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Phillip Renault



Jeff DeBonis leans on an old-growth tree near his home in Oregon

Forester challenges his agency to a discussion

by Jim Stiak

The McKenzie River flows behind Jeff DeBonis' house near Leaburg, Ore. Log trucks roll by in front. In between is DeBonis - in more ways than one. An 11-year veteran of the US Forest Service, a small man with a lot of energy, he's wedged between a desire to protect some of the world's lushest forests and a job that helps turn them into 2 by 4s.

DeBonis is a timber sales planner on the Blue River district of the Willamette (will-AM-et) National Forest. He leads teams of scientists into the steep forests of the Cascade Mountains to study the soil, water and wildlife, and write the environmental analyses required by law before those forests can be cut down.

He's seen the effects of logging throughout the Americas, as a forester with the Peace Corps in El Salvador, for the Agency for International Development in Brazil, and with the Forest Service in Montana's Kootenai and Idaho's Nez-perce. But it wasn't until he transferred last autumn to the Willamette, the biggest timber-producing forest in the national forest system, that what he saw made him open his mouth.

Now he has become, if not a whistleblower, a cry of conscience, an advocate, for preserving the country's fast disappearing old-growth trees.

"All along I had an idea that things weren't quite what they should have been," he says. "But things had not gone far enough until I got to the Willamette. If you look at a map of what's been logged the last three decades, it looks like a shotgun. Road-induced slide areas, streams accumulating lots of gravel, obvious cumulative effects. Back in the Nez-perce, in watersheds not nearly so impacted, we shut off the logging."

In January, he sat down at a terminal in his district headquarters and key-boarded a memo into the Forest Service's internal computer mail system.

"The timber industry's attempt to squeeze every last acre of ancient forest to support a declining industry is doing so at the expense of the rest of Oregon's economy," he typed.

"The Forest Service and the BLM are perceived by the conservation community as being advocates of the timber

industry's agenda. Based on my 13 years of forestry I believe this charge to be true."

The memo found its way through the Forest Service, into some Sierra Club newsletters, and into the hands of the timber industry. The staff at Willamette National Forest headquarters in Eugene began receiving calls and letters, demanding that they muzzle their loose cannon. The staff was unsuayed, replying diplomatically, "You don't want us to fire him — that'll make a martyr out of him."

"The Forest Service is a diverse workplace, with opinions from one end of the spectrum to the other," explains Willamette spokesman Jerry Mason. "And we're not eager to squelch those opinions."

Nonetheless, DeBonis was walked to the woodshed and warned against

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'You are probably not a popular person in certain circles... but there are a lot of people who admire your guts.'

Challenge...

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sending such messages over the government's computer lines. So he tried a different tack. In February, he wrote a nine-page letter to USFS Chief Dale Robertson, expressing his concerns in candid detail. (The letter is reprinted in full on an accompanying page.) As of this writing, Robertson has not replied.

Then, in March, DeBonis attended an old-growth training seminar, the kind that the Forest Service periodically holds to present the latest findings of research into our ancient forests. It was the kind of meeting, says DeBonis, where "everybody says, 'yeah, we've got to start making changes.' But nothing ever happens."

DeBonis was not in a do-nothing mode. At lunch, he went over to a friend's house, laser-printed a one-page flyer, then ran off 300 copies before returning to the seminar. "DO YOU BELIEVE THE FOREST SERVICE NEEDS TO CHANGE???" read the flyers. "To move towards a new vision ... which includes ... policies which reflect

TRUE stewardship ... promoting officers based on meeting the intent and spirit of our land stewardship laws instead of how well they get the cut out? ... Become a member of The Association of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics!!!!"

As he passed them out, he says, the response was not immediately overwhelming. Most people looked at it as if they were stunned. But the message apparently fell upon fertile ground. A fat file folder holds the replies — over 200 and growing — that he's received from the flyer and the memo.

He picks out some quotes from them. "I can't believe a Forest Service employee has felt comfortable to write this. I agree wholeheartedly." "You are probably not a popular person in certain circles ... but there are a lot of people who admire your courage." "We are fortunate that you have the sacrificial guts." "What the hell — go ahead and send me some more info — maybe there is hope."

