

The Wildfire Genie

Taxpayers fund the largest fire department in the world.

By Jim Petersen

By the time this edition of *RANGE* reaches your mailbox, we will be well into the 2025 wildfire season and will know whether or not the Trump Forest Service has made any progress in its quest to stuff the Wildfire Genie back in her bottle. Fire can be a very useful forest management tool—especially when it follows thinning in overstocked forests—but the Biden Administration sophistry about “wildfire for ecosystem benefit” was a national disgrace.

Sonny Perdue, who was President Trump’s agriculture secretary during his first term, was too much of a gladhandler to be effective. His “hail fellow, well met” manner masked the fact that he didn’t know how to reverse the death spiral that began to engulf the Forest Service years before President Trump’s first term began. In an alternate universe, Perdue would have beaten Congress over the head with his copy of the 10-page workforce capacity study prepared for him by the National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR) in July 2019. “Increasing Workforce Capacity to Increase the Pace and Scale of Restoration on National Forest System Lands” traced the loss of more than 13,000 boots-on-the-ground engineers, technicians, foresters, watershed specialists, ecologists, biologists and botanists between 1992 and 2018.

I don’t know why Perdue wasn’t more forceful with Congress. Too nice, I guess.

Tom Vilsack, who was Ag Secretary for both President Obama and President Biden, didn’t understand the roots of the Forest Service’s fall from grace any better than Perdue.

Vilsack had been Iowa’s governor before he was appointed Ag Secretary and was a favorite among midwestern farmers. Perdue hailed from Georgia and was a veterinarian by profession. The West’s culture clash was a bridge too far for both of them.

Stripped to its core, the wildfire pandemic we face in the West today is a direct result of a cultural collision between those who believe that active forest management is the only way to sustain forests and those who believe the only way to sustain forests is to lock them away in no-harvest reserves, allowing the forces of nature to take their course. In forests, these forces include insect and disease infestations and inevitable wildfire. The ongoing culture clash has fueled the largest wildfire pandemic in the nation’s history.

What to do? This is a rhetorical question because by the time you read this essay, we will already know what Forest Service Chief, Tom Schultz, and his crew have decided to do.

Schultz’s “Crew” includes his boss, Ag Secretary, Brooke Rollins; her Undersecretary, Mike Boren; Kristin Sleeper, her Deputy Undersecretary for Natural Resources; and Schultz’s Deputy Chief, Chris French. French has been with the agency for 34 years and is



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ABOVE This Montana forest has been appropriately thinned to maintain age class and tree species diversity. And it will be again soon. Repeated thinning and prescribed burning are the best ways to protect forests from wildfire. LEFT: Tom Schultz, chief of the U.S. Forest Service. BELOW: Lightweight mechanical harvesting systems are marvelous thinning tools. The soil is disturbed but not compacted and residual trees are unharmed because the machines are agile and can easily negotiate small spaces.

responsible for oversight, policy and direction. It’s a safe bet that he knows where all the bodies are buried.

Predicting what the Trump world will look like come Fall is a fool’s game, but I’m going to give it a whirl based on what I’ve already observed and what I know about Tom Schultz’s

career track.

■ Schultz and his Crew will have plumbed the depths of many brilliant minds, including two Evergreen Board of Directors who I will not identify because there are too many screwballs running around loose today who don’t care who they hurt—or kill.

■ The Crew will have worn out the pages of the NAFSR report and many others that trace the political, environmental and cultural pressures that fueled the devastating loss of

public confidence in science-based forestry.

■ Through skill and daring, the Crew will be successful in rebalancing Forest Service funding, not by reducing the size of what is now the World's Largest Fire Department but by convincing Congress that stuffing the Wildfire Genie back in her bottle is an essential investment in the Big Four I've written about before: clean air, clean water, abundant fish and wildlife habitat and a wealth of year-round outdoor recreation opportunity.

I'm a longtime aviation junkie, so I have some strong opinions about the Forest Service's aviation assets. Rebuilt 747s and DC-10s can carry enormous amounts of fire retardant or water, but given their size they are deployed at large airports with very long runways that are often hours away from wildfires. If the goal is to put out wildfires before they become monstrosities that take months to control, the Fire Department needs much smaller planes that can be staged at much smaller airports in the middle of nowhere.

