

Something of Value: The National Forest System

Congressional Action is Needed for the Revitalization of the National Forest System.

March 12, 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

America's 193 million-acre National Forest System is in serious decline. The United States Forest Service (USFS) was created to be the congressional designated manager of the forests and to be the leader of professional forestry in the United States. As much through designed neglect as benign neglect, the national forests are being allowed to change from productive forests to fire-prone, insect-infested, and disease-wracked lands of declining value to the public, and the USFS that manages them for their citizen-owners is declining in its ability to carry out its mission of "caring for the land and serving people." Congress must act immediately to save the National Forest System and its invaluable commodity and amenity resources, and to restore and revitalize the beleaguered USFS charged with their management.

During the past decade, the natural resources on over 12 million acres (an area larger than the State of Maryland) of National Forest System lands have been damaged or destroyed by catastrophic wildfires, insects, and disease. This devastation is a consequence primarily of improper and inadequate management in a time of rapidly changing environmental conditions caused by climate change. Science-based resource management by Forest Service professionals has been preempted by those with ideological agendas and the political power to impose them. Congress's statutory direction for management of the national forests on a sustained yield-multiple use basis has been subverted by special interest groups. This situation will only get worse without immediate congressional intervention.

Congress must act now to charter a comprehensive review of the legislated mission and physical status of the forests and their resources, and then reverse and remedy the situations in those forests and their administration that threaten the nation's economical and ecological well-being. If it does not, and current trends continues, the nation's needs for vital economic goods and ecosystem services provided by the National Forest System will not be met (such as water), and Forest Service capabilities to manage the national forests will decline with the decline of its corps of professional resource managers and other specialists.

We believe the necessary review would best be led by a new public land law review commission, or Congress's investigative arm, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), with input by members of the Forest Service along with representatives of state and local governments directly concerned with national forest issues, citizen dependent on the forests, resource management experts, and user group members. This review should focus on: (1) the biological and physical condition of the National Forest System; (2) the management needs and challenges which must be met to restore those lands and resources through active management, as well as restore public confidence in the process; and (3) The indicators of needed service and products being delivered to American citizens. As a result of this review, Congress should: (1) revise the often-conflicting statutes governing National Forest System management and stewardship; and (2) revise, restore and reaffirm the mission of the Forest Service to manage those lands to produce "the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run" that was its original charge, as well as provide for accomplishment of that mission.

Steps toward these ends are listed in the white paper.

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