The response convinced DeBonis to increase his promotional budget. Twenty thousand copies of *Inner Voice*, the first newsletter of his fledgling association, are now off the presses and will soon be in the hands of the Forest Service, the



environmental community and the timber industry.

So that he doesn't have to "re-invent the wheel," he's modeling the association after similar groups in the Defense Department and the National Park Service.

"We'll set up committees," he says. "Set objectives. Maybe get into the BLM and state land management agencies. Effectively lobby Congress and the upper echelons of management. We're looking for a new vision for the Forest Service, and we welcome anybody."

And what is it this uppity timber sales planner wants from his employer?

"We have a choice," he explains. "Either meeting the resource management laws like the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Forest Management Act, or getting the cut out. Well, we've been trying to get the cut out for 20 years and doing a miserable job on the other end. Let's try the other mode, let's quit meeting the cut and start meeting the laws."

District rangers, he says, can "stick their necks out and say resource values

and my personal ethics are more important than the goddam timber cut," but they'd be bucking Congress, which sets the timber cut levels, he points out. And Congress is not likely to lower those levels — against the desires of big money — without the public demanding it, he adds.

DeBonis hopes that his message from within the service, what he calls an "inner voice," can help convince the public that it's time to make those demands.

A large dysfunctional adolescent

The US Forest Service, according to many who have served in it, is like a large family. But 30,000 siblings can apply a lot of peer pressure on everyone to be a team player. And if DeBonis is correct, the name of the game has always been to get the cut out.

The pressure can take many forms. "A lot of it is inbred," says Mark Wigg, who retired in 1985 after 10 years with the service. "Until recently, foresters

From a man on the ground to the man at the top:

Jeff DeBonis
PO Box 45
Vida, Oregon 97488
February 4, 1989

F. Dale Robertson
Chief, U.S. Forest Service
U.S.D.A.

Dear Dale,

I am writing to you personally because I feel very strongly about the future and health of our national forests, this nation and the planet, and the future role of the Forest Service in addressing this issue. I am speaking from my heart, and thus may sound extremely candid. But I feel it is time for all of us, especially within the Forest Service, to start speaking out more honestly on the reality of what we are doing to our forests and the role the Forest Service is going to play in addressing this reality as we approach the 21st century.

Before I get into the heart of my message, I would like to give you some information about myself, so you will have a sense of my experience and perspective, and my credibility. I am currently a timber planner on the Blue River Ranger District of the Willamette National Forest. I have worked for the Forest Service for over 10 years, on four national forests, in three regions. I have

worked in all aspects of timber management, from sale planning and preparation, to timber sale contract administration.

In addition, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in El Salvador and a contractor for U.S. Aid for International Development in Ecuador. My international experience spanned the gamut from working with the problems of deforestation of tropical rainforests in the headwaters of the Amazon Basin, to reforestation and soil conservation projects in the Mediterranean climate of El Salvador. This international perspective has perhaps given me an advantage in seeing through the scotomas (blind spots) that many in our agency seem to be burdened with when it comes to seeing the necessity for quick and effective change.

Our basic problem right now is that we (the Forest Service) are much too biased towards the resource-extraction industries, particularly the timber industry. We support their narrowly focused, short-sighted agenda to the point that we are perceived by much of the public as being dupes of, and merely spokespeople for the resource extraction industries. In the remainder of this letter, I will try to explain to you why I believe this is true, give you examples supporting my assertion, tell you what I think we need to do as an agency, and what top management needs to do to move us into the 21st cen-

tury as *leaders* of a new resource ethic instead of unwilling participants being dragged along by the chain of 9th Circuit Court of Appeals decisions.

We are over-cutting our national forests at the expense of other resource values. We are incurring negative, cumulative impacts to our watershed, fisheries, wildlife and other non-commodity resources in our quest to meet our timber targets. This is especially evident in Region 6, on "big-timber" forests like the Willamette, but is also occurring on most other timber forests as well. On every forest I have worked on I can give you numerous on-the-ground examples of "getting the cut out" at the expense of other resource values.

