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California's National Forests: Active Management a Key to Sustainable Forestry in the Golden State

Prepared by the California Licensed Foresters Association
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Abstract: California's National Forests are a treasure chest of natural resources, both commodity (timber, water, minerals, range) and non-commodity (recreation, aesthetics, biodiversity). They were created a century ago under the principle of conservation, a land management approach blending applied science and expert judgement to meet human demands for both commodity and non-commodity benefits, both today and for the future.

In recent decades, new laws, court decisions and executive actions have tended to undermine the legislated purpose of national forests, shifting their focus from conservation and "multiple use" to a philosophy of preservation and custodial, non-extractive management. As the USDA Forest Service enters its second century, CLFA argues for a blended approach, and that the California Board of Forestry should take a leadership role in advocating the state's interests in national forest management. These should be grounded in the social, economic and environmental components of sustainability¹, including the practice of sustainable forest management for hazardous fuel treatment, rural community stability and in consideration of global environmental impacts.

Nearly half of California's 100 million acres are managed by the federal government. Federal agencies overseeing these holdings include the Bureau of Land Management and Park Service in the Department of Interior, the Department of Defense, and the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture. Of these, the USDA Forest Service is responsible for the most area: 20.7 million acres, or 21% of the Golden State. This area is larger than 11 of the 50 states.

These lands are distributed among 18 national forests, stretching from the Mexican border in the south to Oregon in the north, and from the Pacific Ocean and its coastal mountains to the slopes and high peaks of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade

¹ As defined in *The Changing California: Forest and Range Assessment*. California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Fire and Resource Assessment Program (FRAP), 2003, page 2. See also Society of American Foresters, John Helms, Editor: *The Dictionary of Forestry*, 1998, for definitions of **sustainability** and **sustainable forest management**.

mountain ranges. 60% of California's working² forest acres are in federal ownership; more than half of the state's entire wood fiber growth takes place on these lands³.

WHY NATIONAL FORESTS?

Roosevelt, Pinchot and Muir: Central to the history of the United States is its westward expansion across North America. California, like many western states, has a much higher proportion of federal land holdings than those in the east. This is because the conservation movement began after most American states had already been settled.

Conservation developed in recognition of – and in response to – the closing of the American frontier. For over two centuries, from the first North American colonies through the Lewis and Clark expedition, California Gold Rush and the near-extirpation of the American Bison, the American experience had been one of constant expansion into a frontier that seemed endless.

During the final decades of the 19th Century, the American public came to recognize the finite nature of the nation's land area. This had a profound cultural impact. The longstanding federal policy of dispensing (privatizing) public lands ground to a halt. New issues of natural resource scarcity – water supplies in the arid west, adequate timber supplies for economic expansion – were behind the creation of our system of national forests.

The most notable early conservationists were President Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the Forest Service. Working closely with Pinchot, Roosevelt withdrew tens of millions of acres of federal public domain from settlement, creating the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture to manage these new *national forests* for the “greatest good of the greatest number in the long run.”⁴

Competing with this utilitarian, Progressive Era concept of scientific management and “wise use” were the more romantic views of preservationists such as John Muir, and reflected in a wide range of 19th Century literature, art and music. Irreconcilable philosophical differences between conservationists and preservationists led, in 1916, to the creation of a separate system of *national parks* in the Department of the Interior specifically dedicated to preservation and aesthetic enjoyment. In California, approximately 6.5 million acres are in national park status, much of it carved out of lands formerly in USDA Forest Service status. In addition, California's national forests also contain 4.5 million acres of congressionally designated Wilderness Areas.

Logging Boom, 1950-1990: Although during the 20th Century large chunks of national forest were converted to preservation reserves, millions of other acres remained in conservation “working” status, and were entered for forest management purposes. Whereas the Forest Service had conducted limited timber sales prior to World War II, national forest lands were considered prime for timber harvest and silviculture during the

² FRAP 2003 Assessment, pg. 51. The Assessment broadly categorizes California forest and range lands as Working, Reserve or Residential.

