

# An End to the War of the Woods!

*Recent developments in federal policy toward Pacific Northwest forests may mean at a divisive environmental dispute.*

by Brad Meacham

**T**REE-LINED U.S. HIGHWAY 101 in Washington State is a long way from the noisy streets of New York City. The route meanders through magnificent stands of old-growth trees that have stood for centuries, and through vast farms of trees that have been planted to replace those already cut. Logging trucks still dominate the road but are less prevalent than they were just a few years ago. Towns are depressed because of the decline of the industry; a general feeling of anxious frustration fills the air. There was a time when this area bustled with activity and families prospered along with it. The American archetype of the rugged outdoorsman was widespread and no one worried about any endangered species.

To the majority of America this mildewy corner of the country is very far away indeed. Wood products are taken for granted. No one thinks about where they come from. Outside the spotlight, this area suffered as the forests thinned and there were fewer and fewer trees to cut. For years, the balance between preserving the livelihoods of the human inhabitants and protecting the natural integrity of the region was a quiet political contest waged in Washington D.C. and in the board rooms of the forest products industry.

No more. With the widely publicized spotted owl controversy and the ascendance of an avowedly environmentally-minded Presidential team, the region is finally on the nation's front burner.

President Clinton's recent appointment of Jack Ward Thomas as Director of the National Forest Service is the most recent indication of this attentiveness. With 27 years of experience as a biologist with the Forest Service, Thomas is no "career" forester but rather a leader with strong scientific credentials. Since its inception, the agency's leaders have always been accomplished career veterans of the field who are ideally immune to political pressure in man-

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aging the forests. Many environmental groups supported Thomas' nomination and he was cheered by the Association of Forest Service Employees, a dissident group of forestry workers who have been frustrated with the agency's recent policies. They accuse the previous management of stifling internal dissent, harming fish and wildlife by overemphasizing timber cutting, abetting timber theft and manipulating timber data to increase harvest amounts (Kenworthy and Schwartz). While many hope the new appointment will improve morale at the agency, others have called for a continuation of the previous career-based appointments instead of establishing a precedent for politicization of the office that could put control of the agency into the hands of an anti-forest administration.

The fact that Clinton opted for Thomas over this cautious objection is noteworthy because it indicates that a major policy shift is underway, exemplified by the administration's support of qualified leaders who will act with the best interests of science in mind. After years of malignant neglect, Northwest forests are finally being paid much-needed attention and the effects will be felt across the nation.

## TIMBER COMMUNITIES VS. ENVIRONMENTALISTS

The land that provided the foundation for legends of the rugged Western woodsman longer exists. Ninety percent of the original temperate rain forest in the lower 48 states has been logged. The original romance of cutting trees by hand saws has been replaced by real images of high-technology logging performed with the benefit of helicopters and government-funded roads that reach far out of the public view.

Even though the original legend turns out to be a fantasy, real communities have become directly tied to the industry that removes the trees. State and local governments receive 25 to 50 percent of National Forest revenue, becoming dependent on the money for their sustenance. Timber sale revenue directly funds the construction of new schools in Washington, and forest prod-

ucts is the largest industry in ( logging activity were to stop exaggeration to say that town sections of the region would die.

Between 1980 and 1990 more than 14,000 jobs directly related to logging were lost in the Northwest. 10,000 processing jobs were also lost (Meyer). Several factors contributed to this development. Some were caused by the relocation of timber company activities to the South where farm trees were more pl

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Some were lost to the increased auction of the forests which increased productivity in a historically dangerous occupation. A chief cause of the loss of the processing sector was the practical shipping one-quarter of all harvested raw logs overseas for processing in Asian mills. Though the federal government blocked the export of federal timber in 1973, the foreign market was so lucrative that private owners supplied their state and put pressure on the American government to open public areas to satisfy domestic demand.