Examples include moving spotted owl habitat areas boundaries and allowing fragmentation of these areas to accommodate timber sales; exceeding recommended cover/forage ratios on big game winter range; ignoring non-game wildlife prescriptions, such as snag and green replacement tree guidelines; exceeding watershed/sediment "threshold values of concern" in areas with obvious, cumulative damage, etc. We rarely, if ever, exceed our objectives in non-timber resources, even though these objectives are set at the absolute minimum we can legally "get away with."

These practices are so commonplace they are the standard operating proce-

dures. They are the norm and we scarcely think twice about them, until some concerned citizen or one of our own special-ists dares to challenge us and we become indignant at their audacity. At the planning level, we have built our forest plans from the "top down" instead of the "ground up."

In other words, we have taken the politically mandated timber harvest level and manipulated the forest plan data to support the cut level, rather than build the plan up from the bottom, letting the harvest level be determined by sound biological and ecological considerations mandated by our resource protection laws.

A simple example of this took place on one forest plan I am familiar with. This plan used an average volume per acre of 25 MBF, instead of the real figure of 17 MBF per acre determined by the past six or seven years of actual harvest from the "big timber" districts. This was done when it was discovered that the politically mandated harvest level was too high to be biologically supported by the actual number of acres available for harvest at the real volume per acre. In other instances, forest plans don't account for reduced timber volume lost via resource protection guidelines built into the plans, for example in green replacement "wildlife tree" prescriptions or riparian protection prescriptions. This

were taught that the only value in trees was timber."

Some takes the shape of a dollar sign. "People who build big timber programs get big budgets and tend to be promoted," says Dan Heinz, a 25-year veteran who retired in 1983. "And the wildlife biologists who get promoted are those who show how timber cutting improves habitat."

"You've got a nice \$20,000 or \$30,000-a-year job," adds Wigg. "You can speak up and not lose your job, but you could be transferred. And even if you say no, it's not going to stop timber sales."

And some of the pressure gets right in your face. "You go into a grocery store and a logger you know walks up to you and starts yelling," says Barry Flamm, a 30-year ranger who now works for The Wilderness Society. "It gets real personal."

