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Where will the wood come from?

By Matthew D. Johnson

Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative has re-energized criticism of federal forest management, and some environmentalists are waging campaigns to cease cutting on U.S. National Forests, a position bolstered in recent months by further arguments against salvage logging after wildfires.

As a biologist who acknowledges that salvage logging indeed needs more scrutiny, I strongly disagree with efforts to ban all logging on federal forests. Proponents of "take no more trees" justifiably emphasize that the economic value of timber produced from our national forests (which comprises just 4 percent of U.S. consumption, according to the U.S. Forest Service) is dwarfed by the environmental damage inflicted by its extraction. But they also suggest, unjustifiably, that the loss of this 4 percent resulting from a proposed zero-cut policy would be offset by more intensive recycling and cutting on private tree farms, among other things.

Wishful thinking. I believe that reductions in timber extractions from federal forests would instead be offset by increased timber imports from other countries, especially in the tropics.

This assertion is supported by recent history. The Northern Spotted Owl was federally protected in 1990, sparking changes in federal forest management. Since then, U.S. production of softwood lumber has declined by about 4 percent, due mainly to less logging in western national forests. Over this same period, however, U.S. softwood consumption has increased by more than 11 percent. (All data is from the U.S. Forest Service.) To meet this increased demand with less domestic supply, softwood lumber imports have climbed a whopping 105 percent, with increasing contributions from Southern Hemisphere countries (though Canada still contributes the most). For example, softwood imports from Brazil, Chile and New Zealand combined have increased more than 2-1/2 times from 1996 to 2000. In short, when we cut fewer of our own trees, more logs arrive on ships.

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Therefore, a zero-cut policy will simply shift environmental destruction from national forests to private and international forests. It is difficult to see how this contributes to global environmental stability: Biodiversity does not distinguish among lands based on who "owns" them.

In the end, natural resource management hinges on meeting demands in a sustainable way. Rather than channeling our discontent with the U.S. Forest Service into safeguarding "our" forests at the expense of others, I suggest we formulate cogent arguments for better domestic forest management coupled with decreases in per-capita wood consumption.

Instead of lobbying for a ban on logging in federal forests, we should:

- seek economic incentives to encourage alternative building materials;
- proliferate the use of composite-wood products and "certified sustainable" wood over conventional lumber;
- increase wood recycling; and
- pressure the U.S. Forest Service to abandon conventional destructive practices and adopt management plans derived from scientific study that preserve ecosystems and maintain viable forest animal and plant populations. A lofty goal, but a first step is to develop logging units with a variety of shapes, sizes and distributions to match local patterns of natural disturbances, such as those caused by fire or windfall.

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Meeting our needs in a sustainable way will require us to throw all our intellectual and creative capital at the problem; such plans will require our best science and artistry. Our national forests should be the canvas for such efforts. With good fortune, our woodlands may one day serve as models of sustainably productive forests for others to emulate.

From a philosophical perspective, a ban on logging in U.S. National Forests is ill-advised based on principle. Although our national forests provide a small fraction of domestic wood consumption, this is a psychologically important contribution because it demonstrates that our society's well-being is partly reliant on responsible land use. It contributes to the fundamentally critical but poorly appreciated concept that we are integrally connected to our land, and our management of it is a reflection of our national character.

In 1949, the conservation ecologist Aldo Leopold suggested that "there are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes form the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace." Similarly, there is a spiritual danger in not carefully managing federal forests in part for timber extraction: Our children may one day suppose that wood comes from ships.

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