FOREST NEWS

Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics

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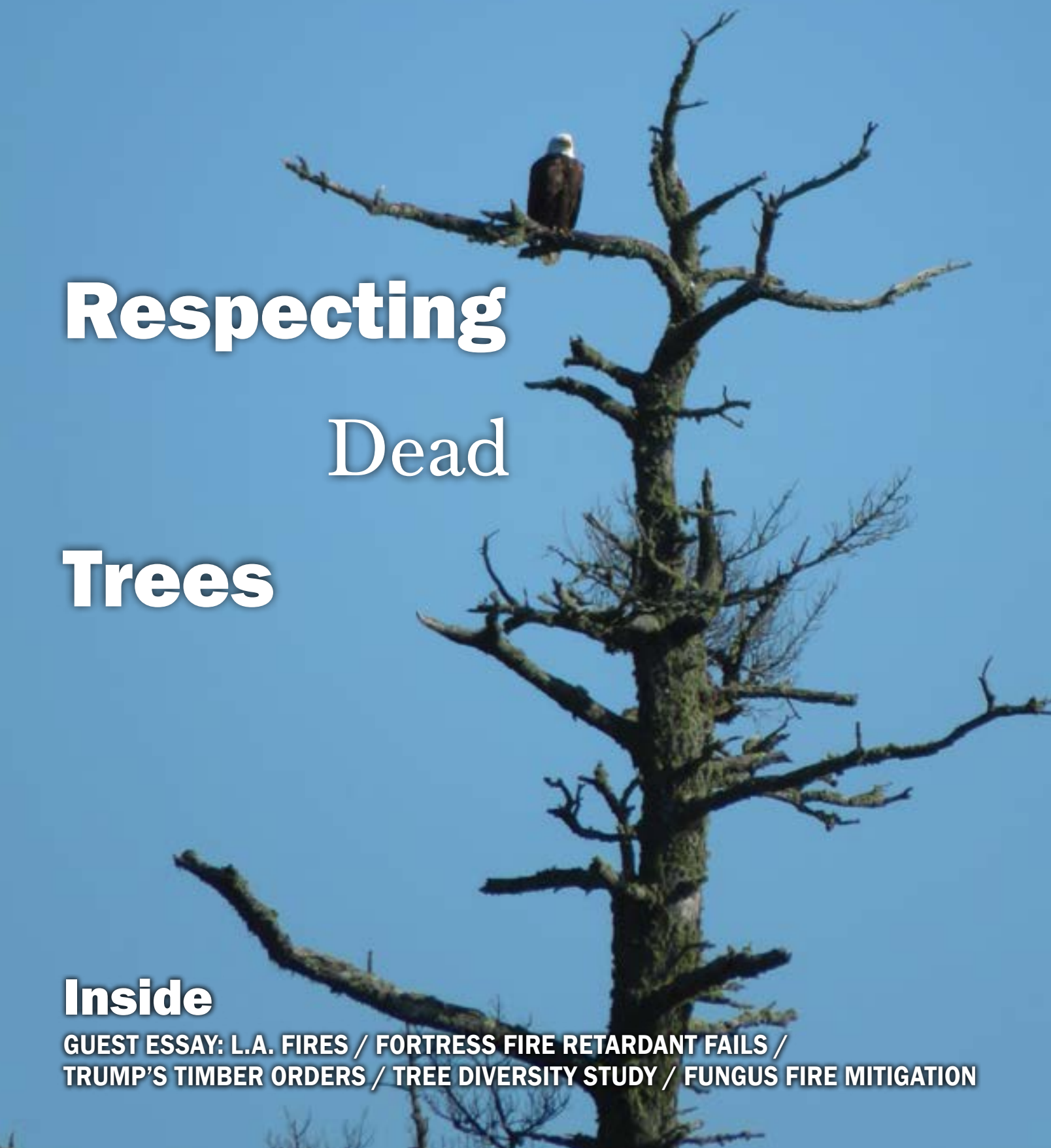

Respecting Dead Trees

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Do Muskrats Herald Twilight?

During his first term, President Trump signed into law the 30,000-acre Devil's Staircase Wilderness, an Oregon coastal rainforest. President Biden, on the other hand, added zero national forest acres to the wilderness system. During Trump's first term, the Forest Service sold an average of 3 billion board feet of timber annually. During Biden's term, the Forest Service sold an average of ... wait for it ... 3 billion board feet per year.

In his first term, President Trump signed Executive Order (EO) 13855 to promote "active management" of forests to "reduce wildfire risk." Although President Biden repealed many of Trump's orders, he left in place EO 13855; in fact, Biden did his best to implement Trump's active management edict.

So what will Trump version 2.0 mean for national forest policy? Although it's still early days, the basic outline continues the Trump/Biden policies of the last eight years. Trump's 2025 timber executive order breaks no new ground. It directs the Forest Service to streamline timber sale planning, under existing law, and instructs his subordinates to set an unspecified annual "target" for timber sales over the next four years.

