

## **A New Age of Forestry is Needed in the United States**

By Jack Thomas Ward

A new age of forestry is needed in the United States. Recent dramatic declines in forest management have brought some undesirable consequences for forest health and wildlife.

Public concerns over retention of biodiversity (such as compliance with the intent of the Endangered Species Act) have thrust concerns for wildlife front and center in forest management debates. Where those debates lead remains to be seen.

A total preservationist approach to management — standing back and letting nature take its course — has become increasingly prevalent. While appealing on the surface, this is not tenable in the long-term because it will not protect forests, retain biodiversity and provide some wood products over time.

A return to a totally economic-driven forestry is also not viable. Public reaction to past forest management practices, e.g. the visual impacts of clear-cutting, precludes harvesting at "economic maturity" from being the dominant factor in forest management decisions.

Public backlash to forestry practices of 1950-1975 resulted in a plethora of federal and state laws and regulations that set forest management on course toward sustainability. Unfortunately, the pendulum of attitudes toward forest management has swung too far to the side of constraint.

Today, most old-growth stands on public lands are protected and provisions exist for recruiting additional old growth over the next decades and centuries. Many stands are in or moving into mid-successional forest condition — the least productive stage for enhancing biodiversity. The key to overall biodiversity, therefore, will be creating and maintaining both younger early successional and late-successional forest stands.

Adding to the challenge of establishing the full spectrum of forest conditions essential to supporting the full spectrum of biodiversity is unprecedented wood consumption in the United States. Our per-capita wood consumption rate is the highest in the world and rising.

Increasingly, we depend on places beyond our borders to provide our wood — places with far less resources and knowledge as how to manage forests responsibly. When we import wood products, we export not only environmental consequences but jobs and dollars.

Currently, the creation of younger-forest conditions is increasingly dependent upon stand replacing fire, insects and disease and blow-down.

Timber harvesting could play a similar role. The choice, to a large degree, is up to us.

The idea of "letting nature take its course" is seductive in its simplicity but has significant downsides. First, the timing, extent, and results of stand-replacing events are only marginally under human control. With human populations increasingly ensconced in forested areas, forest health already degraded, and the ability to use controlled burns limited, "hands off" management — even for public lands — seems untenable in the long run.

Additionally, increasingly depending on "elsewhere" for our wood is morally

bankrupt, economically unfeasible and wasteful.

Clearly there is work to be done in our forests. However, using taxpayer dollars for habitat alterations to provide for biodiversity associated with early succession forests and protect structures in the wildland/urban interface against large-scale fires will prove cost prohibitive. And, once such actions are begun they must be maintained with ever mounting costs and not offsetting returns.

It seems the perfect time for a new forestry. Not a simple reinstatement of what has gone before, but a new approach — one in which the environmental benefits are as significant as the wood produced. We have the know-how, technology, and trained professionals to do the job. Certainly the need is ever more apparent.

This new forestry must focus on the landscape and accept the need to provide myriad values from our forests, including biodiversity, wood products, clean air and water, and recreation. By doing so, and harvesting more trees from its private forestlands, our nation can enhance biodiversity and lessen the impact of our consumption on forests around the world.

If the most fertile lands (usually in private ownership) were intelligently managed more intensely for wood production pressure could be relieved on less productive lands. Those lands then could be managed with more emphasis on such things as biodiversity, scenic values, and watershed integrity.

The answer to what some consider past management sins is not prohibition. Rather, it is a change in approach to forest management — a new forestry. The old forestry is largely dead. But, we have learned much — enough to institute new approaches that will be more acceptable and more sustainable.

Like all species, humans must exploit the environment in order to live. There is no question of that. The question is how such will be accomplished in a sustainable, and socially acceptable, fashion.

**About the writer**

Jack Ward Thomas was chief of the Forest Service under President Clinton.