

Denver Post

editorial

Forests face fresh threats

Sunday, September 28, 2003 - Our national forests are under attack, but not from the threats the public usually hears about. The public debate must focus on today's fights, not yesterday's feuds.

The controversy the public generally hears about is excessive timber cutting. It was true that for decades the U.S. Forest Service allowed far too much tree cutting, especially in fragile ecosystems. But the amount of lumber taken from the national forests fell dramatically from 12 million board feet in 1988 to 2 million board feet in 2002. Yet that significant decline hasn't been reflected in the public debate, as industries and environmentalists still use the high emotions surrounding timber harvests to help their fund-raising. In doing so, both ill-serve the forests.

If America is to do right by its woodlands and grasslands, the public needs to understand, and support efforts to manage, four enormous threats that are undermining entire ecosystems.

U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth outlined the four biggest threats facing the national forests, both in a speech last summer and while touring the country since, including a recent stop in Denver. He expressed dismay that American people don't understand the urgency.

The four threats are:

Invasive species: Legions of non-native and destructive weeds, insects and other pests - to which our forests have little or no natural defense - are eating the woodlands and grasslands alive.

Unmanaged recreation, especially off-road-vehicle use: The high-tech, powerful toys can run roughshod over almost any terrain, far from any road. As the number of ORVs has skyrocketed, so have erosion, wildlife harassment and wetland damage.

Loss of open space: In years past, national forests were surrounded by ranches and farms. Today, many are hemmed in by condos, trophy homes and strip malls. One result has been an alarming loss of wildlife habitat. The proximity of houses and commercial development also makes it politically difficult for the Forest Service to do all it can to combat invasive weeds and wildfires.

Wildfire: Huge blazes like the 2002 Hayman fire captured attention but did little to help the public understand why such titanic fires erupt - and what can be done to reduce their

size and power.

Frankly, the same threats also loom over national parks, wildlife refuges, Bureau of Land Management properties and state lands.

Bosworth and other Forest Service managers have drafted proposals to handle the threats. Some of the ideas are controversial. But their plans, as well as suggestions from environmentalists and industry groups, deserve serious, and well-informed, public discussion.

Throughout this week, The Denver Post editorial page will explain each of the threats in-depth and offer ideas about how the public can help the Forest Service and other public land agencies cope with the challenges.

Tomorrow: Invasive species.

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Forest invasion

Saturday, September 27, 2003 - A silent but deadly invasion is underway, creating one of the gravest threats our national forests and other public lands have ever faced.

Humans have introduced, deliberately or accidentally, new species against which natural ecosystems have no defense. Invaders include noxious weeds, foreign insects, contagious tree diseases, predators from other countries and even domestic animals gone wild.

The invaders spread easily between private and public lands, so the same biological army devastating public property also is ruining farm and grazing lands. Invasive species cause our country \$138 billion in economic damage annually, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The invaders cover 133 million acres of public and private land, and spread at the rate of 1.7 million acres a year. Stopping the alien species' spread is one of the four most urgent issues facing our national forests, says U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth.

If the invaders' march continues unchecked, our native plant life could be dramatically reduced or, in places, even obliterated. Wild animals and birds will lose the places where they live and breed. Large areas of public lands could become expanses of useless weeds and dying trees.

In the Intermountain West, including Colorado, plant invaders include knapweed, which pushes out native plants so wild animals have nothing to eat; leafy surge, which poisons the soil so native plants can't grow; and cheatgrass, which spreads wildfire. An especially harmful shrub is tamarisk, which is spreading along river banks in the Southwest, ruining wildlife habitat and drying up waterways.

Foreign insects such as gypsy moths and longhorned beetles, and microbes like white pine blister rust, are killing entire stands of trees.

Weeds and insects don't make dramatic TV pictures or headlines, so the public isn't aware of the threat. Yet public understanding is crucial to building political will to combat the ecological invasion.

Most invaders are hard to get rid of once they take root. Burn or cut down a tamarisk and the thing grows back. The best defense is to stop the invaders from spreading.

Such efforts entail controversial measures, like herbicides, so the public may have to

tolerate some chemical applications. Control work is costly, too.

The American public that so enjoys our national forests and other public lands should ask Congress to help the Forest Service battle invasive species, including funding for research into new control methods.

Meanwhile, gardeners, landscapers, farmers and ranchers — or anyone who works with plants — must take care to avoid bringing new invaders into our ecosystems.

*(This editorial is the second in a six-part series about new threats to U.S. forests.
Tomorrow: Open space.)*

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Open spaces disappearing

Tuesday, September 30, 2003 - For generations in the West, wild animals traveled easily between public land and private open spaces. As our region has grown increasingly populated, that freedom of movement has become more and more rare.

