

## Healthy Forests



A website of the forest-products industry claims that our National Forests are “sick”. Forests are described as “on the brink of ecological collapse”! Of course, more and faster timber removal is promoted as the only solution for all the symptoms of this industry-defined sickness. We are urged to lobby Congress to make our public forests “healthy” again. Ah, beware fine-sounding, simplistic slogans promoted by a self-serving industry.

Industry views forest fires, tree diseases and insects affecting trees as symptoms of a sick forest. Allowing these natural processes to operate is defined as neglect. Neglect is described as resulting from “excessive” Forest Service analysis of environmental impacts from logging activity. Neglect is said to be fostered by legal challenges and judicial decisions, whenever laws governing forest management are violated.

“Healthy Forests” propaganda is intended to manipulate public opinion. Ultimate goals are to influence Congress, limit legal challenges, and control the Forest Service to accelerate logging projects that are often subsidized with public funds. Excluding logging projects from careful analysis under NEPA (“categorical exclusions”) and from restrictions under the Endangered Species Act are already under way.

The core of this argument is not a choice between healthy vs. sick forests. It is in choosing a balance between amounts of domesticated vs. wild conditions in our National Forests. Domestic and wild forests are extremes in a continuum of forest conditions, management options and values produced.

## Wild Forests

A forest is much more than trees. It is a biotic community of plants and animals interacting with a diverse and dynamic environment. Natural processes, including fire, insects and

diseases, persist in a wild forest. They produce a dynamic mosaic of habitats including open meadows and all stages of forest development from seedlings to old growth. Native plants and wildlife have evolved with and are adapted in numerous ways to these processes and this natural mosaic. Each habitat type and each stage of forest growth has its own assemblage of wild plants and animals. Some larger wildlife species require the mosaic of several habitat types to prosper in wild forests.

Infected, burned and dead trees - standing, on the ground or in streams - are important components of healthy wild forests. They provide structure and micro-habitats necessary for some species of plants and animals. They are especially important in recently burned snag forests and in old growth, two habitat types that are not accepted in wood-producing domestic forests.

Symptoms of a healthy wild forest are diversity, complexity, persistent change and resiliency<sup>1</sup>. These are the essence of inspiration and esthetic value across a landscape. They can be sustained with minimal cost and intervention – and few roads!

## **Domestic Forests**

Domesticated forests are intensively managed to maximize wood production. Other values produced incidental to, or in spite of, management are touted largely as additional reasons to support intensive tree management. Values diminished or eliminated with intensive forest management are largely ignored.

Industrial forestry focuses on a few forest types and a few tree species. (They really can't see the forest for the trees.) Forest stands are harvested at a relatively young age in order to emphasize younger trees that maximize the rate of wood production per year. The earliest stages of forest succession may be minimized on the landscape by tree planting and by harvesting methods that encourage advance regeneration present in the understories of some forests. Herbicides are sometimes used to eliminate broadleaf competition with wood-producing conifers.

Costly attempts to eliminate wildfire from domestic forests have not proven successful. Major fires, accounting for most burned land, occur unstoppably with severe weather, especially wind. Tree harvesting to reduce fuels has had little effect on such fires. But, when fires occur in domestic forests, salvage logging is used to remove dead and dying trees, eliminating important structural habitat components for several wildlife species.

Domesticated forests have extensive roads to facilitate tree inventory, fire control and tree harvesting in an accelerated cutting cycle that may include thinning operations. Tree planting methods and thinning may be used to encourage monotonous "proper spacing" of trees for maximizing growth of wood products. In some places, wildlife have been reduced to eliminate their nibbling on regenerating trees. Even more domesticating methods of forest management have been proposed, such as genetically-modified trees to increase growth and to combat insects and diseases.

Domestic forests have a limited diversity of wildlife habitats and wildlife species. Wildlife adapted to some early stages of forest succession may persist in abundance. Other species will decline, often to extreme rarity. Big game often leave for lack of security cover and to avoid densely-roaded areas.

“Healthy forests” is a euphemism for healthy trees that are young, grow fast and are safe from fire, insects and disease. It is promoted with other fine-sounding, often vague, slogans, each provided with a seductive modicum of truth and a whole lot of pretense and misrepresentation. Among these are: sustained yield, multiple use, wasted wood, forest restoration, overstocked forests, forest vigor, “Logging enhances wildlife” and resiliency. Consider these terms carefully (See below).

## **Balance**

Economic values of wood from domesticated forests are important, but hardly the only forest values. The challenge for Americans is to determine the best local, regional and national balance of wildness and domestication in our system of National Forests. It’s not a question of forest health. It’s a question of how much domestic, semi-domestic, semi-wild and wild forest do we want, and who pays to make it so.

Sustained yield is not a valid basis for promoting increased timber harvesting. Either a small, or a large, timber industry might be sustainable. Biologically, sustained yield only sets an upper limit for sustainable wood harvesting.

Multiple use – Industry deemphasizes “multiple”. It recognizes “use” only as active management and harvesting of products. Simply enjoying a wild forest is ignored as a form of use.

Wasted wood – The wildlife habitat values of dead trees - standing, on the ground, or in a stream – are ignored.

Forest restoration – Industry focuses on restoring trees, not on an entire forest ecosystem.

Over-stocked forests – This pejorative term refers to maintaining proper spacing of trees for maximum rates of wood growth. Habitat values from a natural diversity of tree densities are ignored.

Forest vigor – A term used to describe a young, “properly spaced” stand of trees that is producing wood at a maximum rate.

Logging enhances wildlife - In fact, everything we do, or choose not to do, with our forests affects some wildlife species positively and some negatively. There is no one “wildlife”.

<sup>1</sup>Resiliency, the ability of the forest ecosystem to maintain itself following disturbance caused by fire, wind or human activity, is a product of diversity, complexity and persistent change. By itself, resiliency is a very low standard for measuring quality of a wild forest. Many species of plants and animals might be eliminated, yet some form of a functioning, but simpler, ecosystem will be maintained.