SPECIAL REPORT

A Collision of Visions

The truth about the woods. By Bruce Vincent

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A firefighter carries a chainsaw through a charred redwood forest during a massive wildfire in Big Sur, Calif., on July 5, 2008. The average of 3.5 million acres burned per year from 1960 to 2000 has rapidly increased since then to over six million acres. In 2012, more than 8.7 million acres burned in the West. Is this the new normal, or will it get worse?

My family "wagon trained" to Harney County, Ore., in 1856, and to Montana in 1904. My great-grandfather ran a mule train out of Plains supplying miners in camps scattered throughout the rugged landscape teaming with Alaska gold-rush refugees desperately searching for the mother lode. Northwest Montana is rich in natural resources and as the decades passed, our family ranched, mined and logged to keep the wolf from the door. These honorable blue-collar pursuits produced metals, minerals and lumber for a growing and consuming nation. My paternal grandfather chose to be a timberman and set the stage for generations to follow.

The practices of early logging and lumber production were rough on the land and on loggers. This reflection is not offered as a chastisement for any perceived warts on our rich history of imperfection, but as a nod to reality. Methods used in the good old days of forestry were brutal by today's standards, but so, too, were medical practices and every other science-based endeavor. Apologies for the heritage of ever-evolving and improving forestry techniques will be forthcoming when my doctor apologizes for putting leeches on my ancestors' feverish foreheads.

The by-products of our family logging business include generations of Vincents with high school and college educations, including mine. After high school, I entered college and married way above myself. To pay for a civil engineering degree and a master's in business administration at Gonzaga University, my wife Patti Jo ran a day care in our home and I drove to Montana and logged on weekends and during summers. After graduation I secured a project management job with a construction company in Spokane.

In time, it became clear that pursuit of my white-collar career meant that our children would be raised in an urban setting and play within the confines of a chain-link fence. Warm summer breezes would carry the smells of car exhaust and asphalt, not pine and musky loam. In 1984, we made a quality-of-life decision to move back to Montana and rejoin the family logging business. Like many raised in the West, the factors that tipped our scales in favor of giving ourselves and our family a rural, resource-based future were environmental.

After more than a century of management, our forests remain stunningly beautiful and provide us with the benefits of clean air, clean water, and abundant wildlife. Loggers, like ranchers or farmers, are so deeply wed to our natural environment that things like vistas, smells, weather patterns, and the

feel of seasonal breezes are indelibly etched into our sense of being.

The logging culture of Libby, like other communities in isolated, resource-dependent areas, has been built upon community-oriented, school-oriented, church-oriented, family-oriented people. Our towns embody the last vestige of cultural traits that were foundational in building the greatest nation on earth. We wanted our children to grow up with those benefits.

Shortly after moving home, I learned the importance of politics. In 1995, I wrote a story for *RANGE* called "Something's Wrong In Libby, Montana." In it, I discussed the political environment that was threatening my community, my culture, and the forests upon which they are dependent. Indeed, towns like Libby all over rural America are having what I call a "collision of visions" with the rest of our nation. Ironically, the reason for this collision is a desire to protect the environment.

Not a new concept for rural cultures, our deep-seated conservation ethic has evolved over time and has always been focused upon good stewardship of our resources. Ranchers and farmers are constantly developing practices to better protect soils, water and forage, and loggers seek practices that will protect forests. The ever-changing tools and techniques that stand the test of real-world application are handed down from one generation to the next and help ensure that our resources are healthy and productive for decades to come.

However, we now share this desire to protect the environment with a society that has, for decades, spent time and money vacationing in America's outback. Urban dwellers flee their concrete jungles and flock to our rural areas and it is not surprising that they love what they find. When their short respite is over, visitors have to go back to their homes. Most leave with a desire to protect what they were forced to leave. This understandable emotion has driven and will continue to drive legislative, regulatory and judicial efforts to protect our "last best places."

It is within these political efforts that our rural and urban cultures are colliding. The vast majority of our urban peers might seem mean-spirited and demanding, but most are sincere, profess empathy for our rural cultures, and truly believe that their opinions are backed by science and common sense. Their positions, however, underscore the truth in Will Rogers' claim, "It ain't what you don't know that's a problem; it's what you know that ain't so that's a problem." The public that is clamoring for environmental policy reform knows a lot that just ain't so about environmental realities.

