



Sustaining Family Forests

Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen
20th Anniversary of Forests and Fish, Washington Farm Forestry Association
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It's such a pleasure to be here! I am so grateful to the Washington Farm Forestry Association for hosting this event—the 20th anniversary of the Forests and Fish Law here in Washington, my home state. Thank you for inviting me, and I look forward to the tour tomorrow of the Kingsbury family's Five Springs Tree Farm.

This occasion combines so much of my own past, present, and future. It brings back wonderful memories of my own formative years, both personally and professionally, and it holds such promise for the years to come!

I'd like to introduce my mom, Carole Christiansen, and my husband, Mike Harris, who have joined me tonight.

One Forester's Personal Story

My personal passion is connecting people with their natural resources, and it started for me while growing up here in Kitsap County, about 20 to 25 miles south of here near Olalla. I lived across the country lane from the Kingsbury family's Five Springs Tree Farm.

I was a very shy 9-year-old girl when my mom and dad built our family home on 10 acres of land. We lived in Tacoma, and my parents were fulfilling their dream of raising their family in the country so we could have a connection to nature. I have my own Forest and Fish story!

My sister and I played in the fire-scarred old-growth cedar stumps, which had become hollowed out. We marveled at how they had become "nurse stumps" for magnificent second-growth trees.

We also spent hours down at the creek, Purdy Creek, an anadromous fish stream, where we would cheer on (and often give names to) the salmon swimming upstream to spawn. We were giving them their last blessing!

When it came time to pick which trees would be harvested to prepare the building site, I negotiated each tree with my Dad. I would put my hands on my hips and proclaim that I was going to be a forester and a conservationist (I saw them as interchangeable) and we needed to carefully plan which trees to harvest.

And then we met Mr. John Kingsbury, who was out tending his tree farm across the country lane. He was always so pleasant, and I don't know if he realizes it, but he gave my sister and me a huge gift. He gave us access to our own learning laboratory ... the tree farm, where we explored

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for hours, riding our horses and our little dirt bikes on the many roads and trails on the tree farm! My sister and I were his unofficial forest rangers because we reported when gates were broken or garbage was dumped in the forest!

And that's where my personal passion for the conservation of natural resources began: in connection with a family tree farm.

Those early experiences inspired me to study forestry at the University of Washington, and I worked as a Washington state firefighter during the summers. And the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) District Manager, the big boss, was John Kingsbury. So Mr. Kingsbury not only gave us access to his tree farm he also gave me my first start as a wildland firefighter!

After graduating, I began a 26-year career with the Washington DNR. One of the highlights of my career was visiting family forest landowners and helping them write a forest stewardship plan.

Another career memory is working alongside many in this room to implement the Forests and Fish Law. Building on the foundation of the historic Timber, Fish, and Wildlife Agreement, that law struck a balance between competing uses. The founder of the Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, once put it this way: "There are many great interests on the national forests which sometimes conflict a little." "Sometimes conflict a little"—that was an understatement even a hundred years ago, when most Americans still had strong rural connections and the western states were still only sparsely populated.

By the 1990s, the Pacific Northwest was a different place, and it was torn by conflict over forest uses: Do people want salmon or timber? Do people want clean water? Outdoor recreation? We know that these uses are not mutually exclusive ... but many people thought so at the time.

Common Ground

The genius of Forests and Fish was that it cut through the Gordian Knot: it ended the zero-sum game of "I'm right, so you must be wrong." Forests and Fish discovered common ground, a way of getting to yes:

- Yes, people want salmon. Salmon is our signature species, vital to our regional culture and heritage. Salmonids depend on clean cold water and on good habitat in healthy streams and rivers, from the headwaters down to the sound.
- *and ...*
- Yes, we all live in woodframe homes, so we all need timber from sustainably managed forests, a green building material much better for the environment than concrete or steel.
- *and ...*

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- Yes, most private forest lands are in family ownerships, and if we want to keep them forested and sustainably managed for generations to come, then we need to make sure that their owners can make sound investments with sustainable financial returns.

Twenty years ago, Forests and Fish struck a balance between these competing interests by saying yes ... by validating all of the above.

Of course, the law was just a first step. I came in from the field as Washington DNR Assistant Division Manager for Forest Practices just as the emergency rules for the law were rolling out ... and then there was the process to adopt the permanent rules and the development of the historic habitat conservation plan! It wasn't easy. There were many long debates about the equitability and parity of Forest and Fish, especially for family forest landowners. This was recognized by the state legislature, and I was a part of standing up the first Small Forest Landowner Office. I hired Steve Stinson as our first Director. Sherrie Fox was a part of our interview panel.