Given the thousands of tons of dead woody debris in our national forests, rapid response to wildfires is vital. So is prompt salvaging of fire-killed timber to minimize the risks of reburns that would further damage organic soils in which the seeds of new growth germinate.

Here in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, we have had four-wheeled and amphibious Single Engine Air Tankers (SEATs) all summer. Because they have wheels, they can take off and land at our airport, on a dirt road or in a field. And because they are amphibious, they can swoop down on a small lake or river, pick up about 800 gallons of water in a matter of seconds and return to the fire.

The Forest Service needs to contract for more SEATs and helicopters that can quickly deliver helitack crews and supplies to remote sites. Twin-motor Chinook helicopters and single-rotor Sikorsky Skycranes can carry up to 3,000 gallons of fire retardant or water in interior bladders. Suspend Bambi buckets beneath their fuselages and capacity increases to about 5,000 gallons.

The Forest Service also needs more smoke jumpers and they need to do a better job of using the ones they have. During the 2024 fire season, many jumpers sat beside telephones drumming their fingers. Yes, safety is a big

issue, but fighting wildfires is inherently a very dangerous business. The young men and women who jump are highly trained. They live to jump.

■ Rebalancing the forestry-firefighting scales necessitates hiring or rehiring boots-on-the-ground talent: engineers, foresters, technicians, silviculturists, ecologists, botanists and biologists. Some of these will come from the retiree ranks: men and women who can teach the next generation of leaders how it's done.

■ By fall, the shift in decision-making that began last May will be well underway. Again,



This beast is a Fire Boss. It is an amphibious single-engine air tanker or SEAT. They're excellent firefighting tools because they can land and take off from dirt roads in the middle of nowhere. And because they have floats, they can skim the surfaces of lakes or large rivers, gulping about 800 gallons of water in a single pass. Want to put out a wildfire quickly? SEATs and other smaller amphibious aircraft are the answer. BELOW: This jumbled and dead mess in South Dakota's Black Hills National Forest is what happens when forests are neglected for decades. The only way to fix this is to cut all of it, pile and burn it and start over.



management decisions will be made at the District Ranger levels by people who get their hands dirty most days—and know what measures must be taken to reduce wildfire risks and increase biological diversity. Central planning and decision-making by people who've never been to this or that Ranger District will be a thing of the past.

■ The damage done to the Forest Service's research stations and laboratories by DOGE "experts" who also had no idea what District Ranger staffs did will have been mostly repaired. Many who were unceremoniously

dismissed will have been rehired. These are the people who survey forests to determine insect, disease and wildfire risks. They also monitor threatened and endangered species to determine how to minimize habitat disturbance while also restoring forests that are dying of neglect.

■ NEPA reform will take root. And when I say "reform" I don't mean that the Trump Administration is going to turn loggers loose to "chop down all the trees." I mean that the weaponizing of NEPA regulations by anti-forestry groups will be minimized. Here I think of the goofy Cottonwood Decision in 2015 that created a feeding frenzy among serial litigators and their clients.

■ The Trump Administration and Congress will continue to bless stakeholder collaboration at the state, county and tribal levels by creating and funding more regulatory tools like the Good Neighbor Authority, Stewardship Contracting, Master Stewardship Agreements and the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program.

This leaves only one stone unturned—and it's a big one. Until Congress musters the political courage to put sideboards on the Equal Access to Justice Act, progress in National Forest restoration will be slow and problematic. Serial litigators and their anti-forestry clients will continue to hold far too much power over the lives, homes and futures of millions of Americans. Science will be corrupted by federal judges who are tasked with deciphering conflicting rules and regulations negotiated by members of Congress whose constituents either trust or distrust the Forest Service.

All of us seem to agree on the need to care for our federally owned forests. But over the last 50 years there hasn't been much agreement as to how to do it, so about half of our federal forest estate is now dying, dead or burnt to a crisp. That is about 151,600 square miles—an area the size of our 11 smallest states combined.

How much do we need to lose before we find common ground in our world of difference? ■

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