spring and Snake River Canyon. Periodic Spring discharges about 285 gallons of clear, cold water per second, gushing for several minutes before stopping abruptly then beginning a new cycle. Snake River Canyon, south of Jackson, hosts over 200,000 whitewater enthusiasts from June to August each year.

Winter sports like Nordic skiing and snowmobiling are popular on the Forest, and Jackson Hole and Snow King Mountain resorts offer world-class downhill skiing opportunities.

Four More Years of President Trump

Donald Trump's return to the White House is unprecedented. He's the first convicted felon to be elected to the presidency after a New York jury found him guilty of 34 charges stemming from a scheme to illegally influence the 2016 election. Manhattan Judge Juan M. Merchan delayed sentencing for the 78-year-old criminal president until Jan. 10, handing down a no-penalty "unconditional discharge," a rarity for convicted felons.

A grand jury indicted Trump on four charges for his conduct leading up to the Jan. 6 Capitol attack:

- Conspiracy to defraud the United States.
- Conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding.
- Obstructing an official proceeding.
- Conspiracy against rights (for actions to "oppress, threaten and intimidate" voters).

Controversial decisions by Trump-

With Donald Trump's return to the White House, Forest News takes a look at his first term to get an idea of what might be in store for our national forests and grasslands during the next four years.

appointed judges, including Supreme Court justices, enabled delaying tactics and prevented the possibility of more convictions. Additionally, ethics watchdogs documented 3,737 conflicts of interest during Trump's first term.

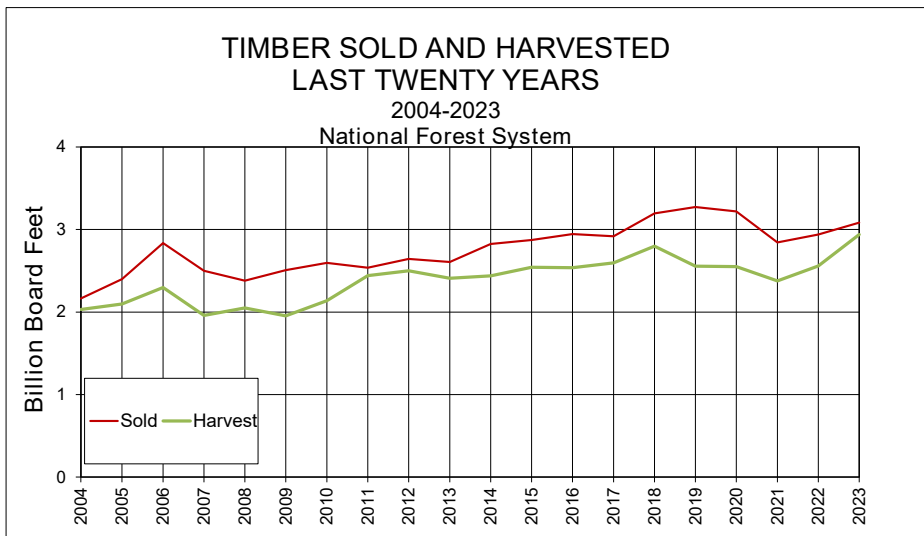
During his first term former Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue served as Secretary of Agriculture. Following Perdue's nomination to lead the Ag Department and prior to his confirmation, agribusiness corporation Archer-Daniels-Midland (ADM) sold a \$5.5-million property to a Perdue-owned business for \$250,000, a move widely seen as a bribe. During Perdue's time in office, the blind trust intended to guard against financial conflicts



Donald J. Trump, official first-term White House photo.

of interest sold Perdue's business, including the former ADM property, for \$12 million. ADM enjoyed reduced government oversight during Perdue's tenure.

Perdue named Tony Tooke to lead the Forest Service, but six months later, Tooke stepped down as chief due to allegations of sexual misconduct from earlier in his career. Perdue replaced Tooke with Vicki Christiansen, who served as chief until retiring July 26, 2021, during the Biden administration. Despite an administration riddled with legal and ethical issues, during Trump's first term, those issues had little, if any, discernible bearing on how the Forest Service and Department of Agriculture operated.



A Forest Service graph charts the amount of timber cut and sold on Forest Service lands under George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joseph Biden.

One metric for Forest Service operations is the agency’s “cut-and-sold” reports. These reports show little change in the amount of timber harvested and sold under Trump compared to the Democratic presidents who preceded and followed him. During Barack Obama’s eight years as president, national forest timber sales trended upward from 2.5 billion board-feet per year to more than 2.9 bbf. Timber harvests increased from 1.9 bbf to more than 2.5 bbf. Under Trump, timber sales went from 2.9 bbf to almost 3.3 bbf, while timber harvests peaked at 2.8 bbf before sliding back to Obama-era levels. Biden’s numbers generally landed in between Obama and Trump numbers, but timber harvests under Biden exceeded 2.9 bbf in 2023.