Charred logs from a forest fire are sorted for processing into boards at a sawmill in northern Idaho. Salvage of logs from a fire must proceed quickly since after a fire the trees are attacked by insects and disease and within a matter of months are no longer usable.

This pervasive lack of accurate information would not be a huge problem if policy in America was dictated by reality. However, it is not. It is driven by the public's perception of reality and when the public's misguided notions hit the real world, we find ourselves crossing the thin line between environmental sensitivity and environmental insanity. Specifically for my timber culture, the management policies demanded by the public in order to save forests are having the perverse effect of saving our forests...to death.

Since 1986, the harvest of timber from America's national forests has declined 70 percent.

Forest density has increased 40 percent in the U.S. over the last 50 years.

Since my 2006 *RANGE* article, "Ash & Smoke," the troubles facing our public-land forests and our nearby towns continue to be profound. Professional litigants—many of whom have been paid millions through the Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA) and Judgment Fund tax dollars—have successfully paralyzed federal forest management. According to Paul Ehringer & Associates of Eugene, Ore., 430 sawmills closed in the West in the decade before the housing collapse in 2007. In Lincoln County, Mont., with a population of about 18,000, we lost five sawmills and at least 1,500 timber jobs. By the time our nation entered the Great Recession, hundreds of thousands of timber workers had already been cleansed from the rural West. In many areas, this cleansing has been so thorough that the entire infrastructure of timber management, including mills needed to process logs and trained loggers to do the work, no longer exists.

In areas like mine, stakeholder groups formed to find common ground in the public land debate. They have been laboring for more than 40 years to untangle the analysis paralysis that has damaged our forests and our communities. We have been told that consensus and collaboration will lead to solutions and the chief of the Forest Service goes so far as to say that these efforts are the answer for the future. This may well be, but if the past is any indication, the future has some problems. Time and again the good-faith efforts by local stakeholders have been blown up by serial litigants, often from faraway states

where lawsuits rain on the table of debate like scud missiles.

The Quincy Library Group in California is a classic example. This diverse group of stakeholders formed in 1992 to pound out a workable solution to their local forest health disaster. It found common ground but also discovered that the Forest Service could not or would not implement its agreed-upon actions. In 1998, a bipartisan effort yielded federal legislation that instructed the implementation of the group's proposed actions. The eco-conflict industry spent the next decade filing 55 appeals and lawsuits on the plan's individual projects and only a handful of small actions ever made it into reality.

The Quincy-area locals continued to meet in good faith trying to press forward, but the seemingly endless meetings have dragged on and on as wildfires torch huge swaths of the landscape. The Forest Service has been able to do little more than analysis after analysis in an effort to match the legal maneuvering of tax-paid obstructionists. In 2009, the last sawmill in the area closed its doors. If this is the future, it looks a lot like the past.

Since years of on-the-ground work by local groups can be thwarted by the conflict industry, it is increasingly difficult to find volunteers who will dedicate their time to finding common ground. Too many have given thousands of hours of their time and seen their good-faith efforts go up in flames along with their hope of resolution for the forests of their children. Many good people simply walk away and who can blame them?

The anti-logging advocates do not worry about finding volunteers. Their well-paid staffs of meeting-goers and lawyers are handsomely rewarded with taxpayer dollars. It would be reasonable to assume that these tax dollars should be easy to track. Years ago, I asked Mark Rey, undersecretary of Agriculture, if he could identify the dollar amount and he answered, "No one knows because no one tracks it." In 1995, EAJA was amended to remove all tracking language.

Wyoming attorney Karen Budd-Falen has spent years digging through court records and nonprofit filings to assemble as much as possible of the EAJA and Judgment Fund payout jigsaw puzzle. She has identified 14 environmental groups which have filed at least 1,200 federal suits in 19 states and the District of Columbia and collected over $37 million in taxpayer dollars thanks to those badly written laws. Environmental attorneys don't even have to win to get paid.

The disassembly of our timber-based infrastructure is painfully evident not only in the number of closed sawmills, but also within the forest-management agencies. If society were to suddenly come to its senses and demand that forests receive the professional management they need, the federal agencies responsible no longer have the capacity to do it. Forest Service's dwindling ranks of timber-management specialists spend 90 percent of their time doing paperwork and their positions are often not filled when they retire.

