

Editorial: Time to update how we manage U.S. forests

Friday, Feb. 17, 2012

Anyone who has spent time in California's national forests knows that these treasures are in trouble. Far too many have meadows that are degraded or vast stands of conifers that are diseased and dying.



Many of the communities in and around these forests also are less than healthy. Sawmills have closed. Tourist businesses have waned with the economy.

The specter of uncontrollable wildfires returns nearly every summer. For decades, the competing demands of wildlife protectors and the logging industry have defined how these forests are managed. For environmentalists, almost every U.S. Forest Service decision would be framed around questions of spotted owls and other species. For forest industries, almost every decision would be judged on whether it increased board feet of timber harvested.

Wildlife and wood products are important components of these forests, but for most Californians, these forests have broader values. These are places where we go to hike, swim, ski, camp and gaze up at the stars. The Sierra is the source of more than half of California's water supply. That's why it is essential we protect and restore those watersheds, for us and future generations.

For that to happen, something needs to change at the U.S. Forest Service and, it appears, change is afoot. Two weeks ago, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that eight national forests nationwide – including three in California – will revise their management plans to conform with a new planning rule that will be finalized in coming months.

Because of decades of litigation and swings of leadership, the Forest Service has been operating under a planning rule that dates back to 1982. That's right – 1982. Forest Service officials say the new rule better reflects modern priorities. It improves public involvement in forest decisions, allows forest managers to adapt to stresses caused by climate change and creates incentives for community collaborations on restoring ecosystems and reducing wildfire threats.

The new rule has detractors on both sides. Some environmentalists say it weakens protections for fish and wildlife by no longer requiring the Forest Service to manage habitats so that healthy populations of animals are "well distributed" throughout each forest. Timber interests

have complained it doesn't provide assurances that individual forests will generate adequate timber for nearby mills.

No doubt, this new rule gives forest supervisors more flexibility to manage forests based on local conditions and values. That creates uncertainties for all sides. But before the critics get back on the litigation bandwagon, we'd urge them to give this new rule a chance to work. Environmentalists will still have the strong arm of the **Endangered Species Act** to protect imperiled wildlife. And timber interests will still have advocates in **Congress** ensuring that our national forests are a source of **wood products**.

The good news is that both sides in the timber wars have recently been working closer with the Forest Service on ways to generate jobs in the cause of restoring these public lands. Collaborations in the Sierra, Sequoia and Lassen national forests have brought together landowners, **conservation groups** and private companies to reduce fire threats through selective thinning of forests for **wood products** and biomass generation. What's needed now is more congressional support for these efforts, as well as funds to monitor the impacts of new forest plans.

These types of collaborations won't end the fights over owls and old-growth timber, but they could help make some of these forests a more tranquil place to be.

###