One of the most significant ways presidents wield power is through executive orders, which:

- Determine how legislation will be enforced.
- Decide to what degree legislation will be enforced.
- Implement administration policy and agendas.

During his first term, Trump issued 220 executive orders, an average of 55 per year. One of the more significant Trump executive orders for our national forests was [Executive Order 13855](#): “Promoting Active Management of America’s Forests, Rangelands, and Other Federal Lands to Improve Conditions and Reduce Wildfire Risk.”

The order has been used to justify widespread logging on national forest lands. Perdue’s official statement about the order exploits the wildfire tragedy that ultimately claimed 85 lives in Paradise, California: “As we’ve



Helicopter wildfire-mitigation logging produced this pile of timber stacked atop Mount Elden in Coconino National Forest in 2019 following President Trump’s Executive Order 13855. Former President Biden rescinded many of Trump’s executive orders but allowed 13855 to remain in place (Forest Service photo by Brady Smith).

Timber sold and harvested from lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service, 2009-23.

President	Year	Timber Sold (thousand board-feet)	Timber Harvested (thousand board-feet)
Barack Obama	2009	2,507,672	1,954,052
	2010	2,597,108	2,137,859
	2011	2,536,704	2,440,432
	2012	2,644,223	2,500,321
	2013	2,607,122	2,408,161
	2014	2,824,953	2,437,488
	2015	2,873,109	2,543,144
	2016	2,946,348	2,536,601
Donald Trump	2017	2,918,142	2,595,688
	2018	3,196,511	2,797,431
	2019	3,271,722	2,556,246
	2020	3,218,523	2,550,013
Joseph Biden	2021	2,844,806	2,377,642
	2022	2,939,117	2,559,778
	2023	3,083,744	2,939,816
	2024	2,883,969	2,662,815

seen in Paradise Valley, California, wildfire can have devastating lasting effects on our people and our towns. More than 70,000 communities and 46 million homes are at risk of catastrophic wildfires.” Perdue’s statement ignores established facts – Paradise was surrounded by thinned and clear-cut forests and Forest Service researchers have demonstrated that clear-cutting and tree-thinning in our forests provide little, if any, protection for at-risk communities.

For comparison, President Biden has issued 154 executive orders as of this writing, including Executive Order 13990, which rescinded many of Trump’s environmentally-related orders. However, Biden did not rescind Executive Order 13855; throughout Biden’s term, the Forest Service has adhered to Trump’s wildfire risk policies. Trump’s order begins, “It is the policy of the United States to protect people, communities, and watersheds, and to promote healthy and resilient forests, rangelands, and other Federal lands by actively managing them For



A forwarder stacks logs on the Flathead National Forest in 2019 as part of a thinning project encouraged by Trump administration policy. This type of heavy equipment in forests has been shown to damage sensitive soils and spread invasive weeds that exacerbate wildfire risk and damage forest health (Forest Service photo).

decades, dense trees and undergrowth have amassed in these lands, fueling catastrophic wildfires.” But as numerous peer-reviewed studies have demonstrated, catastrophic wildfire is driven by wind, regardless of fuel density. And as retired Forest Service Fire Scientist Jack Cohen has proven, community wildfire damage most commonly occurs when wind-blown embers ignite buildings – i.e., protecting people and communities requires minimizing risk in the home ignition zone. Nonetheless, billions of dollars in funding demonstrates that both the Trump and Biden administrations have prioritized logging under the guise of protecting people and communities from wildfire.

Trump’s executive order calls for selling “at least 3.8 billion board feet of timber from USDA FS lands” each year. That timber comes from “treating” more than 6.4 million acres of our national forests to “reduce fuel load.” “Treatment” includes “prescribed burns and mechanical thinning,” but prescribed burning does not increase timber sales. In the years since Trump signed Executive Order 13855, cut-and-sold reports show that timber sales never reached 3.3 bbf, much less 3.8 bbf, under his administration or Biden’s.

Dense, unhealthy forests contain trees with little value beyond the price of a cord of firewood, and firewood permits are not a revenue generator. In fact, efforts to mechanically “reduce fuel loads” cost a few thousand dollars per acre more than the potential revenue from selling the timber, mostly for firewood. Marketing campaigns would have us believe that things like biomass fuel (wood pellets, jet fuel) and biochar (not carbon-negative) are valuable commodities that will help pay for the tree-thinning that politicians claim

is needed to protect our communities, but producing these “byproducts” of logging small trees is feasible only with massive infusions of public monies. To actually sell timber without taxpayer subsidies, the Forest Service must turn to healthy, mature and old-growth forests.


Executive Order 13855 also authorizes reviewing “land designations and policies that may limit active forest management and increase the risk of catastrophic wildfires.” This review requirement echoes false claims from industry groups and USDA officials that wilderness designations cause dangerous wildfire conditions by preventing mechanical “treatments.”

