

## THOUGHTS ON THE OWNERSHIP OF AMERICA'S PUBLIC LANDS

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### Introduction

When I became Chief of the Forest Service, I did not imagine that in less than a year I would be in Colorado facing friends and families of fourteen fallen wildland firefighters, trying to make sense of our tragic loss. That was just the beginning of that long, hot summer. At the end 32 were dead. We now face another, although it may not be as severe.

I also did not imagine that the bombing of Forest Service and BLM facilities and the much greater tragedy in Oklahoma City would bring domestic terrorism, county supremacy, and personal sovereignty issues before the public eye.

As Chief, this is my first time to address the Outdoor Writers. Unbeknownst to many of you, I have read your stories and editorials for most of my life because I am truly a man who loves the outdoors and enjoys sharing it with similarly devoted people. I suspect many of you own, and may even use, copies of my book, Elk of North America. I have seen many of you at events for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, for Ducks Unlimited, and for other conservation organizations. Yes, we are in this business of conservation leadership together.

So here we are and it is time to reason together about the future of the lands we love. And to reason whether those lands should pass in sum or in part into private hands or into management by states or local governments.

First, let me admit a bias. I have a long-lasting love affair with the national forests. I was a Texas boy. I hunted and fished and roamed around on private lands, begging access or sneaking in and out when I wanted. When I grew up, moved away, and discovered public lands, I thought I'd died and gone to Heaven. Here, for me, for everyone, were beautiful wild lands with a bounty of uses managed for everyone, over time.

It has been my great privilege to have spent nearly forty years as a wildlife biologist and thirty years as an employee of the Forest Service. All those years, except for the last eighteen months, I spent in field positions.

### **What's the Status of Federal Lands In America?**

One-third of the Nation's land is in forest ownership, mostly west of the Mississippi. This includes the National Forests and Grasslands, Bureau of Land Management lands, the National Parks and Wildlife Refuges, Defense Department installations, Corps of Engineers, and so on. Some of the land is intensively developed; the majority is wild, coast-to-coast, Florida to Alaska, Maine to Arizona.

In the east and south, lands are mostly private and where federal lands exist, they are often comingled with private lands to the extent that to the casual observer it is hard to distinguish one from another.

### **Who Will Own Public Lands?**

People covet public lands for their beauty and productivity. Recently, people have surfaced many proposals including turning the wilderness over to the Wilderness Society and timberlands over to industry, selling them to the highest bidder, turning over management to the states, etc. The argument is that the federal government cannot afford to own these lands any longer because the costs of management are too great in a time of budget deficits and the need to cut costs.

This a serious debate. It may be well-intended on all sides. It will get louder before it quiets. And, it reaches to the highest levels of government. Recently, Senator Larry Craig, wrote that his Forest and Public Lands Management subcommittee would conduct "an oversight hearing to rethink federal land ownership and management to consider wholly different alternatives to federal land management...as well as proposals to divest the federal government of some of its assets." Senator Craig has stated this forthrightly. Perhaps some of your readers may be interested in participating in that debate. I hope so.

### **What Do Public Lands Do for Us Today?**

Can we afford to own public lands? The better question is "can we afford not to?" For over 100 years, during good economic times and bad, public lands have been the haven for the common man and a firm basis for local and regional economic growth and diversity. Public resources have supported America in peace and in war. Public resources have helped build a nation with inexpensive recreation, wood, energy, and water. They have been the basis for environmental health, yielding clean air and water for generations.

They are today, they remain so today. For example, the National Forests are still operated with Gifford Pinchot's maxim, "the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run," in mind. The numbers are impressive:

On the National Forest System

191 million acres of land in the National Forest System in 43 States of which 140 million acres are forested

About \$4 billion value in minerals, including oil and gas, produced

7.6 million AUMs, 3,000 wild horses and burros, on 97 million acres available for grazing. There has been a bill introduced to make grazing the dominate use. Currently, this bill pertains to BLM, but I feel sure it will include the Forest Service.