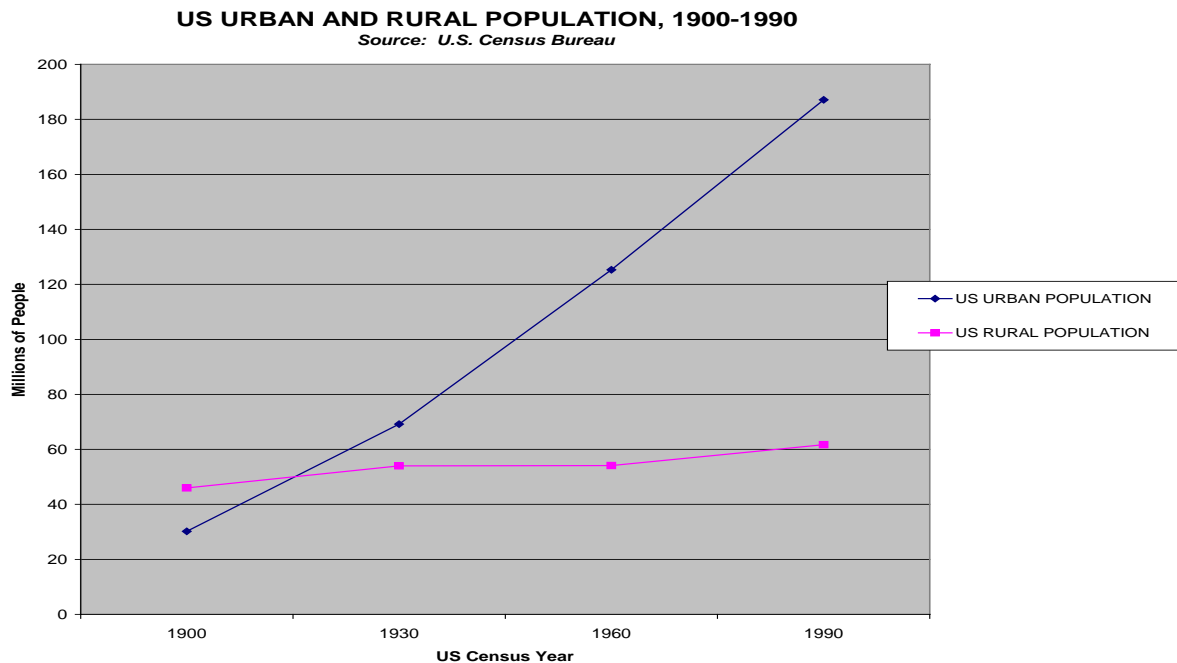
³ USDA Draft FIA Data, 1999, California annual growth (1996). Forest Service growth, at 616 Million Cubic Feet (MCF) exceeded combined forest products industry and non-industrial private forest growth of 510 MCF. Including all land categories, Forest Service lands represent 53% of total wood volume growth.

⁴ Wilson-Pinchot letter, 1905. As referenced in Dana & Fairfax, Forest and Range Management, McGraw-Hill Series in Forest Resources, 1980, pg. 82.

post-war period. Thousands of miles of logging roads were constructed, and harvest levels took off. In California, national forest timber supplied up to 40% of the raw material for the forest products industry, at times exceeding 2 billion board feet (BBF)/year⁵.

Besides increased harvest, logging practices – and their accompanying silvicultural prescriptions – also changed markedly during this period. Foresters began to champion even-age management as the preferred silvicultural tool for national forest lands. The push was for intensive management of America’s national forests to yield sustainable high levels of timber, a post-WWII vision of the “greatest good”.

Environmental Backlash, 1960s-2001(?): While the federal government and its conservation elite transformed the national forest landscape, public attitudes were also changing. Shifting population demographics played a role: the U. S. entered the 1900’s as a mostly rural civilization and the new millennium, heavily urbanized.



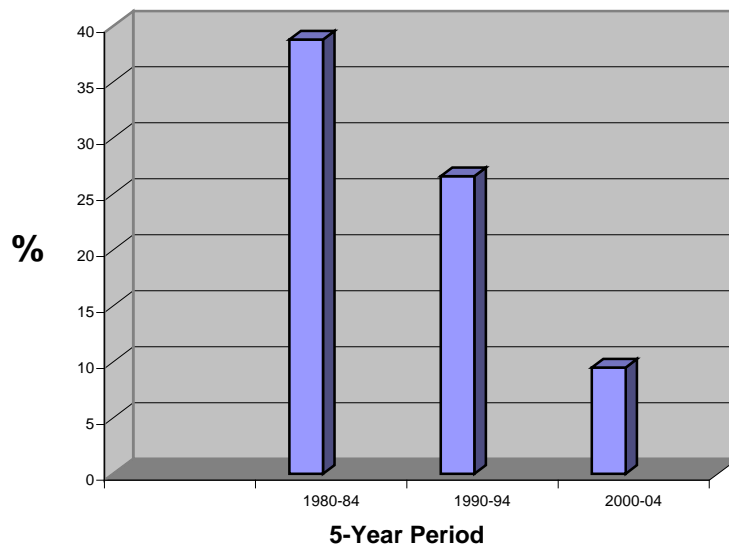
Disillusionment with earlier notions of “progress” helped spark the environmental movement and laws such as the Wilderness Act (1964), National Environment Policy Act (1969) and the Endangered Species Act (1973). Organizations dedicated to environmental protection gained added clout, wielding new tools such as mass campaigns and litigation to achieve their objectives.