Also noteworthy from Trump’s first term is his effort to allow old-growth logging on 9.4 million acres of Southeast Alaska’s Tongass National Forest by removing roadless-rule protections. The Tongass contains the largest intact temperate rainforest in the world, but logging old-growth timber on the Tongass is not profitable. Timber provides less than 1% of southeastern Alaska’s jobs, according to the regional development organization Southeast Conference. By comparison, 8% of regional jobs are in seafood processing, and 17% are in the tourism industry. Both industries would be negatively affected by logging.

Joel Jackson, president of the Organized Village of Kake, responded to Trump’s roadless rule move in a statement that reads, “We are tied to our lands that our ancestors walked on thousands of years ago. We walk these same lands and the land still provides food security – deer, moose, salmon, berries, our medicines. The old-growth timber plays an important part in keeping all these things coming back year after year; it’s our supermarket year around. And it’s a spiritual place where we go to ground ourselves from time to time.”

Near the end of his first term, Trump also tried to open millions of acres of old-growth forests to logging in the Pacific Northwest by slashing protections for the northern spotted owl. Trump’s move would have decreased protected habitat for the owl by more than a third and was characterized as a “parting gift to the timber industry” by Noah Greenwald, endangered species director for the Center for Biological Diversity.

The Biden administration overturned both of these moves by Trump, marking perhaps the most significant differences between the two administrations regarding Forest Service policy decisions. So while cut-and-sold reports aren’t likely change from Biden’s presidency, Trump could very well succeed at increasing old-growth logging on the Tongass National Forest and national forests in the Pacific Northwest.



On the banks of Colorado's Eagle River, a tributary to the Colorado River, the Eagle Mine sits on private land adjoining the Holy Cross Wilderness Area on the White River National Forest. The site, including the nearby town of Gilman, became part of a 235-acre Superfund cleanup site after it was abandoned due to heavy metals contamination caused by historic mining activities.

Guest Column

Good Samaritan Mining Law Finally Passes

by Jonathan P. Thompson

In December 2024, President Joe Biden signed the Remediation of Abandoned Hardrock Mines Act into law, opening the door for “good samaritans” to clean up some of the more than 500,000 abandoned mining-related sites across the U.S. without incurring liability if things go wrong. It could help volunteers improve water quality in historic mining areas such as the upper Animas River watershed in southwestern Colorado. But some fear it could also be used to revive mining.

In 1994, the state of Colorado, with the help of a group of local

volunteers and mining industry representatives, launched the Animas River Stakeholders Group to study and address pollution from abandoned mines in the upper Animas River watershed. It would be a collaborative approach — without heavy-handed regulations or the dreaded Superfund designation. “We figured we could empower the people in the community to do the job without top-down management,” Bill Simon, one of the group’s founders, told me back in 2016. “Giving the power to the people develops stewardship for the resource, and that’s particularly useful in this day and age.”

Their task was a monumental one: The U.S. Geological Survey has catalogued some 5,400 mine shafts, adits, tunnels, and prospects in the upper Animas watershed, with nearly 400 of them having some impact on water quality. Dozens of abandoned mine adits collectively ooze more than 436,000 pounds of aluminum, cadmium, copper, iron, and zinc into the watershed each year, with waste rock and tailings piles contributing another 80,000 pounds annually. It was here that, in 2015, the Gold King Mine blew out, spewing 3 million gallons of contaminated water into area streams and wreaking havoc for hundreds of miles downstream.



The Mayflower gold mine overlooks the short-lived mining town of Scissorville, Oregon, in what is now Ochoco National Forest. Gold was discovered at the site in 1871, and after the mine was abandoned, taxpayers funded the cleanup, which began in 2007 (Forest Service Photo).

The upper Animas isn't unusual in this respect. A 2020 Government Accountability Office report estimated that there are more than 100,000 sites in the Western U.S. that pose physical or environmental hazards, ranging from open mine shafts (that can swallow up an unsuspecting human or animal), to contaminated tailings or waste rock piles, to the big one — mine adits discharging heavy metal-laden acid mine drainage into streams.

Federal and state programs exist to address some of these hazards. But the sheer number of problematic sites and the fact that many are on private land make it impossible for these agencies to remediate every abandoned mining site.

For the last few decades, nonprofits and collaborative working groups like the Stakeholders have taken up some of the slack. With funding from federal and state grants and help from mining companies, the Stakeholders removed and capped mine waste dumps, diverted runoff around dumps (and in some cases around mines), used passive water treatment methods on acidic streams, and revegetated mining-impacted areas.