The Forest Service's response to the Trump order is classic passive-aggressive bureaucracy. On the one hand, the Chief's office directive to field staff is long on rhetoric, e.g., "We enter a new era marked by pressing issues like a growing demand for domestic lumber and wildfire resilience." In fact, U.S. softwood lumber consumption has been flat-lined for the past 5 years, while the (pre-tariff) forecast is for a modest 1% growth in 2025, at most. Nor is "wildfire resilience" a new issue; it's been the Forest Service's raison d'être for a quarter-century.

Most elegant, however, is the manner in which the Forest Service is implementing Trump's directive. Instead of a four-year plan, the Forest Service directs its regional foresters to "develop five-year strategies" to ramp up timber offered annually by 25%, a target that isn't slated to be evaluated until at least a year beyond the end of Trump's tenure. If past is prologue, the Forest Service will fall short of this ambition, as it did during Trump's first term.

The real action is not found in Trump's timber policy, per se, but to changes within the federal workplace. The Forest Service is not immune to the invasive Muskrats and their slash-and-burn disdain for the civil service. Here, too, however, we find echoes of the Biden administration, which eliminated 2,400 seasonal jobs not labeled "firefighter" due to budget mismanagement. Trump's yet-to-be-announced (at this writing) reduction-in-force will continue thinning the Forest Service's workforce.

Will people who visit our national forests see a difference? Insofar as the Forest Service has been short-changing recreation for decades, e.g., a maintenance backlog in the billions of dollars, the public may not notice that fewer trails are being maintained, restrooms are a little dirtier, and visitor center hours are shortened. Although the sky may not be falling, it does feel like twilight in the U.S. Forest Service.

Sincerely,

Andy Stahl

Inside

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Still water reflects the moon on a misty morning at Beaver Meadows on the Allegheny National Forest (Forest Service photo by Kathleen Creek).

Featured Forest

Allegheny National Forest

Located in northwestern Pennsylvania, the Allegheny is the state's only national forest, established in 1923. The 514,029-acre Forest sits on the Allegheny Plateau and features:

- Two wilderness areas, Hickory Creek and Allegheny Islands.
- Two national scenic areas, Hearts Content and Tionesta.
- Two wild and scenic rivers, the Allegheny and the Clarion.

The Allegheny Plateau dates to the Paleozoic Era. (The southern reaches of the Plateau are known as the Cumberland Plateau.) "Regional uplift" caused the area to rise in elevation with little change to the topography. But precipitation over the ensuing hundreds of millions of years eroded parts of the Plateau into a rugged landscape of narrow valleys and gorges surrounded by steep ridges. In Pennsylvania, elevations in the Allegheny Plateau range from 1,750 to 3,000 feet above sea level.

In the 18th century, the forest in northwest Pennsylvania was mostly eastern hemlock and American beech. Black cherry accounted for less than one percent of the Plateau's trees. This old-growth forest contained rich biodiversity and was characterized by large trees, fallen logs, and a multi-layered forest canopy. Today the region is known for black cherry, maple and other hardwoods, with the Allegheny National Forest providing a third of the world's supply of black cherry furniture veneer.

Truly a "land of many uses," the Allegheny offers a wide variety of recreation activities including: camping, motorized trail-riding, and snowmobiling. Paddlers enjoy the Allegheny and Clarion Wild and Scenic rivers, while the 12,000-acre Allegheny Reservoir welcomes motorized boating, camping, and fishing. Abundant wildlife provides hunting and viewing opportunities. The Forest's many overlooks provide gorgeous views from around the forest, especially when deciduous tree leaves turn autumnal.

The Forest also includes roughly 2,000 oil-and-gas wells, thanks to a "split estate" in which subsurface mineral rights are not controlled by the landowner. Many of the wells have been abandoned, like the coal mines that predate federal management.

Respecting the Role of Dead Trees in the Forest

Dead trees have become a frequent target of the Forest Service in the years since the agency was forced to stop allowing clear-cut logging of old-growth trees. Either labeled as "hazard trees" or subject to "salvage logging," dead trees have been identified by the Forest Service as easy targets. As an agency in the Department of Agriculture, the Forest Service has never been overly fond of dead trees – unless they died at the hands of timber companies as a crop harvested to support private-sector profits. But now, after being forced to restrict old-growth logging, the Forest Service has labeled dead trees, especially those killed by native insects and endemic fire, as bad, thereby justifying their extraction to support an unsustainable socio-industrial economic model.

Among the clear-sighted individuals standing up for dead trees is ecologist George Wuerthner: "Like most people I once viewed dead trees as an indicator of some presumed problem in the forest – that a 'healthy' forest was one with a minimum of dead trees and largely free of wildfire, insects, and disease.... I now understand that large numbers of dead trees are critical to functioning forest ecosystems. There is no disputing the ecological importance of dead trees. Dead trees and down wood play an important role in ecosystems by providing wildlife habitat, cycling nutrients, aiding plant regeneration, decreasing erosion, and influencing drainage and soil moisture and carbon storage."