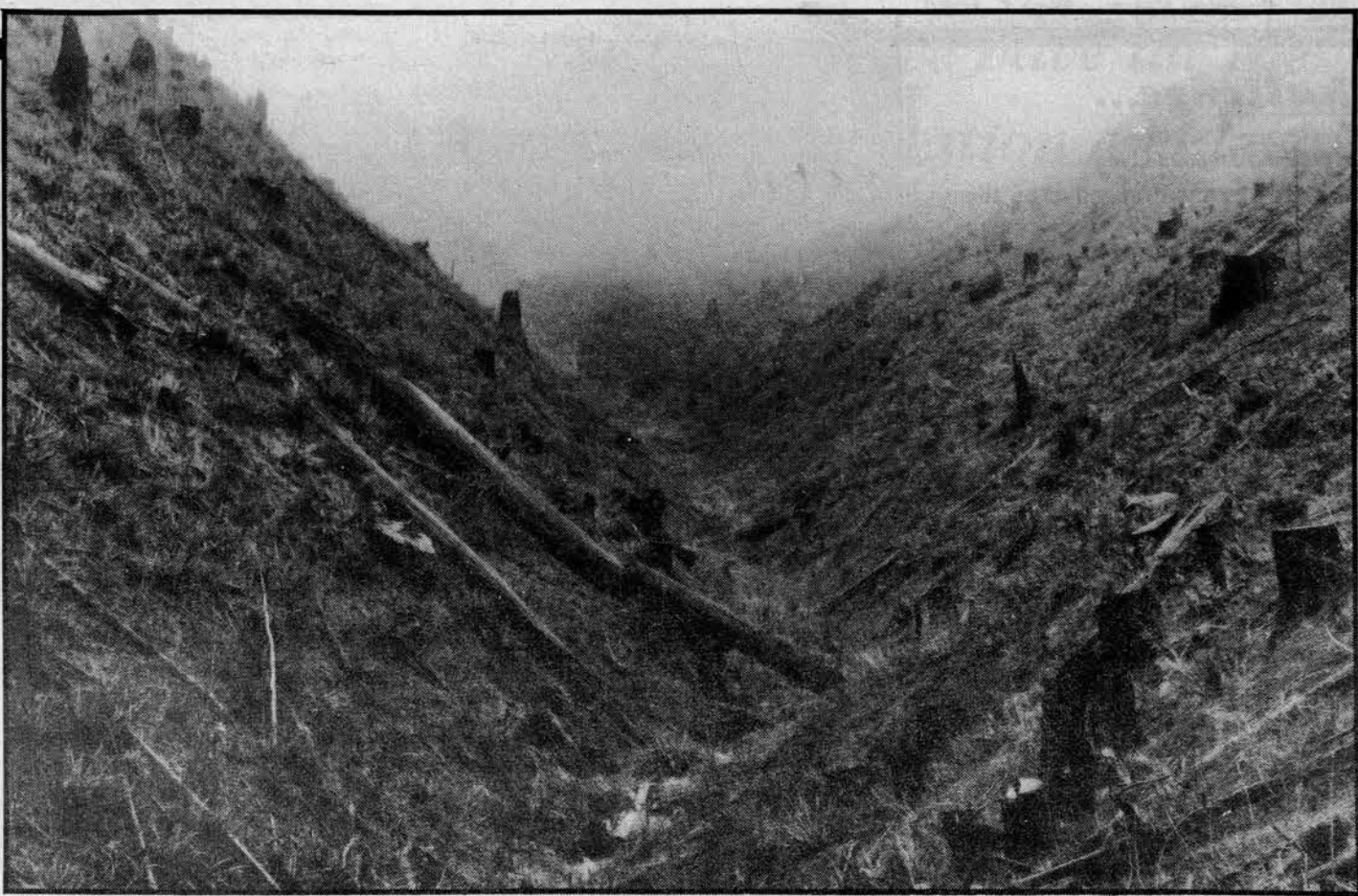
Sara Johnson knows that only too well. A 14-year employee of the service, Johnson was a wildlife biologist in Montana's Gallatin National Forest last year when, against the wishes of the Gallatin's new supervisor, she recommended against some timber sales.

"Next thing I know," she says, "my job was abolished and I was being transferred to a job that was a 100-mile commute."

She could have appealed the transfer, she says, but it would have taken a year, during which time she would have had to take a transfer. Last January she quit.

If the Forest Service is a large family, she says, then it's a dysfunctional one. "It's the good ol' boy network, and what it does, especially to women, is professional battering. You won't hear them saying it, 'cause they'll be accused of being crybabies, but women all over the Forest Service have told me the same thing."

Sara Johnson adds, "It's nice to dream that the Forest Service can change from within, but I just don't believe it."



Clearcut on Oregon coast range

"They thought about transferring me," says another wildlife biologist who advised against a timber sale. "But what they did instead was take away my power. And that's the worst thing you can do to a wildlife biologist."

Given these pressures, DeBonis' words may be falling on rocky soil. Although he says that 90 percent of the people he talks to agree that excessive timber cuts are hurting the environment, that figure may not be representative.

"My seat-of-the-pants guess," says Dan Heinz, "is that 30 percent of the people in the Service" agree with that view. But they're largely in the "amenity disciplines" that include wildlife biologists, landscape architects and soil scientists. "The people who get promoted and make changes, they're mostly of a like-mind," Heinz says. "There's a lot of peo-

ple concerned, but not enough to make a critical mass."

A study published in *Forest Science* magazine last year tends to confirm that perception. Multiple use is not the prevailing concern among rangers, concluded the two sociologists who conducted the study. Timber is.

Still, winds of change are blowing, both from inside and out. Rangers are now taught how to meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, partly in response to the many court cases the Forest Service has lost over it.

Heinz talks of forest supervisors with "environmental ethics that just won't stop," such as Jim Nelson of Nevada's Toiyabe National Forest and Barry Davis of Wyoming's Shoshone.

DeBonis commends the work of Tom Kovalicky in the Nez-perce. Wigg talks of "tremendous changes" occurring in the service, of how it's become one of the "most responsive agencies in the federal government."

