

# Logging, Good Sense & Hypocrisy

*Environmentalists are bringing timber harvest back into vogue. Words and photos by Derek Weidensee.*

**A**n exciting new change blowing across the West these days bodes well for the future of forestry. “Changing public values”—a phrase the U.S. Forest Service (FS) often used to justify reducing timber harvests—is in every FS revised forest plan put out since the 1990s. Fortunately, public values are changing back again, and the public now wants more logging. What’s driving the change is the fear of wildfire, made worse by a mountain pine beetle (MPB) epidemic that’s killing forests and sweeping the West.

This new attitude is coming from people who used to be opposed to logging. Many who consider themselves environmentalists are now seeing logging in a positive light. Forestry is back in vogue.

One shift is a changing attitude against radical environmental groups that litigate

timber sales. Timber harvest on national forests has dropped by 80 percent in the past 20 years. The public now perceives the radicals as controlling FS timber harvest levels. With every future wildfire, the public won’t be blaming the FS, they won’t be blaming the logger, they’ll be blaming the radicals. You broke it, you bought it.

Another shift in changing public values is that radicals are losing the support of “moderate” environmentalists. To help reduce fire hazard, the moderates want more timber harvest. Most of the logging the FS approves now is close to towns in the “wildland urban interface” zone to protect homes from wildfire. After fires burn, these treatments result in surviving “green islands” that are very visible to the public.

Twenty years ago the public saw a raw

clearcut in a sea of green and they condemned the FS and logging and supported the radical enviros. Today when they see these green islands in a sea of black, the public wonders why the FS didn’t do more logging and they blame the radicals for preventing it.

The recent Schultz Fire outside Flagstaff, Ariz., burned over an area the Forest Service and a moderate enviro group collaboratively proposed to thin a couple of years ago. The timber sale was held up by an appeal and the possibility of litigation from the Center for Biological Diversity. A week after the fire, a thunderstorm dumped rain over the burn and flooded 80 homes. Do you think the public blames the FS? The CBD claims that there was no market (sawmills) for the wood anyway. The public now realizes the blame



*Clearcut logging of MPB-killed trees near Breckenridge, Colo. In another 15 years, millions of acres of MPB mortality will fall over naturally and look just like this. Loggers will soon remove this wood and send it to the mill, but nature will remove hers through wildfire.*

belongs to radical enviros for the lack of sawmills. The CBD loses either way. This is a scene that will repeat itself many times in the future

A few more examples from around the West include Colorado, which is suffering a massive pine beetle outbreak in the heart of ski country from Steamboat Springs to Vail. These pro-environmentalist liberal counties helped shut down the timber industry in the '90s and a major sawmill closed in 2003 for lack of FS timber. And now they complain the FS isn't moving fast enough to remove dead trees. The city of Frisco recently clearcut 40 acres of parkland and the mayor received only one complaint. The FS is now proposing to salvage clearcut 5,000 acres around the town of Breckenridge, and every local, state, and federal politician is calling for greatly expanding salvage clearcuts.

Most timber-sale litigation is based on the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Sen. Mark Udall has consistently received a 100 percent rating from the League of Conservation Voters. Even Udall has sponsored legislation that would create "insect emergency areas" where NEPA analysis would be expedited. Seven years ago he proposed "taking funds from the timber sale program and reallocating [them] to protect fish and wildlife" in order "to protect rather than destroy our national forests."

Litigation from Colorado environmental groups has stopped, even though a few years ago, before the pine beetle alarm bells went off, they ended two years of litigation on a puny 600-acre salvage sale. Unfortunately, Colorado's last sawmill filed for bankruptcy last summer, perhaps because they had to haul logs 250 miles.

In New Mexico, Sen. Jeff Bingaman is pushing The Jemez Mountains Collaborative on the Santa Fe National Forest. It calls for increasing logging from 1,300 acres to 8,000 acres per year. Santa Fe is the "new age" capital of the West, giving Obama 76 percent of the vote, and there's no timber industry left. The Santa Fe-based WildEarth Guardians—which shut down the timber industry in the '90s—has endorsed the increase in logging, even though it just filed another Mexican spotted owl lawsuit against the FS. Not a good way to attract the timber industry back.

In Arizona, the Center for Biological Diversity shut down the timber industry in the '90s with litigation. After the 2002 Rodeo Fire burned half a million acres, a collaborative group called the Greater Flagstaff Forest



*Power line clearing on the White River National Forest near Breckenridge, Colo. The Forest Service estimates there are 450 miles of power lines that need clearing. In addition there are 1,300 miles of roads and 550 miles of trails to be cleared. Last year the FS cleared only 50 miles of roads, 14 miles of trails, and 1,400 acres of "wildland urban interface" salvage logging at a cost of \$10 million.*

Partnership was formed. Billing itself as a group of "environmentalists and business people," its goal is to thin the forests around Flagstaff. But there are no sawmills left to take that wood. As part of a proposal to build a \$300 million oriented-strand-board (OSB) plant, the CBD recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding not to oppose thinning on 50,000 acres per year in Arizona's forests. It's doubtful there's a bank in the world that would loan money to a mill dependent on national forest timber.

In the near future, the problem won't be litigation, it will be infrastructure. The buzz phrase, "attracting infrastructure," will go hand in hand with that and "a guaranteed 20-year supply of timber." With every press release, the OSB entrepreneurs call for that. Reforming NEPA to exempt timber sales from litigation would go a long way to guaranteeing that supply.