Scientific findings about the ecological importance of dead wood have been largely ignored by the Forest Service since at least the Obama administration. In 2015, the Forest Service reported spending more than half of its total discretionary budget on firefighting activities, including "hazardous fuels reduction," which includes salvage logging of dead trees. By 2016, aerial surveys showed an increase in the number of dead, drought-stricken trees in California. President Barack Obama's Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, pushed for allocating more than 65% of the entire Forest Service budget to firefighting and fire-mitigation activities. The increasing number of dead trees, he said, "clearly increases the risk of what we're already experiencing, a record-setting fire season in California."

A dead tree in the Siuslaw National Forest provides a buffet for bears and woodpeckers. Dead wood on the forest floor supports ferns, fungi, and mosses.

Vilsack's comments represent a paradigm that continued to be advanced through the first Trump administration and the Biden administration, in which Vilsack again served as Ag secretary. That paradigm also provides the rationale for current Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins' recent Secretarial Memorandum proclaiming an emergency situation on almost 80 million acres of national forest lands because they are "at risk of experiencing substantially increased tree mortality ... from insect and disease infestation; or containing hazard trees" – i.e., dead or dying trees that supposedly pose "an imminent risk to public health, infrastructure, and safety."

According to this paradigm, fires and insects are bad – i.e., natural processes are destroying our forests by killing trees. So, the Forest Service spends billions of dollars each year in an effort to contain wildfire and insect outbreaks because stand-replacing wildfires and large outbreaks of native insects are viewed as something that needs to be suppressed or controlled. For perspective, currently perceived increases in fire and insect harm are directly linked to relatively short-term human interventions as well as long-term natural processes.

Regardless of the scientifically shallow, subjective roots of this paradigm, a growing body of research topples the oft-repeated ideas that (1) dead trees aplenty are bad and (2) wildfires and insects are destroying our forests. Since wildfire and insect outbreaks have persisted in our forests for millenia, the current extent of these "problems" is not unprecedented if we look back beyond 100 years, which is analagous to other natural events like hundred-year floods/blizzards/droughts/etc. These "extreme" events have always played a role in shaping our ecosystems and ensuring their resilience.

In a 2004 article in *Conservation Biology*, Richard Hutto, ecology professor and former director of the Avian Science Center at the University of Montana, wrote, "Everything from the system of fire-regime classification, to a preoccupation with the destructive aspects of fire, to the mis-application of snag-management guidelines have led us to ignore the obvious: we need to retain the very elements that give

A snag in Superior National Forest dispays the classic angular form that earned standing dead trees their monicker. It also hosts the insect larvae that birds like woodpeckers rely on as a food source (Forest Service photo).

rise to much of the biological uniqueness of a burned forest – the standing dead trees."

The list of beneficial functions of dead trees is extensive. Supporting wildlife is one of the few that gets any recognition. Hutto reports that at least 60% of species that nest in severely burned forests use only snags for nest sites, and as many as 45% of North American bird species rely on snags at some point in their life cycle. Hutto's research shows that 15 of those species are most abundant in forests with high snag numbers resulting from high-intensity stand-replacing fires. That these bird species evolved to rely on snags provides strong evidence that stand-replacing fires and large insect outbreaks were neither uncommon nor unnatural, as the Ag Department paradigm would have us believe.

Birds are just one example of ecosystem reliance on dead trees. Burned forests also provide important food sources for wildlife attracted by seeds released from fire-activated cones and new groundcover plants. Cold-blooded species like salamanders rely on dead trees. Ants, pollinators and lichens play significant roles in forest ecosystems and also rely on dead trees. Healthy soil structure with adequate organic matter requires dead trees. Dead trees help create healthy aquatic ecosystems in streams.

Mushrooms, moss, and ferns flourish on the remnants of a tree in Idaho Panhandle National Forest (Forest Service photo by Elisha Stamm).

And yes, even bark beetles contribute to ecosystem health. By breeching the outer layer of tree bark, they create pathways for fungus and other insects to get inside trees and speed up the decomposition process. The pheromones they release to attract other beetles also attract insects that prey on bark beetles. Plus, the compounds released from the decomposing trees attract other organisms that feed on dead wood. Research also shows bark beetle outbreaks increase biodiversity in forest ecosystems.

Sunset silhouettes a snag protected from salvage logging and hazard tree mitigation because it stands on land designated as wilderness — Table Rock Wilderness Area, Oregon (BLM photo).

Any reasonably objective analysis of salvage logging, "hazard tree mitigation," and their effects on forest health reveals the significant ecological costs of these logging practices. In a 2006 paper, Hutto wrote, "I am hard-pressed to find any other example in wildlife biology where the effect of a particular land-use activity is as close to 100% negative as the typical post-fire salvage-logging operation tends to be." While Hutto's findings focus on post-fire logging, many of his conclusions apply to any forest management practice that significantly reduces the amount of dead wood in the forest.

As Wuerthner concludes, "Planning to maintain current and recruit future dead wood in the forest will go a long way toward promoting overall forest health, resilience, biodiversity, and wildlife habitat."