All these years later, I am still very proud of Forests and Fish, and I thank those who led the way for their vision and foresight. Forests and Fish is a model for the nation, one of the largest and most comprehensive environmental measures in the United States, covering 60,000 miles of stream on 9.3 million acres of state and private forest land. It complies with both the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act; it protects Washington's native fish and aquatic species as well as water quality through monitoring and adaptive management; and it accommodates private forest landowners, giving them surety on their lands and acknowledging the critical role they play in protecting and preserving values that all of our citizens share.

I have taken the lessons and the innovations from Forest and Fish into my position as Arizona State Forester and now into my role as Chief of the USDA Forest Service.

The mission of the Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. As you know, the Forest Service manages the national forests and grasslands. It's an area almost twice the size of California, 193 million acres in 44 states and Puerto Rico. Here in Washington state, the national forests comprise 9.3 million acres, or about 20 percent of the state, mostly at higher elevations to protect the headwaters of streams.

Watershed protection is vitally important because people need water to live. Thirty-eight percent of the drinking water in the Pacific Northwest comes from the national forests. Here in Washington, 86 percent of the population is served by a few very large public water systems, and nearly all of them draw water from the national forests.

Sustainability

But our mission at the Forest Service extends beyond the national forests. It extends to the *nation's* forests and grasslands, and we work with state and private partners nationwide to support sustainable forest management across our nation. The key words in our mission

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statement are “to sustain,” and conservation—or wise use—has always been at the core of our mission.

More than a century ago, under visionary leaders like President Theodore Roosevelt, we decided as a nation to leave a legacy of forests for our children and grandchildren. We developed methods and models for the sustainable use of America’s forest resources across landownerships ... on state and federal lands, on tribal lands, and on private lands.

Today, we share a belief that forests are vital to families and communities—that forests are a broad social good, vital to our national prosperity, to our well-being as Americans. All Americans, whether they own forest land or not, benefit from our nation’s forest resources.

Forests provide sustenance, including 53 percent of the nation’s drinking water. In fact, private forests alone supply 30 percent of our nation’s drinking water. And let’s not forget—forests are the indispensable source of green energy and green building materials. Private forests alone supply 90 percent of our nation’s domestically produced forest products.

Forests are also a part of our cultural heritage. Forests are places of privacy, of peace and seclusion and great natural beauty. Forests are home to many Americans, part of their family legacy, places where they can enjoy friends and family, places where they can indulge in the great American traditions of hunting and fishing. Forests include a place where the Kingsburys have passed their family heritage to the next generation and a place where my mother is able to stay 87 years young by tending to her little piece of paradise with her creek and forest.

All this is possible because America’s forest landowners and land managers long ago embraced the sustainable use of forest resources. Thanks to Theodore Roosevelt and other early conservationists, a third of our nation’s land area is still forested today. In fact, we have the world’s fourth largest forest estate.

And most of our forest estate, about 56 percent, is privately owned, unlike in most countries around the world. Private forest land makes up about 445 million acres, more than twice the size of the entire National Forest System. America has more than 10.7 million family forest landownerships on about 290 million acres, or about 36 percent of our nation’s forest land.

Washington alone has about 48,000 private forest landownerships of 10 acres or more. These lands cover a total of about 2.2 million acres, mostly at lower elevations, where they protect vital watersheds by buffering forests at higher elevations from residential areas. These lands are threatened by land use conversion to developed uses, so the Forest Service is working with partners to do everything we can to keep these family forest lands forested.

Challenges

Land use conversion is not the only challenge facing family forests. Other challenges include habitat loss and forest degradation associated with a changing climate, including bark beetle



outbreaks. Invasive species such as gypsy moth, balsam woolly adelgid, Scotch broom, knapweeds, and more are threatening both forests and rangelands.

One national challenge is wildfire. Our nation has over a billion “burnable” acres of vegetated landscapes, most of them naturally adapted to periodic wildland fire. About 80 million acres on the National Forest System overall are at risk, and about a third of that area is at high risk. Hundreds of millions of acres of other lands are also at risk, whether state, private, county, Tribal, or other federal. We are all in this together.

In the last two years alone, wildfires burned almost 19 million acres nationwide and destroyed more than 26,000 residences. Worse, more than a hundred people died in wildfire entrapments, often while fleeing their homes. Over the last few decades, the western fire season has grown at least two-and-a-half months longer, and we have seen the frequency, size, and severity of wildfires increase. Primary drivers are climate change, drought, hazardous fuel buildups, and the spread of homes and communities into fire-prone landscapes.

In fact, large parts of the West are in a “new normal of fire activity,” where a full suite of environmental, social, political, financial, and cultural factors drive outcomes in the wildland fire environment. The wildland fire system we have today is so incredibly complex that no single entity can do it alone—not the Forest Service, not the states, not any given fire department. We are all in this wildland fire system together.

A decade ago, the entire wildland fire community decided to come together to draft a common vision for improving our wildland fire system. I was involved as State Forester in Washington and later in Arizona, and we developed a truly shared approach called the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. Our approach has three national goals:

1. restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes;
2. creating fire-adapted communities; and
3. safe and effective wildfire response, with decisions based on risk analysis for all ownerships.