But the most pernicious polluters — the draining adits — were off limits. The volunteer groups couldn't touch them because to do so would require a water discharge permit under the Clean Water Act, and that would make the Stakeholders

liable for any water that continued to drain from the mine — and for anything that might go wrong during or after cleanup. In other words, if some volunteers were trying to remediate the drainage from a mine, and it blew out Gold King-style, the volunteers would be responsible for the damage it inflicted — which could run into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

For the last 25 years, the Animas River Stakeholders, Trout Unlimited, other advocacy groups, and Western lawmakers have pushed for “good samaritan” legislation that would allow third parties to address draining mines without taking on all of the liability. Despite bipartisan support, however, the bills struggled

and ultimately perished.

That's in part due to concerns that bad actors might use the exemptions to shirk liability for mining a historic site. Or that industry-friendly EPA administrators might consider mining companies to be good samaritans. In 2015, Earthworks pointed out that good samaritan legislation wouldn't address the big problem: A lack of funding to pay the estimated \$50 billion cleanup bill. If a volunteer group did trigger a Gold King-like disaster, the taxpayers would likely end up footing the bill.

But last year, Sen. Martin Heinrich, a New Mexico Democrat, and 39 co-sponsors from both parties introduced the Good Samaritan

Remediation of Abandoned Hardrock Mines Act, tightened up to alleviate most concerns. It passed the Senate in July of this year, and was sent to the House, where it received support from Republicans and Democrats alike. But the law is far more limited than proponents might have wanted. To begin with, the bill only authorizes 15 pilot projects nationwide, which will be determined via an application process. The proponents will receive special good samaritan cleanup permits and must follow a rigorous set of criteria. No mining activities will be allowed to occur in concert with a good samaritan cleanup. However, reprocessing of historic waste rock or tailings may be

allowed but only in sites on federal land and only if all of the proceeds are used to defray remediation costs or are added to a good samaritan fund established by the act.

In theory, though, a mining company could still use the law to its advantage. Back in the early 2000s, for example, a mining entrepreneur looked to reopen a long-idled mill and use it to reprocess old mine waste dumps as part of the Animas River cleanup efforts. That would have provided an impetus and seed money to get the mill running, which would then be used to facilitate a proposed mining revival in the area. Had a good samaritan law been in effect, the entrepreneur could have used it



Acid runoff laden with heavy metals cascades from the Red and Bonita Mine near Silverton, Colorado (photo by Jonathan P. Thompson).

to shirk liability for de facto mining, so long as it was characterized as remediation.

Similarly, the operators of the White Mesa uranium mill in Utah have proposed cleaning up abandoned mines and reprocessing the waste piles. While this may appear to be an example of today's "good" mining making amends for yesterday's "bad" mining, it is in fact merely a way to keep the mill running until the zombified uranium industry

is resurrected. It's analogous to timber companies receiving federal funds to do "forest restoration" and thinning projects — it's just a more acceptable way to log.

Rep. Frank Pallone, a New Jersey Democrat, raised additional concerns, saying the legislation compromises federal environmental law and "opens the floodgates for bad actors to take advantage of Superfund liability shields and loopholes." He added that it would give the incoming Trump administration "unilateral power to decide which entities are good samaritans and which are not."

Of course, the new law only applies to 15 projects — at least for now. While that limits the damage that could be done by bad actors abusing the liability shields, it also limits the benefits, since it can be applied to only a tiny fraction of the abandoned mines that are polluting the region. The Animas River watershed may not benefit at all, since the 48 sites in the Bonita Peak Mining District Superfund site are not eligible for good samaritan remediation.

Now that the liability issue is alleviated, would-be good samaritans will have to figure out how to fund their projects and carry them out effectively. Simply plugging, or bulkheading, a mine adit is costly, difficult, and often futile, because the contaminated water ultimately leaks out into the watershed via natural fractures and faults and through other mines (as was the case with the Gold King). Often, the only solution is active water treatment, which can run into the millions of dollars annually and must be done in perpetuity. Once again, the taxpayers are likely to foot the bill.

The good samaritan law will probably end up benefiting a handful of Western streams. But it does nothing to address the root causes of the problem, which is an antiquated mining law and an industry that has prioritized profit over the environment for well over a century.



The Animas River runs orange through Durango, Colorado, following the 2015 Gold King Mine spill into the Animas River headwaters near Silverton (photo by Jonathan P. Thompson).

Jonathan P. Thompson has been writing about the lands, cultures, and communities of the Western U.S. and the Four Corners Country — his homeland — since the 1980s when he was the editor of the Durango High School newspaper. He went on to work at and own the *Silverton Standard and the Miner*, a weekly newspaper in a Colorado mining-turned-tourist town. In 2006, he began working for *High Country News*, first as an associate editor, then editor-in-chief, senior editor, and finally, contributing editor, a role in which he continues today. He is also the editor and founder of the *Land Desk*, a twice-weekly e-newsletter covering public lands, climate, economies, and cultures of the West. He has authored three books: *River of Lost Souls: The Science, Politics, and Greed Behind the Gold King Mine Spill*, *Behind the Slickrock Curtain*, and *Sagebrush Empire: How a Remote Utah County Became the Battlefield of American Public Lands*.