Guest Column

Want to Know Who's to Blame for LA Fires? Look in the Mirror

by Randal O'Toole

Title frame of the 1962 documentary film produced by the Los Angeles Fire Department describing the catastrophic Bel Air Fire of 1961.

The 1961 Bel Air fire was the worst wildland-urban fire in California history up to that point. Nearly 500 homes were incinerated despite every firefighter in Los Angeles being called up in an unsuccessful effort to fight the Santa Ana winds. Hydrants ran out of water as 50-mph "devil winds" drove fires fueled by "the fastest burning ground cover in the western hemisphere" across major highways that would normally provide sufficient fuel breaks. Former vice president Richard Nixon was photographed spraying water from a garden hose on the cedar shake roof of his rented house to protect it from the flames. While his house survived, homes owned by Burt Lancaster, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Aldous Huxley, and numerous other celebrities did not.

Although similar fires had destroyed homes and businesses at least as far back as 1916, this one prompted the Los Angeles Fire Department to make a movie arguing that "combustible-roofed houses closely spaced in brush-covered canyons and ridges serviced by narrow roads" is a "design for disaster." In response, the City banned wood-shingled roofs and required homeowners to clear their properties of brush but did nothing about the closeness of homes or inadequate fire routes.

Banning flammable roofs was a good start but, by itself, wasn't enough to stop more destructive fires in Los Angeles County. About every 10 years since 1961, major fires in Los Angeles County have burned hundreds of homes and other structures. While the 12,000 structures burned in this year's fires appear to be a new record, this should not be a big surprise to anyone living in Los Angeles or familiar with fire ecology.

Since the Bel Air Fire, environmentalists have promoted the preservation of hundreds of thousands of acres of chaparral in parks and open spaces, thus making permanent the danger to LA homeowners. This included the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area in 1978, 83% of which burned in the Woolsey Fire of 2018. In 1980, the state of California created the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which has since protected another 72,000 acres of chaparral from development, at least some of which burned in this year's fires. In addition, state parks created in the 1960s and 1970s cover around 20,000 acres of the Santa Monica Mountains, most of which burned this year.

Not surprisingly, the LA fires have become as politicized as every other major news story. Contrary to claims in articles from *ABC News* and others, these fires aren't a result of climate change. As technology journalist Tristan Greene notes, "high severity fire in chaparral has been normal as far back as we can look." The damage from such fires has increased mainly because more homes, and more valuable homes, have been built in fire-prone areas.

Nor were these fires worsened by DEI as some on the right contend. Los Angeles' fire chief may be gay, but she has solid fire-fighting credentials and has been warning of the negative effects of cuts to her department's budget for months.

Even if the fire department had been fully funded, however, it wouldn't have been able to do much about the chaparral-fueled fires spread by the Santa Ana winds. Firefighting standards call for 15 to 43 firefighters for each burning

In the aftermath of the 2025 Palisades Fire, homes seemingly untouched by the flames stand adjacent to the devastated remains of homes fully consumed by the fire. (U.S. Army photo by California National Guard Sgt. Jon Soucy).

house, meaning Los Angeles' 9,000 firefighters is enough for 200-600 homes. With thousands of homes burning each day over several days, LA would have needed at least five times its current number of firefighters on call to be ready for fires that happen only once every few years.

Some said that the solution is more thinnings and prescribed burnings, but they clearly don't understand chaparral ecology. Prescribed burning can reduce fire hazards in forests adapted to frequent light burns, such as the ponderosa pine forests of the Sierras. But chaparral is a completely different kind of ecosystem in which natural fires took place much more rarely. Frequent prescribed fires can actually make chaparral more fire-prone by inviting non-native species.

Nor would more water tanks and reservoirs have solved the problem. For one thing, water isn't really the right tool for dealing with landscape-sized firestorms. Plus, when thousands of homes are burning at once, even the most generous water supplies will get overwhelmed.

Contrary to reports from the *Washington Post*, the fires are also not the result of urban sprawl, at least not by what people typically mean by sprawl: housing densities that decline with distance from city centers. The low-density housing found at the edges of truly sprawling regions such as Atlanta, Dallas, and Houston are actually the ideal buffer strip protecting such regions from wildfire.

The 2020 census found that, at more than 8,000 people per square mile, Los Angeles is the seventh-densest of the 37 U.S. cities of more than 500,000 people. It covers a lot of land only because it houses a lot of people, but various greenbelts and growth boundaries prevent it from having much truly low-density housing. This lack of true sprawl is what makes LA neighborhoods so vulnerable as houses are crammed in relatively dense 5,000- to 7,500-square-foot lots right up against the chaparral. Those homes are built mainly of wood and when one house catches fire, the radiant heat from that fire will ignite other structures 20 to 40 feet away.

The most idiotic claim was made by *Reason* magazine, which argued that the damage could have been avoided if only Los Angeles had allowed higher-density development in the city center. Considering that modest, three-bedroom homes in Pacific Palisades are typically valued at $3 million or more, somebody would have been living in those homes no matter how dense the city's downtown.