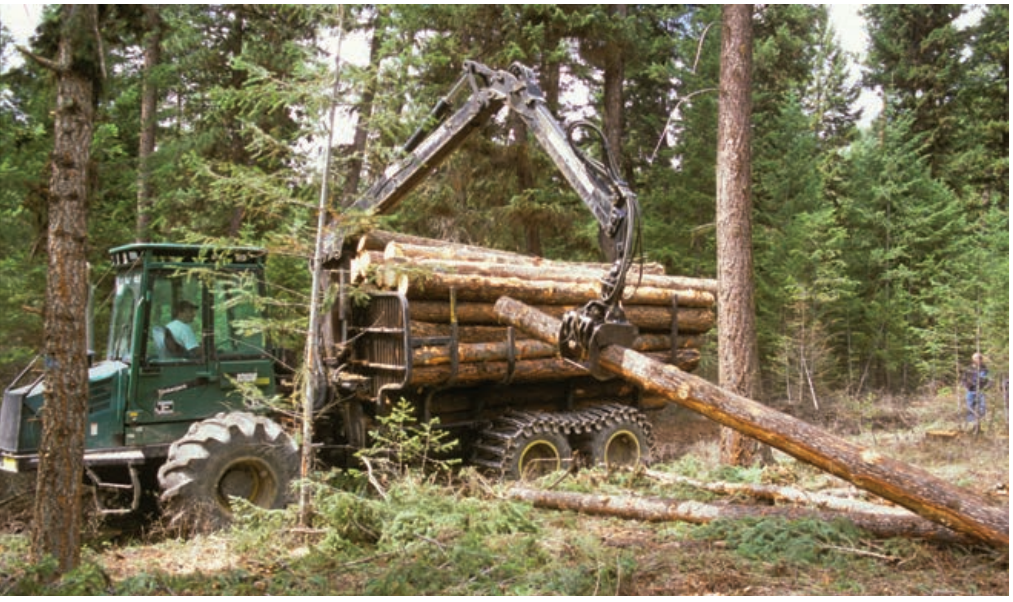
National forests account for 20 percent of the nation's forestlands and 19 percent of its timberlands.

In 2000, the General Accounting Office presciently reported that the single biggest threat to 192 million acres of western forests is catastrophically huge, catastrophically hot, stand-destroying forest fires. Fed by pervasive fuel-loading problems in our dead and dying, overstocked forests, the casualties of the coming calamity will include our wildlands, watersheds, wildlife and forest communities. The report states that the agencies have done precious little to combat the potential collapse of forest ecosystems.

During summer 2012, the West choked on the smoke of nine million acres of "natural management." With decommissioned roads limiting access, and fires quickly turning deadly as winds assault our decadent stands of timber, firefighters seldom have the luxury of actually fighting fires. If the initial attack is not successful, agencies like the Forest Service relegate their crews to chasing the fire and mopping up around whichever private properties or towns they are able to save.

In the last decade, our paralyzed forest agencies have overseen the largest fires in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, California, and Oregon history. In Montana and Idaho, the forest that replaced the stands burned in the three-million-acre 1910 fire is mature, dead, dying and ready to be managed. In "Ash & Smoke," I pointed out that the inland Northwest was poised for a Katrinalike category-five firestorm. As was the case with the New Orleans dike system, this problem is

A Boise National Forest hillside being managed by fire (above) stands in stark contrast to the managed forest landscape of state, federal and private ownership near Loon Lake in northwestern Montana (left).



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Logger Dale Flannigan operates a low-ground pressure log forwarder in a forest thinning operation near Missoula, Mont. The forwarder gathers and removes felled logs, carries them to a landing for loading on a truck, and allows thinning to be done with a minimum of road building.

real and has persisted for decades while the federal government and others did nothing. Some thinning has been accomplished in the narrow wildlands interface around communities in western Montana and northern Idaho, but these quarter-mile-wide defense zones will provide little comfort if burning embers are launched by 150-foot flame licks and carried aloft for miles in front of encroaching fires.

Those who live in our forests do not want to spend any more time hand-wringing and playing the blame game. The fact remains that we have too much fuel in our forests and the problem is getting worse. The past decade has seen some headway in the political discussion of forestry. In response to fires sweeping through the West in 2003, President George W. Bush promoted and signed into law the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. HFRA's focus is to facilitate thinning overstocked stands to reduce or eliminate hazardous fuels buildup in national forests. It also promotes research into new methods that will halt destructive insect infestations.