"I always found the service to be a place you could step out and do something differently," agrees Flamm, who was a forest supervisor. "You could do a lot in your position if you were right and willing to take the flak."

"The Forest Service is going through adolescence" says one wildlife biologist. "But what's it growing up into? I don't know. The old guard is gradually retiring, but the resources are disappearing faster."

Jeff DeBonis insists: "I'm not ready to give the agency up to the timber

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Let's rethink how we manage the forests

builds over-harvesting into the plan as unrealistically high timber harvest levels are striven for.

In the case of yet another forest plan I am familiar with, the forest has avoided developing adequate standards and guidelines to protect wildlife or assess the increasingly obvious cumulative effects occurring in many of the watersheds, even though there are a few examples of forest plans which have adequately addressed these issues. They are avoiding it because they know it would reduce their cut. I could give you many more examples of this from forest plans I am personally familiar with, as well as accounts from other co-workers who have encountered similar situations on forests across the U.S. I don't mean to point fingers at any particular forest plan, but it serves as an example that we always seem to choose to meet inflated timber cut levels in lieu of protection of other resource values.

Other examples of our bias towards "getting the cut out at all costs" include: 1) the numerous ways we find to try to circumvent the National Environmental Policy Act; 2) how we view "environmentalists" as our "enemy" in "getting the job done"; and 3) how we often isolate and pressure our wildlife biologists and other resource specialists to conform, be "team players" so as not to interfere with "getting the cut out." We

do this to the point that they refer to themselves as "combat biologists" on many of the heavy-cut forests. And the sad fact of the matter is that the combat they are referring to is with their own supervisors, rangers and forest management teams.

A final example concerns the recent record of decision for the final Environmental Impact Analysis for the spotted owl. In this case, we decided to continue our accelerated harvest rates at 95 percent of the harvest level that would be available if no action were taken! Habitat areas will only comprise 9 percent of the current spotted owl habitat, and a full 50 percent of the remaining existing habitat will be open to continued harvesting and fragmentation. This is being proposed in the face of an almost unanimous agreement in the scientific community that the spotted owl is either crashing towards extinction or very close to it.

As an agency, we support and at times publicly reiterate timber industry's smoke screens of jobs vs. environment, jobs vs. the spotted owl, and help promote the impression that we will all be living in cardboard shacks below some freeway overpass if we don't cut the last grove of old-growth. The disinformation being promoted by the timber industry is too long a subject to get into in this particular letter, so I have taken the liberty

of enclosing an additional article I wrote (which you may have already seen) pertaining to some specifics on that particular subject. To put this issue in perspective in a general way, however, we

dedented rate because Wall Street views standing timber as "under-valued" (and a leveraged buy-out opportunity)? We are not talking about tourism versus ugly clearcuts. We are talking about corporate

*The question occurs to me:
Why are we so biased
in favor of the timber industry?*

should ask ourselves these questions: Are we, as an agency, going to continue to support the current global epidemic of destruction of our biosphere's ecological diversity and survival, for short-sighted, short-term economic "security"? Are we going to continue to parrot the timber industry's propaganda that turning our national forests into industrial tree farms is necessary for "jobs," when this very industry exported over 5 billion boardfeet of raw logs last year from Oregon and Washington alone?

Are we going to sacrifice the public's national forests while private industry liquidates their lands at an unprece-

greed versus a priceless national treasure.

The question occurs to me: why are we so biased in favor of the timber industry? I believe it can be partly explained by the homogeneous nature of the Forest Service "culture" which promotes a certain mindset. Some of the characteristic beliefs commonly held by this mindset are:

- 1) If we just believe we are doing "right," we are right;
- 2) Two decades of accelerated resource extraction, timber harvest which was viewed as "right";

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Challenge...

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beasts. I'll be more effective on the inside than just another person who throws rocks at them from the outside."

So far, his optimism seems reasonable. "He won't be reprimanded as long as he doesn't use government time or money," says Sherry Wagner, spokesperson for the agency's region 6 headquarters in Portland, Ore.