Far more sensible suggestions have come from retired Forest Service fire researcher Jack Cohen, fire historian Stephen Pyne, and chaparral ecologist Richard Halsey. Instead of permanently staffing the fire departments with enough people and providing enough water supplies to deal with once-a-decade events, they say, people need to take responsibility for fireproofing their own property. As Halsey says, we need to fireproof communities "from the house out rather than from the wildland in."

Too many people assumed that the government would take care of them in the event of a fire. This dependence on government — government firefighters, government water supplies, government land management — has become Los Angeles' weakness. People who lost their homes and are looking for someone to blame should look in the mirror.

This means they should rebuild their homes with materials that will not ignite even if a neighbor's home is burning furiously. It also means they should surround those homes with largely non-flammable landscapes: grass lawns are okay; eucalyptus trees and other flammable plants are definitely not.

It would help if the insurance companies that abandoned Southern California came back to insure only properties that are built to fireproof standards.

Members of Forest Service Taskforce 1600 — a special firefighting unit pulled from Shasta-Trinity, Plumas, Modoc, Tahoe, and Stanislaus national forests — face off against the Palisades Fire (Forest Service photo by Victor Guillen).

Unfortunately, when those companies left, California started its own insurance program, giving homeowners one more signal that the government would take care of them even if they continued to fail to protect their properties from wildfire.

Even if insurance companies only covered Firewise properties, regulation in the form of strict building and property management codes will be needed if only because some people won't get insurance and thus won't have an incentive to build responsibly. The LA Fire Department's 1962 film notes, "you are only as safe as your neighbor," and based on that principle, even many libertarians would agree that some regulation is needed.

If Pacific Palisades homes had all been built of concrete blocks or other fireproof materials, it wouldn't matter how many firefighters LA had, as few of the homes would have caught fire. Nor would the lack of multiple escape routes from places like the Summit have mattered, as many people could have stayed in their homes during the fires since the only threat to them would be smoke. Los Angeles should quickly write new building codes to ensure that homes built to replace those destroyed in the 2025 fires will be safe from future fires.

It is also important that owners make changes to existing unburned homes remaining in fire-prone areas. The city should require that yards of homes located downwind of chaparral hills be designed and managed to Firewise standards. That means cutting down trees that are clustered together, removing trees and brush that are up against homes and other structures, and trimming the lower branches from any trees left behind. Gravel, concrete, or pavers should be installed in a five-foot perimeter around all structures.

While it might be too much to demand that existing homes be completely rebuilt with fireproof materials, the city should require property owners to take relatively low-cost steps to protect structures from ignition. Roofs are already supposed to be non-flammable, but plenty of other parts of homes can still be vulnerable to fires, including vents, eaves, decks, porches, and windows.

Vents and soffits "can be weak links in a fire," says one Firewise report, allowing hot embers to enter the home. Homeowners should shield all vents with wire screens with one-quarter-inch or smaller openings and install fireproof soffits in all eaves. Wooden decks and porches should be rebuilt with non-flammable materials. Ordinary glass windows should be replaced with tempered glass.

California and Los Angeles could offer homeowners grants covering, say, half the costs of these changes. This would be less expensive in the long run than fighting more firestorms and providing government-backed insurance for homeowners who don't bother to fireproof their properties.

Millions of people in the West live on a fireplain. We can't prevent wildfires in such areas, and it is futile to try. What we can do is protect ourselves and our homes from those fires. Those of us who live in fire-prone areas owe it to our neighbors as well as ourselves to make our homes and properties as fire resistant as possible.

Despite more than a century of wildland fires spreading into its neighborhoods, Los Angeles has so far failed to ask its residents to do that. As the ash settles from the 2025 fires, local taxpayers should press the city to fix this.

Randal O'Toole is a forest policy analyst who has monitored and critiqued Forest Service, BLM, and other agency programs for more than five decades. He is the author of *Reforming the Forest Service* and several papers on wildfire policy including "The Perfect Firestorm: Bringing Forest Service Wildfire Costs Under Control."

Briefly

Compass Minerals Shuts Down Fire Retardant Business

In a statement to investors, Compass Minerals announced that it "has decided to wind down its fire retardant business, Fortress North America," as "part of a larger strategic refocus to improve the profitability of the company's core Salt and Plant Nutrition businesses.

As previously reported, the Forest Service declined to purchase Fortress aerial fire retardant for the 2024 wildfire season, citing "significant signs of corrosion in air tankers using Compass' magnesium chloride-based aerial fire retardants."

The Forest Service had indicated that it would await a "coordinated, independent assessment" before making a final decision about using the Fortress product, which was touted as "a cleaner, safer and eco-friendly alternative to the ammonium phosphate chemicals that have been the industry standard for the last six decades."

Fortress' setback with the Forest Service, a subsequent drop in stock value, and an ensuing class-action lawsuit likely contributed to Compass Minerals' decision to dump its fire-retardant business.

A plane drops Fortress magnesium-chloride-based fire retardant on the 2023 Rabbit Fire in California (photo by Marty Wolin via Fortress North America).