Even though it will take more time to rebuild a timber infrastructure capable of fully implementing the HFRA than it took to disassemble it, the framework of the HFRA could be a light at the end of the tunnel for our forests and our forest communities. Under it, federal agencies are trying a variety of pilot programs to implement needed management including promising stewardship contracts. These contracts focus on fuel removal and forest restoration to improve forest health and generate by-products including watershed protection, habitat enhancement, and commodity outputs. So far, most of these contracts have been too small to have any real impact on landscape-level health problems or to provide any significant economic benefit to communities or the forest-product-processing infrastructure. Thankfully, a few are now being suggested that are large enough and lengthy enough to have a real impact—if they can be implemented.

National forests hold 46 percent of the nation's softwood timber inventory but only provide six percent of the annual harvest.

Sadly, standing in the way of the ability to implement forest-management plans is the same hurdle that has paralyzed action in the past. The HFRA did nothing to modify the ability of professional litigants to get paid for tying up decision-making in the federal courts for years. The federal-judge-shopping lawyers know well that insect infestations can destroy a forest's health quicker than managers can weave a management strategy through their carefully selected court system.

The ability to implement the intent of the HFRA may depend upon passage of legislation to curb the ability of obstructionist lawyers and groups to misuse the well-intended EAJA. In 2009, Wyoming's Representative Burris joined a number of other leaders in co-sponsoring legislation to modify EAJA, but it has a rough road with the current makeup of the Senate and the current resident in the White House.

Have we hit bottom in this debate? I am not sure. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is now perfecting its role in regulating timber-management systems under the guise of protecting watersheds mandated by the Clean Water Act. (As we go to press, the Supreme Court is pondering a logging-related CWA lawsuit that could further diminish the hope of all domestic logging.)

What's next? In the worst-case scenario, the nexus of the EPA and forestry proves to be more troublesome for our forests than the Endangered Species Act has been. The heavy hand of the EPA in managing watersheds leads to private forestland enjoying the same management gridlock as our public lands. Serial litigants will continue to milk the taxpayer for millions while untold acres of forests and watersheds are fried by fire.

In the worst-case scenario, forestry companies will abandon this nation and move to developing countries with forest resources, growing populations, and a need for cash. Raw materials will be managed using methods we quit using decades ago, and forest products will be shipped here.

In the worst-case scenario, supporters of conservation biology and the extreme Wildlands Project will succeed in depopulating our forest areas one core area and connecting corridor at a time. Human stewardship is eliminated and nature manages our forests. Blackened, sterilized, eroding landscapes will greet visitors to the West. The rich come from the cities to watch the rural hangers-on fight for our homes in our natural habitat. The smell of sawdust on work clothes is replaced with the smell of forest-fire smoke on espresso cups.

In the worst-case scenario, the top-down, command-and-control environmental regulatory regimes yield private land sellouts to the federal domain by those who can't keep up the fight. The wildland urban interface will be filled with 20-acre ranchettes when landowners find that subdividing and not stewardship is the only way to pay back the bank or satisfy the stockholders.

For loggers in this worst-case scenario, thriving will require moving out of this

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The thinned forest (above, left) of thick-barked pine will survive a forest fire because it has no fuels that will let fires burn to the tops of the trees. Without thinning, millions of acres of densely overstocked forests will be completely destroyed much like this stand in Arizona (above, right).

country and learning a new language such as Spanish, Portuguese or Russian. A few will stay in America but will find themselves taking steps back in time to the days of horse logging and labor-intensive, low-production, salvage-only operations. They will make it only if their spouses work real jobs.

We now have more forestlands in the U.S. than at the turn of the 1900s because of the advent of production agriculture. Farmers now use soil-nutrient management techniques that allow them to grow their crops on smaller areas of land, and millions of acres of marginal farmlands that used to be used to grow crops such as cotton and corn have now been reforested.

Many activists in the deep ecology movement would like to see the worst-case scenario happen. They have no empathy for anyone who has the audacity to live within the forest landscape unless it is they who wish to live there. The social-engineering aspect of conservation biology requires whole swaths of rural areas being depopulated and re-wilded. Those in the way of their long-term re-wilding plans are considered necessary casualties in their quest to save the planet the way they want to save it.