The supply of trees dried up even more quickly after the Fish and Wildlife Service listed the Northern Spotted Owl as an endangered species in 1989. The elusive animal commanded more significance than its 16-inch frame would suggest because it is known as an "indicator species" that can act as a barometer of the health of an entire ecosystem. Since the owl is high on many ancient forest food chains, its endangered status means many other species may also be in trouble. Excessive cutting has threatened the viability of species besides the spotted owl, from salmon to banana slugs. While measures to protect other species are under consideration, land for the owls has been set aside, cutting the amount of timber and

pinching logging communities that were already heading toward economic depression. The owl soon gained the ire of the timber community.

The frustrations of the logging community run squarely against the increasing outdoors ethic of urban dwellers who turn to the forests for refuge from the city. Just as the number of timber jobs have declined, the number of visitors to wilderness areas has increased appreciably. As a result many

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parks require campsite reservations as much as eight months in advance and permits are required before hikers can enter some wilderness areas. With the region's population growing, more pressure will be put on land that was once the exclusive preserve of logging.

Until recently, the scramble for forests continued virtually unaddressed. While economic downturn has hurt the regional economy, the question of what to do with the trees has not been conclusively answered. While the environmentalist forces appear to have the upper hand, the timber-dependent communities are left to wither on the vine.

A typical clash between the two groups occurred in 1989 when hundreds of loggers and members of their families descended on the Washington legislature in Olympia to vocalize their disgust over a plan to limit logging access to state-owned forests. At packed hearings involving suited timber executives and neatly-scrubbed environmentalists, the throngs of citizens clogged the town and caused everyone to formulate an opinion about the issue. If it was not the legal facts that persuaded them, it was the smell of the proudly unwashed loggers crammed into the marbled hallways. In a state where loggers used to stay in the woods and everyone else minded their own business, this conflagration brought the hostilities of the threatened communities to the consciousness of the majority of the state. There has been no easy fix for the problem.

THE ORIGIN OF THE CRISIS

The debate over the use of forest lands goes back to the late 1800s when the federal government encouraged western settlement with generous land grants for homesteading and mining. The timber equivalents of the eastern industrial magnates began to gain control over millions of acres of prime virgin forest through government railroad grants and clearing house sell-offs. At bargain rates, the land was quickly claimed and much of the forested west was occupied within a few years, concentrating control in only a few hands. For example, almost 71 percent of private timberland in western Oregon was occupied by only 68 people in 1913 (Dietrich 21).

What has become today's 191 million acre National Forest System began in 1876 with an obscure congressional appropriation (Robinson 4). For the first time, public domain was set aside as a publicly-managed reserve of trees to be controlled by a government agency instead of by private corporations. Under the auspices of the larger Department of Agriculture, the organization had a "multiple use" mandate to manage the forests for several purposes. One aspect was to ensure that there would always be an adequate supply of trees to furnish the industry so that the market-driven demands of private enterprise would never decimate the resource. The first Forest Service Director, Gifford Pinchot, pioneered the idea of "sustainable yield" forestry to minimize the waste of logging practices that left more refuse timber rotting on the ground than was available in entire eastern forests (Ervin 64). Instead of letting companies sloppily harvest only the choicest trees in a stand and leave the rest, they began cutting all the trees in the allotted area.

As a result of this early conservation measure, by 1969, 61 percent of timber from western forests was being "clear cut" (Robinson 76). The final product was a more efficient system for the harvesters, but altogether inadequate one for the environment: It left entire mountainsides bare, allowed soil erosion, and threatened stream organisms which relied on the forest canopy for shade and protection from siltation.

Another crucial factor in the current forest crisis was the obscure Knutson-Vandenburg Act of 1930 that established the current perverse funding mechanism for the Forest Service. Under the "K-V" rules, taxpayers still fund the

cost of site preparation and road building when the Forest Service sells land to logging companies. The Forest Service then keeps the fee that the buyer pays. In 1930, the average cost to the government of preparing a sale was about 50 cents per thousand board feet, so the law specified that a 50 cent reimbursement would have to be paid to the treasury. Even though the average cost is now over \$50 per thousand board feet, the same 50 cents rule still applies. The national treasury ends up absorbing the extra \$49.50 per thousand board feet and the Forest Service takes the rest of the fees to fund its activity, providing jobs for small dependent communities. Consequently, logging is beholden not to the sustainability of the cut, but to political pressure to provide employment. Today this system means that hundreds of millions of dollars are lost annually with this taxpayer subsidy of the industry, creating dependent communities that are resistant to reform and rapidly depleting the forest stocks (Baden).