Today, condos, strip malls and parking lots have destroyed wetlands and valley bottoms, robbing wildlife of winter grazing and obliterating breeding grounds and migration routes.

Of the four major issues facing our national forests, as defined by U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth, the consequences of urban sprawl near the forests are most visible. No longer are national forests surrounded by open spaces that buffered public land from development. Today, cities and subdivisions have crept right up to forest boundaries.

In the past, environmentalists raged about how livestock overgrazing ruined public lands. Many complaints were legitimate, and even today the Forest Service and its sister agency, the Bureau of Land Management, must do a better job of requiring ranchers to take care of the public lands they use.

But the huge and ugly impacts of sprawl near the national forests have created far worse damage than ranching ever did. Even the worst-managed ranch is still better wildlife habitat than any strip mall, Bosworth noted.

If the West continues losing agricultural open space, the national forests and other public lands will be threatened. Wildlife will suffer, vistas will be lost, and runoff from roads, parking lots and driveways - carrying oil and other toxins - will pollute lakes and creeks.

Nowhere is the result more worrisome than in Colorado along the Interstate 70 corridor, which bisects ancient elk and predator migration corridors. It's hardly the only place, though, where open spaces are vanishing. From Durango to Nederland, the problem is obvious and expanding.

The resulting fragmentation of the landscape has left only islands of habitat instead of the broad, continuous swaths that wild animals require to truly thrive.

What's needed are ways to better preserve open spaces and buffer areas near the national forests.

Local governments must be more alert and proactive about the problems. Summit

County, for example, incorporated some wildlife concerns into its master zoning document. Still, the legislature needs to give local governments better growth-management tools.

Praise is due non-profit groups such as The Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Lands, the Colorado Conservation Trust, and the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust. These and other groups work with federal agencies to save open spaces, under either public or private ownership.

But, Congress also needs to invent additional tools to buffer national forests from sprawl.

(This editorial is the third in a six- part series about new threats to U.S. forests. Tomorrow: Off-road vehicles. See the entire series to date at www.denverpost.com/opinion.)

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New ATV rules necessary

Wednesday, October 01, 2003 - Humans can affect wildlife habitat and ecosystems just by traveling through them. Usually, though, the damage done by hikers, horseback riders and mountain bikers is minimal, or at least repairable. The good news is that most of the 214 million people who visit our national forests every year are proper stewards of their public lands, leaving behind footprints that disappear and taking with them only memories that last a lifetime.

That's not always the case with motorized vehicles, though. The problem is especially pernicious with all-terrain vehicles.

Unmanaged recreation, especially burgeoning ATV use, is one of four major issues facing our national forests, says U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth. The ATV issue bedevils many other public land agencies, too.

The number of people who own ATVs has exploded to about 36 million nationwide. In Colorado, the number of registered ATVs mushroomed from 11,700 in 1991 to more than 62,000 by 2001.

While ATV drivers represent just 5 percent of all forest users, they cause an enormous number (some rangers say the majority) of complaints from other visitors.

Groups like Tread Lightly try to promote responsible backcountry driving, but it takes only a few yahoos to cause damage.

For example, in 2000, two Texans drove off the road near Silverton in an area known for fragile alpine tundra, and got stuck on a cliff. It took seven hours and a legion of local rescuers to retrieve the vehicle. But it will take a century or more for nature to repair the damage to the land.

Cars and most sport utility vehicles usually stay on designated roads. ATVs, though, can easily rip through meadows and wetlands.

This destruction isn't always illegal. Federal law doesn't expressly require ATVs to stay on the road in all places, although some areas are off-limits.

The broad exemption is uncalled for in the 21st century. All motorized vehicles should have to remain on real roads and be prohibited from zooming anywhere on public lands. Bosworth thinks the Forest Service can impose that requirement through administrative

action. If ATV user groups - which speak with a disproportionately loud voice on the political stage - challenge the Forest Service's power to do so, Congress should pass a law giving the agency clear authority.

But the Forest Service has to be fair about the process. The agency must survey which legitimate roads should stay open, and which illegal ones should be closed. Clear and understandable road signs must be erected. A public education campaign should precede the changes. The Forest Service must assign enough field personnel to enforce the rules.

Then Congress should increase the ridiculously puny fines now on the books. It's silly that the maximum fine is now just \$1,000 when the damage from ATVs can reach many thousands of dollars.

(This editorial is the fourth in a six-part series about new threats to U.S. forests. Tomorrow: Fire suppression. See the entire series to date at www.denverpost.com/opinion.

