

Wilderness Society wants cut slashed to 5 billion board feet

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — The annual national forest timber cut should be reduced more than half, to as low as 5 billion board feet in the next eight years, the Wilderness Society proposed Thursday.

But the Forest Service immediately responded it found "nothing new" in the report that will cause it to change federal timber policies.

In a report entitled "New Directions for the Forest Service," the environmental group urges the Bush administration to place a heavier emphasis on building up private forest resources while emphasizing recreation, wildlife preservation, environmental protection and other non-timbering uses for national forests.

THE recommendations, including eliminating below-cost timber sales, would reduce the U.S. Forest Service budget 25 percent by 1997 — a reduction from \$2.5 billion to \$1.8 billion, the group said.

Justifying the group's position, society President George Framp-ton Jr., said the Forest Service has been clear-cutting the national forests since the 1950s at a rate 10 times that of the average pre-World War II years.

"It's time for a major change, a new charter for the U.S. Forest Service," he said. "As far as I know, this is the first time in the last 10 or 20 years that anyone has attempted to basically outline a completely new charter for the management of our national forests."

But after receiving a briefing from the Wilderness Society this week, Associate Forest Service Chief George Leonard said "there is really nothing particularly new in the report."

WHILE the report may be the first time the Wilderness Society has outlined its call for a 54 percent slash in the timber sales program by 1997, Leonard said the group's "general belief that the sales program is too high has been well articulated by them in the past."

"I don't see this report sending us back to the drawing board on all those forest plans" that have been drawn up recently by the Forest Service, he added.

The report specifically repeats the Wilderness Society call for phasing out below-cost timber sales on national forests that return less revenue to the Treasury than it costs the Forest Service to prepare. Taxpayers are now losing \$400 million annually from these below-cost timber sales, the society claims.

The group also seeks a moratorium on all new construction of logging roads on national forests, the creation of "biological reserves" and cutting the timber sales program from its current 11.5 billion board feet level to 5 to 6.5 bbf in eight years.

Those and other proposals in the report would result in a slash of \$700 million in the Forest Service's annual budget by 1997.

BUT LEONARD, in an interview, said the Forest Service can
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defend a timber sales level of about 11 bbf, "about the same level as the harvest has been for the last 25 years."

Based on the results of a 10-year Forest Service national planning process which should be completed by October, Leonard said the 11 bbf sales level and "other programs that are associated with it, including a very strong increase in recreation and wildlife and fisheries programs, represents the best view of what contributions the national forests ought to be making to the economic and social well-being of the nation."

Leonard said he is "absolutely convinced that the volume (of timber sales) is sustainable into perpetuity," a claim the Wilderness Society disputes. Environmentalists maintain that such a sales level cannot be sustained without wiping out the forests, particularly old-growth stands that endangered species such as the spotted owl depend on.

Leonard acknowledged that if the Forest Service's current strategy for protecting the owl in the Northwest is not successful, the Forest Service would have to protect more old-growth stands than it now contemplates, with the result of a reduced sales level in the region.