Recreation facilities that can accommodate 1.8 million people at one time with over 835 million visits per year (43% of total use on federal lands). The building and maintainance budget was cut from \$70 to \$25 million.

Over 121,000 miles of trails. This budget was cut after the House mark-up from \$26 million to \$5 million.

7,000 miles of scenic byways

34.5 million acres of Wilderness. In the House mark-up this part of our budget stayed even.

4300 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers

1/2 of the Nation's cold-water fisheries. Pacfish, Inland Fisheries, and Columbia River Basin EIS have been effected. The Columbia River Basin was reduced from a proposed \$4.6 million to \$400 thousand.

Almost 200 Threatened or Endangered species live on National Forest lands, which means we have done a good job. There aren't many places left for these to exist. Our proposed wildlife budget was cut from \$100 million to \$90 million; and the T&E budget was cut by \$8 million.

47% of the U.S. softwood inventory

Support for about 500,000 private-sector jobs

100,000 volunteers per year

9500 partners; 12,000 plus agreements valued at about \$800 million

The National Forest System works collaboratively with State and Private programs

Stewardship programs affecting over 3.5 million acres of private Forests was cut to \$0.

Over 200,000 woodland owners assisted with management information and stewardship programs

Urban forestry assistance to over 13,000 urban areas

Research undergirds everything, it is the cornerstone of sound management.

Nearly 300,000 acres of Research Natural Areas

The World's largest forestry research organization

International Forestry to Amazonia, Indonesia, Isreal, and Central América. This was completely eliminated in the House markup.

400 Agreements with State, local, and other federal law enforcement agencies to provide protection to forest visitors and users

Do we now propose to give up these vital contributions to the Nation and the world? What should we divest ourselves of? Do we wish to make public lands private, to see them possibly posted with "no trespassing" signs, to see hunting and fishing "by invitation or permission only" become a way of life for American sportsfolk? To see the preservation of species and diversification of human communities near present public lands become solely the interest of state and private corporations?

#### **What About Private Forestlands?**

Presently, 200 corporations own twenty-seven percent of all private forest lands. Seventy-one percent of private forest land owners own only three percent of the land. Ownerships over 100 acres are held by less than eight percent of all owners.

My conclusion is that large tracts are for the corporations and the wealthy. They do a great job of managing for their lands to meet their objectives--quite laudable outcomes for the most part. But, I ask "how will the average American benefit from public lands becoming private; where will the experiences they now get from public lands come from in the future?"

### **Is Public Forest Management Too Costly?**

We must reduce the deficit and that calls for lean times in the public purse. The Forest Service is reducing headquarters and regional staffs by 25% and field organizations by 6% between now and 1997. We have already reduced staff by 4000 people; we will drop 3000 more. We are responding to budgets which will go down at a 10% rate per year for some years to come, about \$300 million below the presidential request for FY96. Budget reductions should be viewed in light of our streamlining and Reinvention efforts which will allow us to reach much further to improve efficiency and customer service. In all of this, our focus is on sustaining field activities and superior customer service as much as possible.

### **What Does the Public Think?**

Last year, our Reinvention team commissioned a values poll of the American people. Performed by an independent organization, Kaset International, the results were instructive:

50% agreed that "the federal government is an effective caretaker of the public forests and grasslands"

64% agreed that "the federal government should balance the wilderness and recreational use of public land with logging, mining, and grazing uses"

80% agreed that "the need for conservation of natural resources on public forest lands will increase in the 21st century"

82% agreed that "the primary purpose of managing public forests is to maintain a healthy environment"

90% agreed that "the federal government has the responsibility of conserving public forest resources for future generations"

But only 17% agreed that "the consumer needs of the American public should be satisfied even if the natural resources on public forests are eventually depleted"

I was asked my opinion about the subject of making public lands private at a recent House hearing. I answered, "Congressman, first I'll give my professional opinion and then my personal one. My first answer is "No" and my second answer is "Hell, NO! Speaking for myself, I won't stand for it for me and I won't stand for it for my grandchildren, and I won't stand for it for their children yet unborn. This heritage is too precious and so unique in the world to be traded away for potage. These are our lands--all the lands that most of us will ever own. These lands are ours today and our children's in years to come. Such a birthright stands alone in all the earth. Hell no!" The American people appear to feel the same way.