Musk Firings Undermine Wildland Firefighting

The extralegal firing of Forest Service employees by Elon Musk's "Department of Government Efficiency" will undermine the agency's firefighting capabilities. Musk's pseudo-agency claimed that firefighters were exempt from the purge, but as reported by Kylie Mohr in *High Country News*, a Forest Service fire officer who spoke on condition of anonymity said, "We lost the whole suite of support."

Many of the people fired have certifications, informally called "red cards," which qualify them for various roles critical to wildland firefighting. More than 75% of the employees fired under Musk's guidance hold red cards, according to Frank Beum, a retired regional forester.

On March 5, the independent Merit Systems Protection Board ordered the U.S. Department of Agriculture to reinstate almost 6,000 employees, allowing many Forest Service employees to remain on the job, but the order expires April 18 (shortly after ***Forest News*** goes to press).

In spite of the ruling, fired employees still fear losing their jobs because of President Donald Trump's March 13 deadline for federal agencies to submit plans to reduce the size of their workforces.

Students at the Mid-Willamette Valley Fire School complete on-the-ground wildfire training to earn their "red card" certifications (BLM photo).

Canadian Town Fights Fire With Fungi

The Alberta town of Fox Creek plans to fight wildfires with mushrooms, according to a report from *CTV News*. The Mycological Research Project is exploring how to enhance the existing fire-mitigation benefits of fungi and is a collaboration between the town, Portage College, Alberta Innovates, and Alberta Wildfire.

The idea is to cultivate fungi that will help speed up the decomposition of dead trees and plant material, reducing fuel availability, increasing soil moisture, and cooling the soil."So the forest fires would burn less hot, hopefully less severe," said Samantha Benton, Fox Creek emergency and safety coordinator.

Benton said the team will be tailoring the findings of a Colorado study to Canadian species of trees and fungi. "We'll figure out what we have and which works best.... Hopefully by this time next year, we'll have a good, solid view of how things are going."

Olive-brown waxy cap mushrooms (Hygrophorus hypothejus) grow in coniferous forests and are one example of fungi that could help reduce wildfire risk.

Retardant stains the landscape pink in Los Padres National Forest, California, after retardant was dumped illegally during the Howard Fire (photo by Peter Deenan).

Fire Retardant in Western Ecosystems

In a paper recently published by the American Chemical Society, scientists with the U.S. Environnmental Protection Agency identify aerial fire retardant as a source of phosphorous pollution in Western ecosystems.

Citing high concentrations of phosphorus and nitrogen "in many U.S. waterbodies ... in remote, relatively pristine watersheds," the paper is the first to examine ammonium-phosphate fire retardant as a source of these pollutants.

The researchers found that phosphorous in fire retardant is applied at rates 4-44 times the rate at which it is applied as fertilizer for crops. Nitrogen in fire retardant is applied at rates up to 16 times greater than for fertilizer.

"Excessive nutrient loading to surface waters endangers drinking water supplies ... and many other water quality end points." Even when retardant drops avoid water, "the potential for runoff exists."

The report comes on the heals of findings that retardant contains toxic levels of heavy metals.

Fall foliage reveals tree diversity in Ottawa National Forest. A recent report shows tree species diversity improves a forest's ability to attenuate temperature extremes (Forest Service photo).

Tree Diversity Reduces Impacts of Temperature Extremes

Various studies have shown that forests act as a buffer to climate extremes, creating micro-climates that support forest resilience and biodiversity. The authors of a new study, "Tree Diversity Increases Forest Temperature Buffering via Enhancing Canopy Density and Structural Diversity," note that the "effect of tree diversity on temperature buffering in forests is largely unexplored."

During a large-scale six-year study, the researchers found that "tree species richness increases forest temperature buffering," strengthening protections against both extreme heat and extreme cold.

While "other mechanisms that cause positive biodiversity-ecosystem functioning relationships in forests ... are all species-specific," the authors of this report conclude, "Temperature buffering emerges from the community as a whole."

The authors documented "a considerable magnitude" for this positive effect on temperature extremes when comparing a forest monoculture to forest with 24 different species.

Mixed forests cooled temperatures by 7.9°F (4.4°C) more than single-species forests in peak summer months and stayed 2°F (1.1°C) warmer in winter.

"This buffering effect of tree species richness was mediated by enhanced canopy density and structural diversity in species-rich stands," leading the researchers to recommend "safeguarding and planting diverse forests."

Wind drives a wildfire across the prairie in Oklahoma. In Stillwater, wind-driven fire destroyed 74 homes in March.

'Where the Wind Comes Sweepin' Down the Plain'

In late February, Oklahoma experienced multiple fires driven by high winds. By March 5, most of those fires were considered contained, but on March 14, a storm brought more high winds that fed more than 130 fires, destroying over 300 homes and burning 179,000 acres.

In Stillwater, 74 homes were destroyed by wildfires. At a news conference, Fire Chief Terry Essary said the fires spread rapidly and crews quickly became overwhelmed because of the high winds and low humidity. "Nobody has enough resources to fight fires when the wind is blowing 70 mph," he said. "It's an insurmountable task."