This worst-case scenario is not foreordained. For the last several years, the public has gotten a taste of reality with forest management by fire and it is looking for better answers. The public likes its forestland too much to stand by while nature works through the ugly part of "natural" management. It wants forests to be healthy and while it may not know what a healthy forest looks like, it is safe to say that sterilized topsoil and boiling trout streams don't fit its image of healthy.

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The needles turn orange on pine-beetle-killed trees in the Nez Perce National Forest near Elk City, Idaho. The drainages of this area provide steelhead habitat and the forest and fish face an uncertain future.

Loggers have long been prepared to attend to forest health problems. I believe that in 2013 the public will be ready to listen. In some of the harder-hit areas where fire has burned hundreds of thousands of acres in single events, even those who have long fought against our forest communities are recognizing that logging can and should be properly applied in our fuel-laden forests.

For instance, in Arizona and New Mexico there is growing support for logging as a forest restoration tool, and it is within some of these forests that the new, larger stewardship contracts are being attempted. The Forest Service and others are now trying to attract timber companies into northern Arizona.

It is bittersweet to watch these efforts by those who were complicit in the destruction of the very thing they now seek to rebuild, but I hope for the local communities that they can one day make these projects reality. Resurrecting the timber industry in areas where it has been wiped away will not be easy and there is little trust in the federal agencies.

John Deere, Caterpillar and other equipment manufacturers have developed biomass balers, bundlers, chippers, and clippers that can deal with the small stems and limbs that need to be removed from forests, but this new-technology machinery is expensive. Anyone from a forest community can imag-

ine the look on a banker's face when a logger asks for a million dollars of equipment financing when work for the machinery is based upon a Forest Service management promise. "Yeah, right," would be the common refrain.

These imperfect localized management efforts indicate that the long-fought battles over the amount of board feet coming off a forest are finally being supplanted by a discussion of necessary fuel treatments to achieve a healthy forest. This is a positive and needed refocus of the forest debate. Years ago, Jim Petersen of the Evergreen Foundation wrote that the commodity war in forests needed to stop. He maintained that we should consider the forest as if there were never going to be another cubic foot of fiber harvested for human use. Focus, he maintained, must be on forest health. He pointed out that since you cannot make trees stop growing, the flow of possible wood products from maintaining a healthy forest would be self-evident and sustainable. Mr. Petersen was right.

What, then, does the future hold for loggers? I am afraid that logging, like ranching, mining and farming, faces an uncertain future in the near term. Hopefully, the public will eventually recognize loggers as professional caretakers of its interests in forest landscapes, and logging will be seen as a tool that helps to protect the watersheds, wildlife habitat, and forest landscapes.

Logging is not different than any other natural-resource sector in this country, and our future will demand that we constantly engage in the debate over our forests. To survive, we each need to have a line item in our business plan that allows time and resources for advocacy. We have to be engaged in educating the next generation about who we are and what good we do for the environment.

The future of logging in America is excellent. If those who truly love the woods work together to move beyond the quagmire of today's management, we can achieve results that are better for our families, our communities, our nation—and our forests. ■

Bruce Vincent is a third-generation logger. He travels the country jacking his jaw and is owner of the consulting firm Environomics, executive director of Provider Pals, and boardman on the Evergreen Foundation. After 36 years of "awesome marriage," he and PJ have four children and almost 10 grandchildren. He can be reached at cgnw@frontiernet.net.

Annually, U.S. forestland owners plant about six trees for every tree harvested.

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U.S. annual growth rates have exceeded harvest rates since the 1940s.

Timber harvesting is forbidden on 50 percent of all national forestland in the United States.

COURTESY VINCENT FAMILY

FROM TOP: The Idaho-Montana divide near Lookout Pass (Interstate 90) is a beautiful setting featuring western larch, lodgepole, ponderosa and fir. ➤This is a processing head cutting trees down and turning them into logs in a thinning operation. ➤This smoke plume is in the Cascades near Bend, Ore. ➤Vincent Clan: adults, from left: Cory and Lacie Farmer (daughter), Bruce, Patti Jo, Michelle and Chas Vincent (son), Vance Vincent (son), Echo and Justin Venn (daughter). Grandchildren, from left: Capri Farmer (in arms of Lacie), Madison and Addyson Vincent, and Lute Venn. Grandchildren not shown are the recent additions of Berklie Vincent, Acton Farmer, Presley Venn, and Reagan Vincent. Soon to be released: a new Vincent boy, and a new Venn child (they aren't finding out until the launch).