### **Doesn't Some Change Make Sense?**

Must all lands presently in federal ownership remain there? The answer here again is "no." There are a multitude of reasons to offer some lands to state and local government or private ownership--but never in ways that would violate our need at a Nation for sustained ecosystems. I believe that if we are giving up resources, we should be gathering resources at the same time, filling in needed ecological elements within existing federal ownerships or through public-private partnerships.

Natural resource professionals are trained to think one to two hundred years in the future. That is both a curse and a blessing. If these lands are a treasure today, they will be infinitely more so in a hundred or two hundred years. Turn over public lands, your national forests? To quote the Congressman, "Hell no!"

### **Who Will Control Public Lands?**

There are several movements popular in America presently that roughly fall under the title "county supremacy." These folks want to control management of public lands through county laws. Any time federal employees carry out activities contrary to those laws, the local officials feel they can have that employee arrested. Folks, we're talking here about employees conducting permitted activities on federal lands: recreation facilities, timber sales, fish structures, riparian enclosures, camp grounds, mining, roadbuilding and maintenance, maintaining trails, and protecting public safety.

If intimidation doesn't work, the county supremacy folks also contend that the federal has no right under the Constitution to own land.

Folks, it's a flim-flam. The question of federal land ownership has been discussed, legislated, and litigated off and on since the early 19th Century. Unless Congress chooses otherwise, federal lands remain in federal ownership. All states that were territories of the United States specifically gave up their rights to claim federal land when they attained statehood. Now some advocates covet those acres after 100 years of federal stewardship and are trying to take them from the American people at large. These were the lands that nobody wanted -- lands that in some cases were dramatically abused. Now after 100 years of stewardship by government land management, after billions of dollars of public investment, they say "hand it over." What kind of deal for the American people is that.

### **Do Public Land Stewards Have a Stake?**

Much has been said of the threats and danger to Forest Service and other natural resource professionals in the West. True, there have been bombings and threats and other acts of intimidation. True, our employees in some places carry "get out of jail" cards and travel in pairs. Is that the entire picture. Absolutely not.

Forest Service employees and other public servants have been part--an intimate part--of their communities for nearly a century. They coach little league, are members of church, active in civic groups, members of school boards, and other commissions. They vote. They pay taxes. They play softball. Their kids attend public school and some play football. They have been, are, and will be an integral part of their communities.

Let me give you an example of what that relationship can mean. A few weeks ago, one of our valued employees was shot through the head as he sat in his pickup writing up his notes from a bridge inspection. He was a valued member of his community and a pillar of his church. His funeral was moved from his church to the high school gymnasium so that everyone who wanted to pay respects could come. There were many Forest Service people there, but most were friend and neighbors from other walks of life.

I spent twenty years living in the town next to that one. There is where I wanted to be and those were the people I wanted to live among. My friends are there. My wife of 38 years is buried there. My home is there. There is where I will return. And there are friends to welcome me.

As you enter Etowah, TN, about 45 miles from here, you pass a sign that says "Welcome to Etowah, a Forest Service community."

I wear my uniform today to make a point. I am Forest Service and proud of it. There are 40,000 people out there that share that honor with me and I am proud of every one of them. You should be too.

My daddy told me how to avoid ulcers. Life consists of big stuff and little stuff. Don't sweat the little stuff. All stuff is little stuff. As usual, my ole daddy was about half right. The future of public lands can't be little stuff. In my opinion, it is the really big stuff of my generation for those who love wild things and places -- who love the land and cherish the freedom it provides.

I encourage you and the audience to take a stand one way or the other. This is really big stuff.

So the debate rages about who should own and who should manage today's public lands. Remember those of us who have committed our skills, our love of the land and community, and our lives to the public resources that sustain us all.

Thank you for your time today.