USC Analysis: Retardant is Laden With Toxic Metals

On Oct. 30, 2024, just as the previous issue of **Forest News** was going to print, researchers at the University of Southern California's Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering published a report titled "**Metals in Wildfire Suppressants.**" The report provides the first-ever chemical analysis of aerial fire retardant.

The USC report shows that the most commonly-used retardant, Phos-Chek, contains high levels of toxic metals. California, where half of all U.S. retardant rains down, has established levels beyond which toxic metals are considered "hazardous waste."

The limit for cadmium is 1,000 micrograms per liter ($\mu\text{g/l}$). The USC researchers found that Phos-Chek contains 14,400 $\mu\text{g/l}$ of cadmium. For chromium, the hazardous waste level is 5,000 $\mu\text{g/l}$; Phos-Chek contains 72,700 $\mu\text{g/l}$. For vanadium, which can be radioactive, Phos-Chek contains 119,000 $\mu\text{g/l}$, five times the hazardous-waste limit.

Biden Administration Drops Plan to Protect Old Growth

Citing pushback from Republicans and the timber industry, the Biden administration has pulled its proposed old-growth forest plan. Forest Service Chief Randy Moore announced the decision in a Jan. 7 **letter to forest supervisors**.

As **previously reported**, the Forest Service proposed slight increases in old-growth protections in a draft environmental impact statement, which would have allowed logging in old-growth forests under the guise of wildfire mitigation.

Comments by Bill Imbergamo, executive director of the industry-friendly Federal Forest Resource Coalition, followed the typical circular logic used to justify increased logging on public lands:

"Old growth forests are succumbing to fire, insects, and disease, and they need management to make them healthier and more resilient."

Meanwhile, "Forest management" and other human interventions are responsible for damaging forest resilience by exacerbating the threat to our forests from "fire, insect and disease."

Report Reveals 'Catastrophic' Decline in Wildlife Numbers

Released in October 2024, the World Wildlife Federation's (WWF's) **Living Planet Report 2024** cites a "catastrophic 73% decline in the average size of monitored wildlife populations" from 1970 to 2020."

The Zoological Society of London maintains the Living Planet Index — the basis for the WWF report — and has tracked almost 35,000 vertebrate populations of 5,495 species for over 50 years.

The report documents freshwater aquatic wildlife declines of 85%. Wild animal populations on land decreased 69%, and marine life was reduced by 56%.

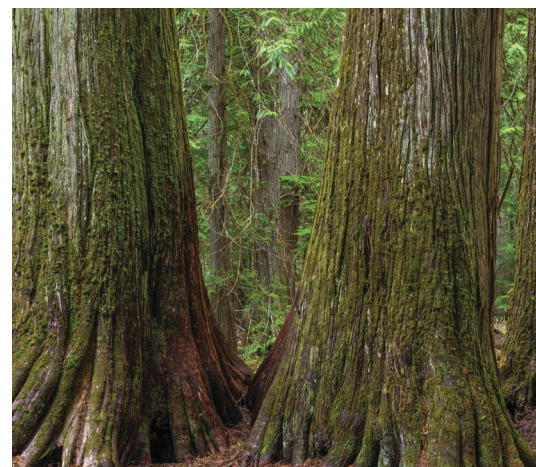
The report notes that significant declines in wildlife populations "negatively impact the health and resilience of our environment and push nature closer to ... critical thresholds."

Examples of "regional tipping points" include "decimation of North American pine forests" and "destruction of the Amazon rainforest." Exceeding thresholds of destruction for these regional ecosystem could create a domino effect capable of undermining food security and the global economy, the report concludes.

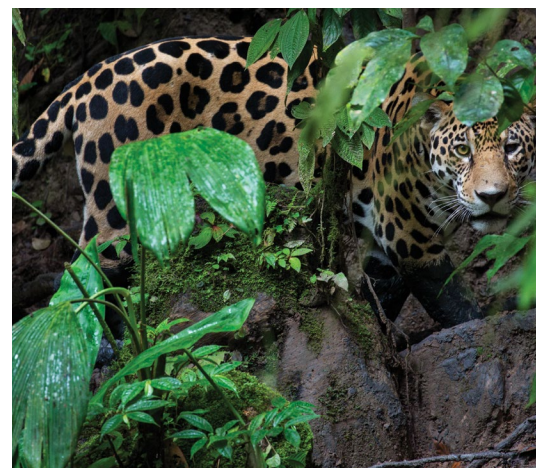
"Nature provides the foundation for human health, a stable climate, the world's economy, and life on earth," said WWF-US President and CEO Carter Roberts.