By the 1960s, national parks and wilderness areas were established to meet the public demand for recreational space. As the public mood shifted toward an increased awareness of the recreational aspects of the outdoors, the forest management mandate for "multiple uses" became increasingly important. The environmental movement beginning with the Wilderness Act of 1964 demanded that the forests be managed as some-

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thing more than giant tree farms. At the same time, the pace of logging began to pick up and accelerate the decimation of the stocks.

This brewing crisis came to a boil in the 1980s when the Reagan Revolution applied laissez-faire economic ideology to natural resource management. The bargain basement forest sales under K-V rules continued even though the value of trees had skyrocketed. When the leveraged buyout boom hit natural resources companies, the forests became the victim of profit-minded pri-

vate management policies that did not consider the long range health of the resource. The Maxxam Corporation exemplified this behavior when it sought to pay its \$750 million debt by cutting old-growth timber in California even though there was no way that the cutting rate could be sustained (Meyer). Without environmentally-minded managers in control, the forests soon started

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paying the price for this corporate activity-

With the declaration of the spotted owl as endangered, the economic constraints were compounded by environmental ones. When the administration appeared unenthused with the idea of enforcing that law, the issue was dragged into court. Injunctions then locked up the land even more and all activity stopped on large tracts. The resulting economic slump inspired populist politicians to foster the belief that the system could continue without change. They encouraged the idea that the owl was to blame for the economic depression, that somehow the agenda of the environmentalists was directly hurting the timber communities' way of life. No mention was made of the short-sighted management policies of the timber companies,

The Bush Administration billed a plan developed by an Interior and Agriculture Departments task force as a compromise between the various interests. In response to the previous listing of the owl as endangered, the plan called for 3.2 billion board feet to be logged off forest service land annually, protected areas for the owl as long as environmental groups promised not to obstruct logging with court challenges, and sought a complete review of the endangered species laws (Sampson and Gray 17). The plan was criticized as totally unac-

ceptable by both sides. Timber interests wanted even more trees (they were accustomed to around 4 billion board feet in the roaring 1980s) and environmentalists wanted drastic reductions. Since 3.2 billion board feet was about all the trees that could be cut according to endangered species laws, the plan did not seem to be a compromise at all for the environmentalists.

Without either side willing to back down, the matter came to a standstill. Courts prevented much activity from taking place and timber-dependent communities waited in limbo. While all sides knew that change had to happen, there was apprehension about the form it would take.

#### CLINTON'S CHANGES: SEEKING A COMPROMISE

Into this fray stepped Bill Clinton. Having picked Al Gore as a running mate, he inherited the environmental concerns that Gore had expressed as a Senator. These were met first with the appointment of several environmentally-minded leaders to land management posts, a move that caused a collective sigh of relief among employees in the agencies that had been forced to carry out the earlier mismanagement policies. The new Secretary of the Interior, environmentalist/lawyer Bruce Babbitt, began a crusade to reform the governance of 503 million acres of public lands under his control. For forests, the first step to create a new policy was a forest management conference last April in Portland. Modeled on the economic conference he had held after the election, Clinton invited the leaders of environmental, industrial, and governmental organizations, as well as scientists and affected citizens to participate. The input was to be blended into a comprehensive solution to the problem.

In early July, Clinton announced the first honest attempt at satisfying the competing needs of both sides. His compromise proposal reduced the amount of logging permitted on 22 million acres of federal forest land in Washington, Oregon, and northern California to 25 percent of the high 1980s levels. Under Clinton's plan, the logging industry may cut 12 billion board feet over 10 years, or about 1.2 billion per year. By requesting \$1.2 billion in economic aid to the depressed timber-dependent communities over five years, Clinton's program would provide eco-

omic development grants, interest grants, and job training to employ displaced loggers in watersheds damaged by logging. To stimulate as much energy as possible, a tax change would be the incentive for raw log export. To encourage domestic milling, forests which are deemed "reserves" would be protected by being 6.7 million acres of "reserves" to maintain the ecological integrity of stands. Instead of the court method of preserving land in the guise of saving an owl, the president would seek to preserve wildlife intact. Specified areas would be closed for "experimental" logging and some old growth would be opened to further logging.