"In fact, I personally think Jeff's a real asset. For me reading it — 'environmental ethics' and all — it doesn't make sense that anyone in the service wouldn't want to join his association," Wagner says.

"There'll be no reprimand" for what he's done, says the Forest Service's Assistant Chief, Steve Mealey, in Washington, D.C. "We're not a repressive organization."

"Oh, he won't lose his job," predicts Dan Heinz. "They'll probably keep him here, maybe gradually diminish his responsibilities."

But DeBonis says he knows reprisal can be subtle. But, "even if they transfer me to Texas or wherever," says DeBonis, "I can be just as effective on a computer terminal there."

He sits on his patio, while his scruffy dog unearths some freshly planted flowers. "I know that if they want, they can make my life miserable," DeBonis says.

He looks up at the starlings flitting in the dusk above the rolling McKenzie. "It's one of those choices," he says. "You go through the logic of it in your head, you think about it for a long time, but you make the choice from the heart."

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Jim Stiak lives in Eugene, Oregon. His report was paid for by the High Country News Research Fund.

Phillip Renault



Clearcut in the Oregon Cascades

Is resistance futile?

Bucking a federal agency is never easy. Dan Heinz tried reform from within but finally decided that the approach didn't work.

After 25 years as a recreation planner in Deer Lodge, Mont., Heinz quit. "I was making comments on the environmental analyses for timber sales, but no one paid attention."

In 1983, thinking he could do more as a private citizen, Heinz took early retirement and went to work for the American Wilderness Alliance, an organization of some 2,500 members headquartered in Denver.

"I came out of forestry school thrilled to see timber on a hillside," he says, "thinking I was doing good for society. But in the Rockies I saw clearcutting on sub-marginal land that wasn't suitable for timber by any stretch of anyone's imagination."

Apparently, his analysis was accurate. Of the 35 timber sales he's challenged since he left the Forest Service, he's lost only three.

Rolf Wallenstrom got in hot water over the ocean. A 30-year employee of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, he was their Western states regional director in 1987 when he wrote a memo critical of plans to allow oil drilling off the California coast. The memo predicted more risks from oil spills and tankers than his supervisors foresaw, or, evidently, wanted to hear about. In December, Wallenstrom was offered what he calls a "sweetheart deal," a "do-nothing job anywhere."

He turned it down, and in January was fired for refusing to accept a transfer. He appealed the firing and reached a settlement that allowed him to retire, with the agency paying all his back wages and more than \$10,000 in legal fees.

"I've never seen anything like the last eight years," he says of his time in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during the Reagan administration.

"The service tried to manage information, hide it, and not let out what was

going on." Nor does he see the situation improving under President Bush, with the names that have been suggested for leadership of his agency. The service's rank-and-file, however, is a different story.

"I'm still getting letters of support," he says. "I think my case has been a real morale booster for the troops remaining."

But to those thinking of emulating his defiance, Wallenstrom offers a warning: "You can't speak out if you're not willing to go to the mat. If there are any ghosts in your closet, they'll come out."

Chris Frissell moved toward the mat without really trying. Frissell, a fisheries researcher at Oregon State University, objected to a timber sale which would have ruined Dry Creek in the Siskiyou National Forest, he says, as a "control site" for his research. Gregory Forest Products had bought the sale in the early 1980s, but after most of Dry Creek became protected inside the Grassy Knob Wilderness, the company offered to turn the sale back to the Forest Service.

The agency refused, and, in January, Frissell wrote to the Siskiyou National Forest to register his objection. He also sent copies of his research to some groups who had requested it, including The Wilderness Society. In February, Oregon State University President John Byrne received a letter from Dennis Hayward of the Northwest Timber Association, stating that Frissell had crossed the line between science and advocacy by engaging in "preservationist actions" unsuitable for a university.

Byrne responded that there were no grounds for any action. Frissell says he was "not too concerned" for his own sake, but adds that he's heard of many similar cases, most of which are "kept quiet and handled internally."

The Dry Creek watershed, adds Frissell, has not yet been logged.

— Jim Stiak

Letter...