The Oklahoma fires not only demonstrated (yet again) that wind drives catastrophic conflagrations, but also illustrated the misguided notion that cutting trees in our national forests will minimize community wildfire risk.

A tree-thinning project at Monroe Mountain on Utah's Fishlake National Forest left unshaded ground that will be hotter, drier and more susceptible to readily combustible invasive plants (Forest Service photo by John Zapell).

Dispatch

EOs aim to Increase Logging, Executive Power

Less than three months into his second term, President Donald Trump had signed 112 executive orders, more than half as many as the 220 EOs he issued during his entire first four years in the White House. As of this writing, two of Trump's EOs, both issued March 1, focus on timber.

"ADDRESSING THE THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY FROM IMPORTS OF TIMBER, LUMBER"

The last time timber was a legitimate national security concern was likely the formative years of the United States of America, as documented by the U.S. Naval Institute. Events on the high seas — piracy and ransoms for the safe return of U.S. citizens — led to the 1794 *Act To Provide A Naval Armament*, signed by President George Washington. The act allowed the president to contract for the building of four ships of 44 guns each and two ships of 36 guns each. Secretary of War Henry Knox signed onto Joshua Humphreys' plans to build six ships. Humphreys shared his plans for the frigates in a letter to financier Robert Morris: "As such ships will cost a large sum of money, they should be built of the best materials that could possibly be procured, the beams of their decks should be of the best Carolina pine & the lower Futtocks & knees if possible of Live Oak."

In the late 1700, live oak trees, which only grew in the southern U.S., produced the most desirable timber due to its durability and resistance to the deleterious effects of saltwater. While construction of the first U.S. Navy ships quickly fell behind schedule and suffered multiple setbacks, the investment produced a handful of legendary vessels, like the 44-gun USS Constitution. During the War of 1812, witnesses remarked that cannonballs bounced harmlessly off the sides of the frigate, hence its colloquial name, "Old Ironsides." The ship's durability is attributed to its dense live-oak frame. Truly, live-oak timber was a matter of national security in the early years of the nation.

Trump's EO claims that U.S. reliance on Canadian timber for paper and two-by-fours rises to a level of national security rivaling creation of the nation's navy. As others have pointed out, "'National security' is one of the provisions under the United States-Canada-Mexico Agreement that can be used to justify the use of tariffs. "National security" then justifies the EOs that demand increases in timber harvest on public lands, especially national forests.

"IMMEDIATE EXPANSION OF AMERICAN TIMBER PRODUCTION"

Trump's other timber EO calls for an immediate increase in federal logging, mostly on national forest lands, by "fully exploiting our domestic timber supply."

In other words, our national forests — "lands of many uses" — should focus even more on tree farming. The EO also echoes its companion EO by painting accelerated logging on public lands as a matter of "national and economic security." Community protection from wildfire, the usual Ag Department rationalization for cutting our trees, is barely mentioned in this order.

The EO does, however, direct federal agencies to undermine environmental protections established by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Both the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are directed to implement measures that boost logging under existing contracting authority and to propose legislation to expand logging authority. The two agencies must also propose annual targets for timber sold from federal lands.

The Agriculture and Interior departments are ordered to more broadly adopt NEPA exemptions (categorical exclusions, or CEs) that the Forest Service has recently been using to expand the size of projects that receive only cursory NEPA review. The EO specifically targets efforts to protect and restore whitebark pine, a keystone species of northern Rocky Mountain ecosystems listed as threatened, by ordering the Interior and Ag departments to complete whitebark pine ESA consultations within 120 days.

The EO also targets protections for endangered species in the name of fast-tracking logging on public lands. It directs the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service to expedite any ESA reviews that affect logging projects and to prioritize ESA consultations for logging projects. It also orders federal agencies to eliminate any existing policies that create an undefined "undue burden" for logging federal lands and to accelerate ESA consultations on federal logging projects.