In spite of this bold attempt at a comprehensive solution, environmentalists who wanted to protect all remaining old-growth felt betrayed by the president's move. "The Forest Service refers to this as new forestry," said Joan Reardon of the Wilderness Society's regional director in San Francisco. "But when you're talking about ancient forests, new forest voodoo forestry. We need reserves and we got none of that" (Diringer).

On the other hand, timber industry advocates felt that the president did not unlock enough land. They predicted the loss of tens of thousands of jobs as a direct result of the president's program. "The president didn't make good"

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*Bill Clinton-  
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either half of his promise for a balanced solution. This ain't balanced and ain't a solution," said Mark Rey of the American Forest and Paper Association. "There is nothing in this plan that gives any hope to the people in the Pacific Northwest who depend on the forest products industry" (Diringer). Logging trucks parading coffin-bearing trucks in Portland on the day of the announcement exemplified the hyperbole that is rampant on both sides of the dispute (Serafin). Timber industry advocates have threatened to seek court action

increase timber allotments, and have indicated that they will seek congressional support to weaken the Endangered Species Act in order to open protected land to the industry.

For his part, President Clinton was disappointed with the final plan because it upset his consensus-seeking sensibilities (Egan 23). He conceded that

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**Jim Bayley-**  
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not everyone would be happy with the compromise but he believed it to be the best possible arrangement. "We have to play the hand we were dealt," Clinton said. "Had this crisis been dealt with years ago, we might have a plan with a higher (timber) yield and with more...protected areas. We are doing the best we can with the facts as they now exist in the Pacific Northwest" (Diringer). The implication is that all sides could have seen a better outcome if earlier administrations had tried to resolve the issue.

Though extremists on both sides of the issue insist that the battle over the forests is not yet over, many accept the president's assessment. One example is the community of Hayfork, California, where citizens agree that a compromise must be reached to preserve the forests and reduce the area's 23 percent unemployment rate. As the community closest to the experimental logging area, the town will pioneer techniques to log specific areas in a manner that is less ecologically devastating than the original method and restore environmentally damaged hillsides and streams. While the generated timber will be less valuable than that from big, ancient trees that used to be cut, townspeople are relying on skillful marketing to ensure success. "A lot of people in timber still don't trust the environmentalists," said Jim Bayley, a small businessman in Hayfork, "but I don't think there's much choice. If the mill shuts down, we could lose half the town's population. We should support these ideas while there's still the opportunity. It's probably the best chance

we're going to get" (Martin).

The missing link in this attempted solution is money. According to a spokesperson for an involved senator, most congressional appropriations bills to provide the funds have been passed. While some of the Clinton proposal's components can go into effect, most forests are still being held by court injunction until public comment on the plan is concluded in March. After revisions are made, the plan will be fully enacted by Executive Order.

With the leadership of reform-minded Babbitt and Thomas, the chances for a long-term resolution are brighter than ever before. As a result of the president's leadership on the issue, communities will be stabilized and logging will be curtailed in environmentally sensitive areas. Instead of chaos, peace may finally return to the much-maligned Northwest forests. •

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#### Perot

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depends on Clinton's popularity. If his support is lukewarm, Perot will probably throw his hat into the ring once again. He recently told a crowd of supporters/"We're going to go marching down Pennsylvania Avenue one day." (Ayres) Indeed, UWSA could act as an effective vehicle for a second run at the presidency. Newsweek describes it as "a carefully crafted legal entity—a not-for-profit 'civic league'—that allows Perot to raise funds and act the role of an undeclared candidate without having to disclose his list of contributors." (Fineman, "Ross," 24) Even if he doesn't run again, it's unlikely he will leave the spotlight on his own accord. Perot clearly likes being an influential figure, and if the Democrats are unable to demonstrate their ability to govern he will continue to be a headache for both parties for some time to come. •

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