Our Cohesive Strategy for wildland fire management is part of being good neighbors, a national priority for the Forest Service. Being good neighbors takes active management—using every tool and authority we have to improve the health of America’s forests. The tools we have include timber sales, targeted grazing, herbicides in some cases, stewardship contracts, and prescribed fire. Our tools also include fire prevention programs, community wildfire protection plans, and Firewise practices for homes and communities to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

The authorities we have include the appropriate use of environmental assessment and decision making—using sound science and data to make sound decisions. In this past year, Congress has given the Forest Service new authorities to improve the condition of America’s forests. For example, we now have expanded stewardship contracting authority for up to 20 years. We really

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need market solutions to treat the many acres of small-diameter trees that need to be removed to improve forest health, and this 20-year contracting authority will attract the needed investments in biomass and smallwood processing.

We also have expanded Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) with states and Tribes. Through GNA, we can pool resources for all kinds of fuels and forest health treatments on federal lands and adjacent lands as well as for projects related to wildlife habitat, soil and water, and data collection. We now have 166 good neighbor agreements on 56 national forests in 36 states.

We are using our tools and authorities to improve forest conditions. In 2018, we treated nearly 3.5 million acres through timber sales and prescribed fire, the highest levels ever. We sold 3.2 billion board feet of timber—the most in 20 years, creating jobs through a sustainable flow of forest products.

Shared Stewardship

But it still isn't enough, so it can't go on being business as usual!

Another priority for the Forest Service is promoting shared stewardship by increasing partnerships. We need others to help us make a difference across the landscape, so we are committed to working with partners and landowners to accomplish work on the nation's forests in the spirit of shared stewardship. We believe that joining together across shared landscapes and around shared values is critical for the future of conservation.

The reason is this: the scale of our work has to match the scale of the risks and the problems we face. For example, salmon face risks ranging from the oceans to headwater streams—and all points in between. If we want to have salmon, we need to mitigate the risks by working with partners at the appropriate scale. Forests and Fish is a great example of coming together to work at the right scale of the risks to our salmon fisheries.

Now we have an opportunity to match the scale of our work to the scale of the fire risks we face as well. In the past, our projects were randomly scattered across landscapes because no one was able to get their arms around the problem of fire risk. If a severe fire came, the project worked: the fire dropped from the canopy to the forest floor, where firefighters could control it before it burned into homes and communities. But we had no good way of assessing the full scale of the risk and placing our treatments accordingly.

Now we have tools for understanding a whole range of conditions at landscape scales. Today's megafires can travel for many miles to threaten homes, communities, and other values. The entire area at risk is called a fireshed, and scientists can now map entire firesheds, including all the federal, state, private, and other landownerships that collectively make up an individual fireshed. We can also map the contribution to fire risk from each parcel of land, and we can use that information to forecast what might happen if we put various kinds of treatments here or there.

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We can use the same approach for other kinds of threats, like invasive species. Through planning at the right scale based on the outcomes we agree on for shared landscapes, we can place treatments of any kind in a cost-effective way to achieve shared goals. We propose to apply the new technology through shared stewardship, with the states taking the lead. The states will convene partners to set broad priorities across shared landscapes for the outcomes we all want. Then we will use our new planning technology to come to agreements with communities and stakeholders on the right tools to use at the right time in the right places at the right scale.

The stars are aligned. Here in Washington, the state has a forest action plan that can serve to coordinate fuels and forest health treatments across planning areas that span jurisdictional boundaries. The state is also uniquely positioned to convene stakeholders across firesheds to evaluate the wildland fire environment, agree on cross-jurisdictional planning areas, use scenario planning tools to assess fire risks and alternatives for managing the risk, and set priorities for investments that will bring the most bang for the buck.

The Forest Service has a signed shared stewardship agreement with Idaho, and others will be signed soon. Next week, Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz, State Fish and Wildlife Director Kelly Susewind, and I will sign a shared stewardship agreement for Washington.

Modeling Shared Stewardship

Forests and Fish is a good example of the capacity here in Washington for shared stewardship. The law produced a habitat conservation plan that brings together partners and stakeholders from across the landscape to address risks at the appropriate scale based on common values and goals. Forests and Fish was an early model for the kind of shared stewardship we need now across the nation.

In closing, family forest landowners are the backbone of private forest landownership in the United States. I got my own start in forestry from a family tree farm here in Washington, and I share the values and hopes of family forest landowners as embodied in Forests and Fish. The Forest Service shares your commitment to being a good neighbor—to recognizing the rights, values, and needs of stakeholders across the spectrum. I hope you will support us and our state partners here in Washington in working together across shared landscapes to match the scale of our work to the scale of the risks we face. And I can assure you that the Forest Service will do everything we can to sustain family forests, for the benefit of generations to come.