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Forest fires misunderstood

Thursday, October 02, 2003 - As huge wildfires raged across the West in recent years, their smoke signaled that something is drastically out of whack with our national forests. Unfortunately, the flames' true message may have been misunderstood by the public and political leaders.

Most North American native forests evolved with fire and are thus well adapted to survive periodic blazes. How often wildfire should occur depends on the ecosystem. The ponderosa pines in Colorado's Front Range, for instance, should burn at least every couple of decades.

In many national forests, though, natural fires have been suppressed for so long that when they now ignite, they explode with exceptional fury and destructiveness.

One expert estimates that between U.S. 285 and Interstate 70, ponderosa forest conditions are so bad that the Front Range could see another 40 blazes, each the size of the massive, 215-square-mile Hayman fire.

Wildfire, says U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth, is one of the four most serious issues facing our national forests.

The worry isn't about all fires - some small blazes actually help ecosystems get back into balance. The concern is over the size, frequency and extremely destructive behavior of the recent wildfires.

There is broad consensus that some forests need to be brought back into balance, but there's controversy about how or where such work should be done.

To help shape effective and ecologically correct policies, the public needs to understand key facts.

Many forests, including those on the Front Range, are too dense. Deadwood, shrubs and scraggly trees should be removed by thinning. That work involves the use of chainsaws, mulchers and other machines.

However, thinning should not excuse a return to the days of extensive clear-cutting. Unfortunately, public debate to date has focused on whether thinning is a stalking horse for a resurgence of destructive logging practices. It shouldn't be. But environmental groups shouldn't use that one concern to divert attention from the real threats to our

national forests.

Ironically, one of the most effective tools for stopping catastrophic blazes is to set small, controlled fires called prescribed burns. The little fires consume the excessive build-up of shrubs and other small flammable materials - kindling, in other words - so future fires don't have enough fuel to grow big.

Yet according to a Sept. 15 report from the General Accounting Office - Congress' non-partisan investigative arm - one reason the Forest Service doesn't set more prescribed burns is that the public objects to the smoke.

Of course, when a really large wildfire erupts, these complainers then might scream about why the Forest Service didn't prevent the conflagration.

How best to mitigate against huge wildfires requires combining good forest and wildlife science with public understanding. What the recipe needs less of, however, is political gamesmanship.

(This editorial is the fifth in a six-part series about new threats to U.S. forests. Tomorrow: Paying the bill. See the entire series to date at www.denverpost.com/opinion.)

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Invest now in healthy forests

Friday, October 03, 2003 - It will take money to fix the four big problems facing our national forests: invasive species, wildfires, loss of open space and unmanaged recreation.

For starters, the Forest Service must fix its finances. This year was the first time the agency got a clean audit from federal accounting experts. But even U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth - who identified the four top problems facing national forests - knows the agency needs to improve its financial practices.

If the Forest Service can better handle its finances, it will boost its credibility on Capitol Hill. It then may be able to convince Congress to lift restrictions lawmakers placed on Forest Service spending. Although well-intentioned, Congress' habit of earmarking almost every dollar in the agency's budget leaves field personnel with too little flexibility. For example, there's one pot of money to build outhouses and another to build trails. When the Forest Service needs to repair a popular but damaged trail, it can't take money out of the plentiful outhouse fund.

Instead of micromanaging the agency's capital projects budget, Congress should allocate money to broader categories. For instance, if money were set aside to protect watersheds, supervisors could respond to problems facing their particular national forests. In one place, watershed protection might mean preventing catastrophic wildfires. In another, it might mean stopping off-road vehicles from ripping through stream beds.

Congress must stop budgetary backsliding, including reductions in wildfire funds. Following the awful 2002 fire season, Congress handed the Forest Service and other land agencies a \$215 million cut in 2003's overall wildfire budget, including preparedness, response and rehabilitation. Some specific cuts were nuts. For example, the 2003 wildfire preparedness budget alone was slashed by \$25 million. Bush asked Congress to restore \$14 million in preparedness money for 2004. Overall, he wants 2004's wildfire budget to about match 2002's funding. Yet even that request means forest managers will fall further behind in preventing catastrophic fires.

In truth, reducing the threat of wildfires nationwide will take hundreds of millions of dollars over several decades. Controlling invasive species also will take many millions of dollars. By one estimate, stopping alien weeds could require \$300 million a year. In reality, the Forest Service was told to expect \$17 million nationwide for the program in 2004. Similarly, controlling unmanaged recreation and encouraging open space

protection will require personnel and more salaries.

Even in these tough budget times, Congress and President Bush should find the needed cash to safeguard our national forests. Inaction only means that the future price of dealing with the four serious threats will climb ever higher.

(This editorial is the last in a six-part series. Read the entire series at www.denverpost.com/opinion.