The listing, in 1990, of the Northern Spotted Owl as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act was the trigger for a rapid collapse of national forest management. The chart below illustrates the effect in California.

⁵ See “California Timber Harvest Statistics”, posted at <http://www.boe.ca.gov/proptaxes/timbertax.htm>, for Board of Equalization Timber Yield data beginning in 1978.

National Forest Volume as a Percentage of Total California Timber Harvest, 1980-2005

California Board of Equalization, Timber Tax Division



The change was revolutionary; a triumph for preservationists at the expense of a discredited model of conservation. Some environmental organizations abandoned earlier, more limited, goals of thwarting national forest clearcutting or the harvest of old growth trees. They argued and litigated for a complete halt to commercial logging⁶. Currently, harvest levels on California's national forests have fallen below 10% of growth^{7, 8}.

2005: Second Century and New Beginnings? The swing of the societal pendulum from conservation to preservation appears to be moderating as the Forest Service celebrates its Centennial. Due to increased public concern and awareness of catastrophic wildfire and its impacts, many preservationists formerly opposed to all forest management have conceded the need for preventive fuel treatments in some areas. Statistics on increased U. S. timber imports and the rapid decline of USDA Forest Service output in response to the 1990 spotted owl listing may have also eroded support for total logging bans.

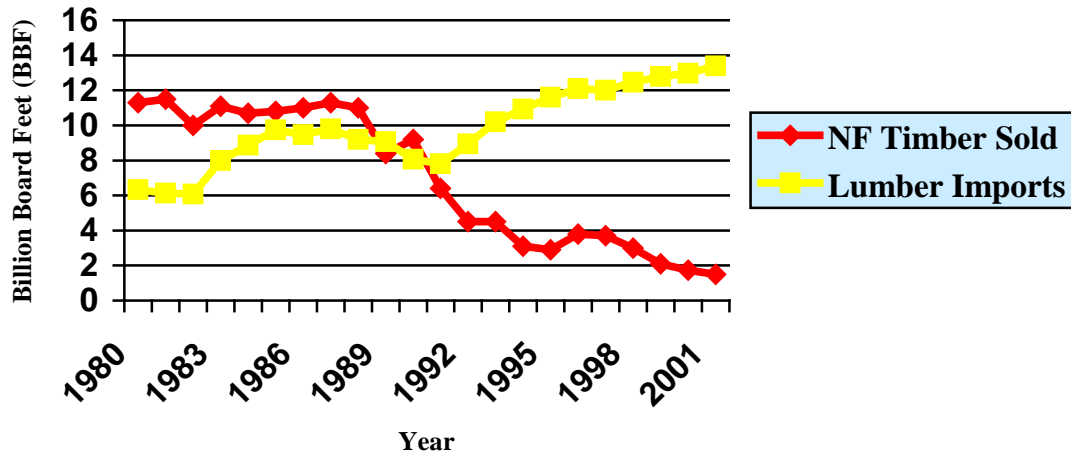
⁶ Most notably, the Sierra Club's position, adopted in 1996: The Sierra Club support[s] protecting all federal publicly owned lands in the United States and advocate[s] an end to all commercial logging on these lands. <http://www.sierraclub.org/policy/conservation/forest.asp>.

An interesting aspect of this view is the attempt to bifurcate, as a moral issue, a distinction between "commercial" and "non commercial" forest management activities. Activities that require outside capital (funding) in order to accomplish are viewed more favorably than those that do not.

⁷ USDA Forest Service, R-5 FIA and Cut and Sold Data, 1995-2000. During this period, harvest represented 5.2% of total growth (7.3% of net growth). Harvest levels continued to decline after 2000, to a new low of .11 BBF in 2004.

⁸ Note also "Forest Service Has 900,000 Acre Reforestation Backlog", *The Forestry Source*, June, 2005. http://www.safnet.org/archive/0605_reforestation.cfm.

National Forest Harvest and Timber Imports



Source: California Forestry Association

The Bush Administration has set a different course for national forest policy. A cornerstone is the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, passed in 2003, which authorizes greater federal support for preventive fuel treatments.