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3) That somehow there are no negative cumulative effects resulting from our accelerated rates of timber harvest because we are doing "right," we "care about the land," and we are all good people working in a respected agency;

4) As long as we "get the job done," and keep producing, then things will be OK, and will somehow get worked out;

5) That somehow we are safely "in the middle" between the two opposing equally-weighted special interest groups represented by the timber industry and the environmentalists; and

6) If we throw enough money at a problem we can "have it all," that all our resource problems are solvable by creative budgeting.

In the interest of space, I don't want to address the fallacy of all of these beliefs here, but I would like to comment on a few of them.

POINT 1: The signs of negative, cumulative impacts to our global ecosystems are becoming more and more obvious every day. I don't need to enumerate them here, we read about new environmental disasters every day. We all agree that problems like rain forest deforestation must be stopped. And yet these same symptoms are occurring in our country, in our national forests. We rightly become indignant over the fact that 50 percent of the tropical rain forests have been destroyed, but hardly seem to

notice that we, as an agency, have contributed to the destruction of 95 percent of the temperate and near-temperate rain forests of this continent.

Replacing an ecosystem as complex and diverse as our old growth temperate rain forests with a monoculture of "genetically improved" Douglas fir is ecologically unconscionable and totally contrary to NEPA, which states that we "preserve important natural ecosystems and maintain an environment which supports diversity." We are currently risking the extinction of this entire ecosystem, as evidenced by the status of our indicator species, the spotted owl, by our continued insistence on logging most of the remaining 5 percent of the temperate rain forests, the bulk of which is on national forests. And we are doing this in the face of unprecedented unanimous agreement of federal agency biologists that the owl is in fact endangered due to continued logging on public lands.

This stubborn, get-the-cut-out mindset we tend to embrace as an agency blinds us to the actual destructive results of our actions. We see only what we want to see. As the negative impacts of our actions become more and more obvious, we try to pretend it's not happening. And yet at some subconscious level we know that we are over-cutting.

When I talk to co-workers about this subject, it is almost universally agreed that we are, in fact, over-cutting. But most of them fail to make the connection that we, in our agency, are contributing

to the global environmental onslaught. I have observed this apparent paradox from sale preparation foresters through district rangers, timber staff officers and forest supervisors.

Most of these people stop short of admitting that we are seriously damaging the resource or our credibility with the public. A few of us do see the global perspective and realize the damage we're doing, but still insist that we cannot make the needed changes in our management or resource ethic practices "at this level of the organization," whatever level we happen to be in. Our scotomas are held firm by our mindset. We march blindly on to the tune of continued resource extraction at any cost, and refuse to accept the reality of the destructive results of our actions.

POINT 2: We delude ourselves in thinking that we are somehow in the "middle" between the environmentalists and timber industry. The fact that we think the environmentalists have "equal weight" with the timber industry as just another "special interest group" is a fallacy. One cannot logically weigh the motives of environmentalists with those of the timber industry. It's like comparing apples and oranges. Timber industry's motive is short term, quick profits, and tends towards short-sighted economic gain. They have a very narrow focus. The environmental community, on the other hand, has a long-range perspective. They are promoting a vision of a sustainable future, both economically and eco-

logically. Their motives are altruistic, not exploitative.

Unfortunately, we ally ourselves with timber industry and think that the "environmentalists" are somehow obstructing us with their numerous appeals and lawsuits. Industry's disinformation campaign has the public believing that these appeals are frivolous and counterproductive. The fact is, environmentalists are winning appeals and court cases because we have broken the law. The only frivolous action going on is our agency's disrespect for environmental preservation and ecological diversity. We are the obstructionists, in our insistence on promoting the greedy, insatiable appetite of the large corporate timber industry we serve so well.

An even more poignant example of our bias towards the timber industry's agenda concerns how we react after environmentalists do win their lawsuits against us. In many instances, environmental organizations have won on principle in court, but end up losing "on the ground," often with our compliance and help. Instead of accepting the obvious merits of their case and rethinking our action or attitudes, we find ways to circumvent the rulings and continue our business as usual activities.

Examples include the National Wildlife Federation and Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund's case against the Mapleton District of the Siuslaw National Forest in which they won in court,

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