A slurry bomber dumps Phos-Chek retardant on the Sequoia National Forest during the 2016 Cedar Fire (USDA Photo by Lance Cheung).



Old-growth cedars grow on the Kootenai National Forest in Montana.



In the Amazon Rainforest, an endangered jaguar peers through leaves on Ecuador's Yasuni National Park (photo by Karine Aigner/WWF).

EXPLORE Act Enjoys Broad Support



Mountain bikers ride on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. The EXPLORE Act will expand mountain-biking trails on public lands (Forest Service photo by Nate Lowe).

On Jan. 6, President Biden signed into law the “Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act” (H.R. 6492). With bipartisan sponsorship, the new legislation passed the House by voice vote in April. In December, the bill passed the Senate by unanimous consent.

The Act intends to accomplish many things, like “addressing housing shortages and outdated infrastructure” in gateway communities, and improving public lands accessibility for marginalized groups, veterans, and kids.

The legislation also reduces fees for small businesses that depend on public lands, includes provisions for building long-distance bike trails, and permits the use of fixed rock-climbing anchors in wilderness areas,

Tribal Nations also benefit from the new law by being able to apply directly to the federal government for conservation funding.

Representatives Bruce Westerman (R, Ark.) and Raúl Grijalva (D, Ariz.) sponsored the bill. “I’m proud to support this legislation and thankful for all the hard work leading to this incredible win,” said Westerman when the bill passed the Senate in December.

Prescribed Fire Promotes Buffalo Clover Recovery



Buffalo clover grows in Hoosier National Forest (Forest Service photo by Kirk W. Larson).

Buffalo clover (*Trifolium reflexum*) is listed as endangered by the State of Indiana, but this rare plant was discovered on the [Hoosier National Forest](#) following a prescribed burn.

This patch of buffalo clover lives in an open canopy of dry oak forest adjacent to a “barrens” plant community and is the only known occurrence of buffalo clover on the Hoosier National Forest (and one of only two populations known to occur in Indiana).

In Indiana, buffalo clover has fewer existing populations than running buffalo clover (*Trifolium stoloniferum*), which is listed as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The discovery of buffalo clover is attributed to the repeated prescribed burning of the area, which stimulated germination of pre-existing seeds. Similar results have occurred for the species at other locations in nearby states, including the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois.

Lockheed Martin Employs Goats to Reduce Fire Risk



Fire-mitigation goats graze a hillside in California to reduce wildfire risk by consuming dry weeds that serve as easily ignited “fine fuels.”

Lockheed Martin’s Waterton Canyon campus sits on 98 acres of rugged foothills near Denver. In August 2024, a 500-acre wildfire came within a mile of the aerospace facility, serving as a wake-up call for corporate decision-makers.

Professional staff members were tasked with finding the best way to mitigate wildfire risk, and the high-tech company turned to a low-tech solution: goats.

Sean Vogel, a member of the Lockheed team, told [Colorado Public Radio](#), “When we evaluated how to best mitigate the fuels that allow the fire to move quickly ... goats were really the most logical choice.”

Lockheed Martin hired [Goat Green](#), a company that deploys its 1,200-goat herd to combat noxious weeds and mitigate fire risk in Colorado and Wyoming. Lockheed Martin officials [extol](#) the goats’ ability to “vigorously consume fire-prone vegetation like weeds, scrub oak and poisonous plants.”

The Waterton Campus sits at the eastern edge of Pike National Forest, where Forest Service officials continue to pay contractors between \$2,000 and \$4,000 per acre to cut down trees to reduce wildfire risk. When wildfire returns to the area, the two approaches will make for an interesting comparison.

Northwest Forest Plan Amendment

The Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP), adopted in 1994 during Bill Clinton’s administration, covers 24.5 million acres in Washington, Oregon, and northern California. The NWFP was created in response to logging practices that decimated old-growth forests, created expansive clear-cuts, destroyed critical habitat for endangered species, and were deemed illegal in federal court. Timber harvests dropped dramatically in subsequent years.

In August 2023, a team of scientists with the U.S. Geological Survey, the Forest Service, and Oregon State University published a report based on a quarter century of data collection at more than 1,000 sites in 219 watersheds protected under the NWFP. The report documents “steady improvements in watershed condition” resulting from “broad-scale forest recovery combined with targeted forest, road, and stream management under the Northwest Forest Plan.”

The Plan has helped restore damage done by decades of unsustainable logging — protecting drinking water, keeping wildlife species off the endangered species list, restoring salmon runs, and improving quality of life and outdoor recreation, which provides the basis of a growing regional economy.

But Ag Department bureaucrats, timber-industry officials, and many in the Forest Service never supported the NWFP, and the Forest Service leadership has decided it’s time to amend the plan more to their liking. The proposed changes to the Plan are contained in a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS), and the Forest Service will accept public comments on the proposed amendment until 11:59:59 p.m. March 17.