Although the pendulum may be swinging back toward center, forestry remains a highly polarized issue, both in Washington D.C. and Sacramento. Organizations such as CLFA and the Society of American Foresters are working to build bipartisan understanding and support for sustainable forest management. Worth noting is that, historically, forestry has enjoyed such support. Only in recent decades have partisan fault lines deepened.

Since forest management, like medicine or any other profession, is not a Republican or Democratic domain, partisan differences need to be dampened so that public land management professionals at the field level have adequate guidance and support to manage resources for the “greatest good” of current and future generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BOARD OF FORESTRY:

- 1.) **Help the Forest Service define a 21st Century conservation ethic** on its managed lands. Is harvesting less than 10% of timber growth sustainable, especially given current (and unnaturally high) levels of flammable woody vegetation in our forests and wildlands? What is a sustainable level of timber harvest vs. growth, given competing societal objectives of water quality and quantity, wildlife habitat, recreation, aesthetics and rural community stability? Is it Zero? 10%? 25%? 50%? Are there mechanisms to compromise competing interests so that the “pendulum” comes closer to center?
- 2.) One way to start these discussions is to first **seek agreement on what our national forests should look like in 2050**, and then discuss how to accomplish this vision. Diverse interests might be pleasantly surprised at how the tools of

forest management could assist in actualizing a consensus vision, with sustainable commodity outputs as one of the benefits.

- 3.) **Begin a public dialogue about the Golden State's unprecedented addiction to timber imports**⁹. Should we extract more of our renewable forest resources at home, rather than in distant lands with much less stringent environmental protections? Californians should look closely at a resource *NIMBY*¹⁰ *ism* which completely inverts the familiar environmental slogan, "Think globally, act locally."
- 4.) **Promote an explicit state policy goal of 50% wood self-reliance by 2025.** We believe this level of wood production is achievable, sustainable and will benefit both our state economy and the environment.

CONCLUSION

National forests contain most of the Golden State's softwood acres and wood fiber growth. In addition to numerous other values, these lands are crucial to the economic viability of our state's forest products industry and extensive rural timber-dependent regions.

Some argue that we can have a sustainable Golden State timber industry based only upon California's private forestlands. This is true, but only at a greatly diminished scale.

Some of the same voices differ with conservation itself, at least with trying to implement its principles anywhere on public lands. They reject attempting to balance both commodity and non-commodity resource values, while remaining silent on the issue of California wood supply and timber imports.

Without the economic backbone of sustainable, active management on adjacent national forest lands, efforts by California foresters, forest landowners and environmentalists to discourage private forest properties from being converted to other uses (such as development) are seriously undermined.¹¹ A sustainable national forest management program is crucial in creating and maintaining market-based incentives for the existence of a globally competitive forest products industry in California¹².

California's rural communities, citizens and forest products infrastructure are poised to benefit from a renewed level of national forest management. When we suggest "renewed", we don't mean to infer a return to an earlier model. But it's time to move beyond the current reactive model as well.

Finding common ground – optimizing rather than creating winners and losers – offers many public benefits. Active forest management can generate local revenues

⁹ California imports approximately 80% of its wood products, an unprecedented level. CDF (10/96) estimated Californians consume 10-11 BBF annually. Current state harvest levels are below 2 BBF (BOE).

¹⁰ NIMBY: Popular acronym for "Not In My Back Yard".

¹¹ See *Sacramento Bee* "Out on a Limb", June 7, 2005, for a discussion of poor timber microeconomics and the conversion dilemma facing California timberland owners.

<http://www.sacbee.com/content/news/environment/story/13022695p-13869043c.html>

¹² See http://www.clfa.org/whats_new.htm "California Forestry 2050: What do we want our forests to look like, and how do we get there?" for more discussion and analysis of the forest conversion issue, and the contention that a prosperous forestry sector is essential to California's long-term environmental quality.

usable for many purposes, such as expanding recreational access, the repair or removal of crumbling roads and watercourse crossings, or for additional forest management treatments to reduce threats facing people, wildlife and native biodiversity from insect outbreaks and unnaturally hot, catastrophic wildfires.

The Board of Forestry must help frame important state forestry issues – such as national forest management – by reaching out to California citizens, elected officials and the media. CLFA’s goal is to provide BOF Members, staff and the public with tools that will help build greater understanding and lead to more informed forest policy decisions.

This concludes our series of three White Papers prepared in response to the 2003 FRAP Report. In addition to this paper on national forest management, we previously addressed the issues of natural resource governance and education/outreach. Copies of each of these White Papers are posted under “What’s New(s)” on our website, www.clfa.org.