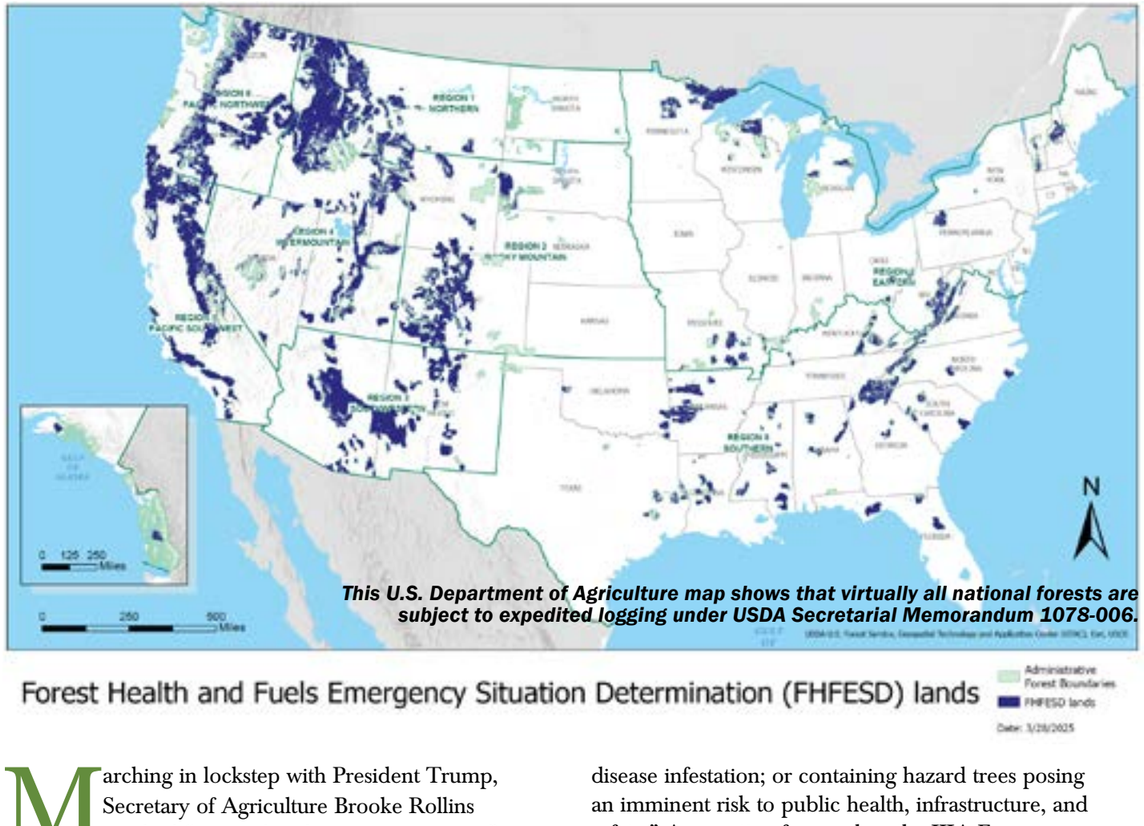
For a number of reasons — from sawmill capacity to worthless timber to Forest Service staff firings — these timber EOs seem unlikely to have a significant effect on logging public lands. The larger concern seems to be that these timber EOs are framed as a matter of national security, a pattern readily discernible in other actions by the current administration.

Those EOs include declaring foreign trade a national emergency to raise tariffs to historic levels under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977. Trump has also framed immigration as a national security issue, claiming the U.S. is under attack, mainly from Venezuela, so that he can activate wartime powers under the Alien Enemies Act of 1798.

As others have observed, Trump is ignoring actual problems while manufacturing "the fake emergencies he needs to further enlarge and centralize his power."

Heavy equipment severely compacts the soil while stacking pine logs on the Kisatchie National Forest in Louisiana (Forest Service photo by Stacy Blomquist).

Ag Secretary Orders Expedited Logging



This U.S. Department of Agriculture map shows that virtually all national forests are subject to expedited logging under USDA Secretarial Memorandum 1078-006.

Marching in lockstep with President Trump, Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins invoked "national and economic security" in Secretarial Memorandum 1078-006, "Increasing Timber Production and Designating an Emergency Situation on National Forest System Lands."

Secretary Rollins' Memorandum attributes this forest emergency to "uncharacteristically severe wildfires, insect and disease outbreaks, invasive species, and other stressors whose impacts have been compounded by too little active management." As ***Forest News*** readers are aware, the characteristics cited by Rollins are largely a result of too ***much*** "active management" — e.g., clear-cut logging, fire suppression in fire-dependent forests, overgrazing, soil compaction by logging equipment, etc.

Nonetheless, Rollins invokes provisions of the Biden administration's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) to make an Emergency Situation Determination for 66,940,000 acres of national forest lands "rated as very high or high wildfire risk." The Emergency Determination also extends to 78,800,000 acres of national forest lands "at risk of experiencing substantially increased tree mortality over the next 15 years from insect and disease infestation; or containing hazard trees posing an imminent risk to public health, infrastructure, and safety." Accounting for overlap, the IIJA Emergency Declaration affects 112,646,000 acres, or 59 percent of all National Forest System lands. Rollins' solution is to limit environmental reviews and public input, and a letter from Acting Forest Service Associate Chief French Chris orders Forest Service officials to increase timber production by 25% over the next four to five years.

Many of the areas with high fire risk have wood with little economic value, such as small-diameter trees. As FSEEE Executive Director Andy Stahl has pointed out to *E&E News* reporter Marc Heller, "'Worthless wood' is synonymous with 'hazardous fuels.'" Stahl told Heller that French's letter alludes to this reality by offering "direct financial support programs to industry." This financial support for logging worthless trees indicates the work requires taxpayer subsidies because it isn't profitable. Stahl also said that big timber companies produce the vast majority of the nation's wood from privately held land. "Even a 25 percent increase from national forests would be little more than a rounding error in the national wood supply, he said."

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Siuslaw National Forest at Cape Perpetua, Oregon, where FSEEE's work helped protect irreplaceable old-growth trees (Forest Service photo by Cecilio Ricardo).

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