The Forest Service DEIS proposes to overhaul the 30-year-old NWFP by increasing logging on federal lands across the Pacific Northwest in the name of fighting wildfires and boosting rural economies. According to the DEIS, the proposed amendment would increase annual timber harvests by at least 33% and potentially more than 200%. The number of timber-related jobs would increase accordingly,



A map produced by the Forest Service shows areas that could be affected by impending amendments to the landmark Northwest Forest Plan.

but taxpayer-subsidized wildfire-mitigation logging is economically sustainable only as long as it receives government subsidies.

“The Forest Service must maintain and enhance the protections of the Northwest Forest Plan,” said Earthjustice Senior Attorney Aurora Janke. “If the agency’s proposed amendment does not keep current protections, include robust tribal involvement, and protect climate-buffering forests ... then it should not go forward.”

Prior to the March 17 comment deadline, anyone can submit comments on the proposed Northwest Forest Plan Amendment at tinyurl.com/mtuwdbk3.

What can we Learn About Wildfire From Australia?



The Mount Solitary bushfire burns in Australia's Blue Mountains.

Five years ago, the Black Summer Bushfires burned more than 60 million acres in Australia. Between June 2019 and May 2020, hundreds of fires burned, mainly in southeastern Australia. Like the recent fires in Los Angeles, Australian bushfires are driven by high winds. They tend to burn more intensely and advance more rapidly than U.S. forest fires.

Because of the well-documented wildfire threat, Australia had already developed a “strong institutional structure and community social capital” for “prevention, mitigation, and management” of wildfire risk, according to a post-fire assessment by Australian researchers. These assets include well-established organizations, systems, and legal

contingencies at the local, regional, and national levels. The Australian lessons-learned report “underscores the importance” of the proverbial ounce of “pre-disaster prevention” over a pound of “emergency response” cure. A key component of Australia’s strong institutional structure is its community wildfire response policy: Stay and Defend or Leave Early (SDLE).

Sarah M. Mccaffrey, a Ph.D. scientist at the U.S. Forest Service Northern Research Station, co-authored a report comparing the Australian SDLE approach to the U.S. total evacuation response. The report acknowledges the easily promoted crowd-control, common-sense “simplicity” of the U.S. approach. But the report demonstrates, “The growth of

housing in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) has contributed to the current fire management challenge” by multiplying “the potential complexities of evacuation. ... In Australia, large-scale evacuations in response to wildfire have not been widely used.”

Instead, Australian fire management agencies follow a “common-sense” approach to wildfire. Residents are encouraged to “accept responsibility for how they will respond to the threat of wildfire,” which “greatly reduces the risk to firefighters.” The SDLE approach encourages residents to decide well before a fire occurs whether they will choose to leave when a fire threatens or “stay and actively defend their property—and to make appropriate preparations in advance for either

option.” Appropriate preparations focus primarily on home/structure hardening and secondly on defensible space. For Australia, home hardening includes fire bunkers – the fire-equivalent version of mid 20th-century tornado cellars on farms across the Great Plains. (“Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”)

Unlike the U.S. strategy of total evacuation, the SDLE strategy is “well supported by extensive research on how houses ignite and are destroyed in wildfire and the circumstances in which civilians die in wildfires.” Australian research shows that civilian deaths most often occur because of “radiant heat exposure” when people are caught in the open “while trying to flee at the last minute.”

Over the past 100 years, 78% of Australia’s civilian wildfire fatalities occurred when people tried to flee. Ten percent of deaths occurred when people were passively sheltering, and 2% died while actively defending their property. While U.S. research into civilian wildfire deaths is limited, an analysis of the 2003

Cedar Fire in Southern California found that almost all the 22 civilian deaths occurred while individuals were evacuating at the last minute.

Australian research also shows that most houses are destroyed “by fires igniting from embers entering or landing on the house either before, during, or over a long period after the fire front has passed.” Post-fire studies in Australia indicate that, when someone is present and actively defending the property, “there is a greatly increased chance that the house will survive.”