All these examples have three things in common: most members of the public consider themselves to be environmentalists; they destroyed their timber industry; and now they want the timber industry to come back and bail them out. There will be more fires, followed by more public demand to log to mitigate fire hazard. That will be followed

by more public frustration and anger because there is no infrastructure to do it because radical enviros are the reason there's no infrastructure now and probably won't be in the future.

Fortunately for Montana, it still has a timber industry, even though that state's Alliance for the Wild Rockies is the most litigious group in the country. Between 2006 and 2008, AWR litigated 11 timber-sale projects, and there are numerous timber sales within each project. Colorado and Arizona had zero litigation.

The Beaverhead Deerlodge Partnership has been formed between the Montana Wilderness Association and the timber industry. This group seeks compromise by calling for more logging and more wilderness on the Beaverhead Deerlodge National Forest (BDNF). Sen. Tester has introduced legislation that would mandate the Forest Service to follow the partnership's goals, which proposes to log 50,000 acres in 10 years. Sounds like a lot, until you find out it's only two percent of the forested acreage. In the last 50 years, only five percent of the forested acres on the BDNF has been logged. Doesn't any timber-sale litigation now look ridiculous and petty? Here are the facts about FS log-

ging now. In the 10 years ending in 2008, the BDNF has logged an average of 800 acres per year—that's .03 percent of the forested acreage. At that rate it'll take 30 years to log one percent!

Why hasn't Montana succeeded in ending litigation when other areas have? Most members of the public in Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico consider themselves environmentalists. The majority in Montana don't. It appears that increased logging can only occur where the majority consider themselves environmentalists. In Arizona, the CBD endorses quadrupling the timber harvest from present levels back to a level that is 80 percent of the pre-litigation "get out the cut" 1980s. (Why did they shut down the timber industry again?) In Colorado, the FS has responded to the cries of enviros by ramping up timber sales to a level not seen for 30 years. In New Mexico, Sen. Bingaman is proposing to increase timber harvest in Santa Fe National Forest from three million board feet to 25 million board feet per year. In response to the beetle epidemic in Montana, the FS is proposing to quadruple salvage logging on the Helena National Forest. Anyone care to bet if it gets litigated?

Perhaps the most bitter irony of all is that on forests that have a timber industry left, the cost to treat the acres gets pretty small. In Montana, the loggers recently paid the Forest Service \$300 per acre for the rights to salvage log MPB-killed "hazard trees" along forest roads. In Colorado, the FS pays the loggers \$1,200 per acre to log dead trees along forest roads! That's what happens when enviros destroy the timber industry.

As an old logger, I have an inner conflict. On the one hand, I celebrate that so many moderate enviros have changed their minds about logging and forestry. I hope Sen. Bingaman's plan succeeds and the OSB mill gets built. I think it's going to save lives. But I'd also like to see the success in New Mexico repeated in Montana. On the other hand, why should a bunch of old hippies in New Mexico be able to increase timber harvest by six times but Montana can't? Could you imagine the litigation if Montana proposed to increase timber harvest from today's 25 percent to 80 percent of the 1980's harvest level?

Sen. Bingaman is chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. He wouldn't allow Sen. Tester's partnership legislation out of committee because he's uncomfortable about the "timber harvest mandates." He prefers collaboration. It's nice that radicals have stopped litigating, but perhaps Bingaman

would be more understanding of Montana's dilemma if renewed litigation ruined his collaboration.

Perhaps the only real chance of reforming NEPA and the Endangered Species Act (ESA) will come when moderate enviros have their plans thwarted by litigation. If anyone has ever harbored a dream of monkey wrenching the enviros by turning the tables and using their own tactics against them, perhaps this is the time and Sen. Bingaman is the place. Perhaps if renewed litigation would threaten the guaranteed supply that returning infrastructure will demand, then maybe even Sen. Bingaman will demand NEPA reform.

Here's a headline that would shock enviros across the West: "Judge Molloy orders USFS to analyze if hiking in wilderness areas violates the ESA by denying grizzly bear and Canada lynx critical habitat." Remember, enviro law is the only court venue where the burden of proof is on the defendant (FS) to prove innocence. You don't have to prove hiking harms grizzlies; all you have to do is prove the FS hasn't disproved it yet, and I know it hasn't analyzed it at all. It wouldn't take much for a couple of bright young conservative lawyers to turn the enviro world upside down and score some serious Equal Access to Justice Act money to boot.

Forestry wins either way. If Bingaman's infrastructure and the OSB mill get built in Arizona and tens of thousands of acres are thinned, when the great wildfires sweep through and those thinned forests are spared for all to see, then forestry wins. And if they don't get built, in five years when the great wildfires burn through a half million acres and a frustrated public and Sen. Bingaman demand NEPA reform, then forestry wins.

Either way, the next five years are going to be exciting times in forestry. It could be the time when the radical enviro ideology crashes and burns. They are about to reap the whirlwind and history will judge harshly their folly. ■

*Derek Weidensee has worked as a licensed land surveyor for 20 years. He's been trained to observe the land and analyze numbers. Before that he spent 10 years as a logger, five of those in Montana and Idaho. "Since I have no life," he says, "my hobby is reading Forest Service environmental impact statements and forest plans."*