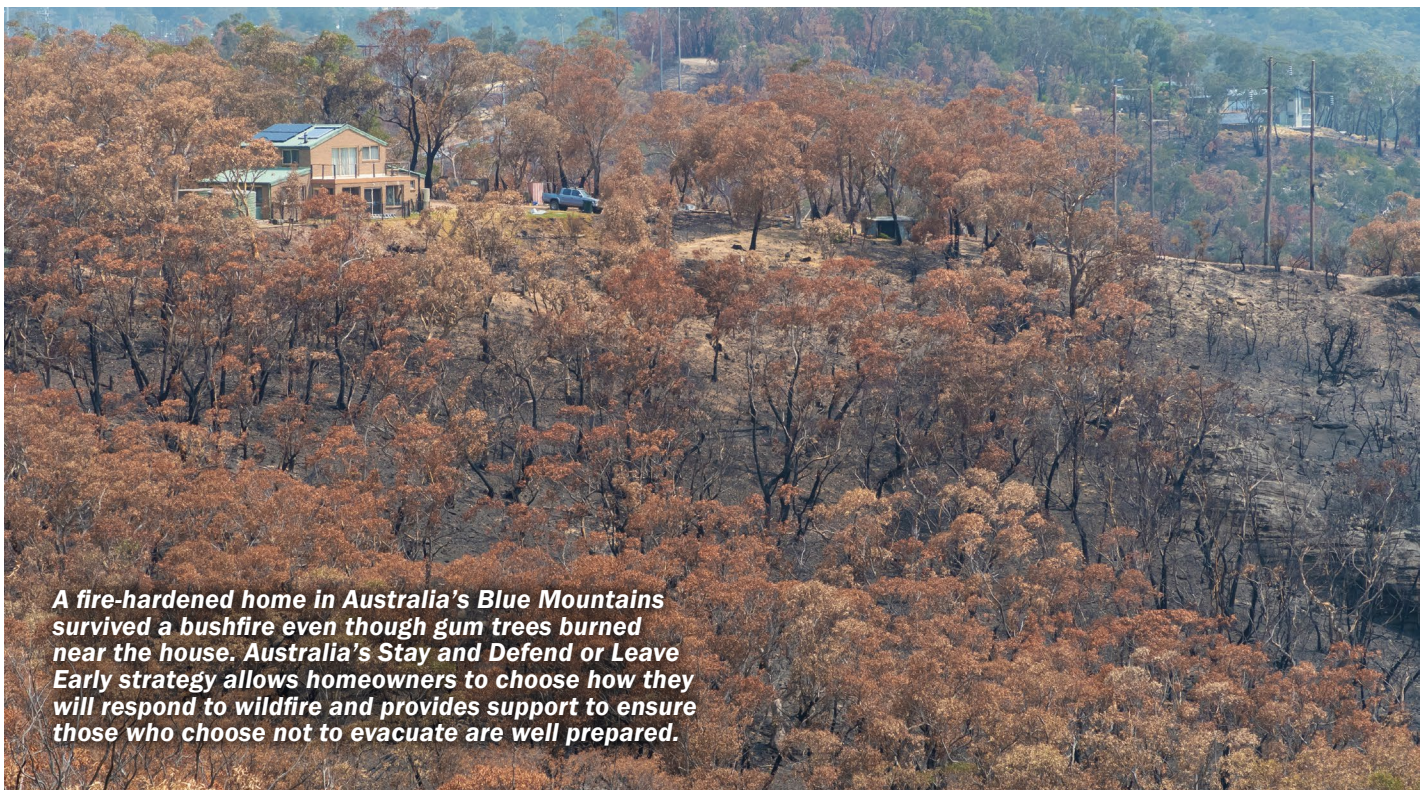
Research by Forest Service scientists like Jack Cohen and Mark Finney at the Missoula Fire Sciences Lab has reached the same conclusions. *Anecdotal stories* from U.S. homeowners who refuse to evacuate suggest that they often save both their homes and those of neighbors by extinguishing embers and spot fires.

Australian residents are provided with all of this information so that they can make informed decisions. Those who decide to leave are told

to “leave early, well before the fire is in the immediate area and travel on roads becomes dangerous.” Residents who choose to “stay and defend” are advised to prepare in advance by implementing home-hardening protections and fuels management in the home ignition zone.

The report concludes that many U.S. communities could benefit from adopting a SDLE approach with proper preparation: “There will be a need for widespread understanding of and agreement about the alternative and its potential benefits.” Achieving that level of understanding and agreement will require:

- Substantial education and outreach to ensure that residents and fire personnel fully understand the risks and choices.
- Effective partnerships between communities and fire management agencies.
- Agency structures and processes that support the policy.
- Individuals and communities willing to accept responsibility for their own safety.



A fire-hardened home in Australia’s Blue Mountains survived a bushfire even though gum trees burned near the house. Australia’s Stay and Defend or Leave Early strategy allows homeowners to choose how they will respond to wildfire and provides support to ensure those who choose not to evacuate are well prepared.



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P.O. Box 11615
Eugene, OR 97440
541-484-2692
fsee.org

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Call Your Representative Now

California Representative Doug LaMalfa is introducing H.R. 168, which would give fire-retardant polluters a free pass nationwide. This bill would undercut our recent legal victory, and it flies in the face of the damning new retardant study from the University of Southern California.

Let's nip this in the bud!

If you live in California, call U.S. Senator Alex Padilla and ask him to protect our drinking water and streams from toxic retardant pollution.

**The Congressional switchboard phone number can connect you to your representative's office:
202-224-3121**