Agency Wasting Money and Environment

By KAREN FRANKLIN

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The U.S. Forest Service consistently defies its legislative mandate to manage tree cutting responsibly in national forests. Year after year it runs its timber program with virtual indifference to environmental consequences.

If the Forest Service were reaping huge profits, its defenders could argue that economic considerations sometimes outweigh environmental concerns. But, in fact, the government often sells the wood at a loss. It is a telling fact that this agency consistently draws fire both from liberal environmental groups and from the conservative National Taxpayers Union.

Between 1982 and 1987, the Forest Service's timber-cutting losses totaled $2.4 billion, according to Barry R. Flamm, chief forester of the Wilderness Society.

Timber sales from the Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska, for example, have lost from 91 to 99 cents on the dollar during the 1980s. In spite of a severely depressed timber market in the region, Forest Service engineers built roads and logging camps to the tune of at least $40 million a year — to provide timber that no one was very interested in buying.

The agency started out asking $1,000 per thousand board-feet of cedar. But the Louisiana-Pacific Corp. and Japan's Alaska Pulp Corp. — Tongass' exclusive customers by 50-year contract — insisted they couldn't pay that much. The price finally settled on was $1.22.

The Forest Service yawns at warnings by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game that this program jeopardizes one of the few untouched ecosystems left on earth. Road-building and logging threaten grizzly bears, Sitka deer, salmon, bald eagles and other wildlife. In explaining why the Forest Service pays money to disrupt the environment, officials often cite its lifelong friendship with local timber-dependent communities.

Such thinking ignores the rest of the American people, each of whom owns an equal share in the national forests. The law mandates that the Forest Service preserve endangered species habitats, water quality, and back-country recreation areas; nowhere does it require the agency to look out for local economic interests.

Forest Service defenders point to several purported spillover benefits of selling timber at below-market prices. For instance, cutting timber, which typically requires extensive road-building, reduces the cost of opening up new areas for recreation, and creates panoramic views and new picnic areas. But some economists argue that the agency's forest management plans systematically exaggerate the public demand for logging's side effects.

The Forest Service claims that logging can "enhance" wildlife. "Clear-cut" areas create forest "edges," which bring together different types of habitats and spur the growth of shrubs for grazing animals. What the Forest Service fails to factor into the equation is that clear-cuts attract animals that live in areas disturbed by civilization and displace animals that require primitive space remote from man. In other words, the more fragile the species, the more harshly the Forest Service treats it.

The Forest Service's original purpose was to supply the nation with lumber from national forests. This emphasis was supposed to have shifted after the 1976 National Forest Management Act, when Congress ordered the agency to stop giving priority to timber and, instead, to manage the land for all uses, with special attention to conservation.

But there appears to have been no lasting transformation. In fiscal year 1989, the Forest Service requested increased funding for timber sales of nearly $26.5 million, and reductions of nearly $19 million in programs such as trail maintenance, reforestation, recreation, and habitat management.

In a letter to the Senate interior appropriations subcommittee, 33 senators protested that this budget request, like those in the past, shortchanged recreation and wildlife in favor of timber.

Further polluting the ideals of NFMA is a 1906 "payments to counties" law, which entitles all counties with national forest land to 25 percent of the proceeds from timber harvests. The payments, earmarked for road and school budgets, come from gross receipts; whether the Forest Service ultimately lost money on the timber has nothing to do with it.

Perhaps the Forest Service's tendency to sell timber at a financial loss could, in principle, be defended. The losses could be seen as public payments (that is, taxpayers' payments) to the lumber industry to ensure that wood is harvested in an environmentally responsible way.

The trouble with this rationale, as we've seen, is that the agency pays only passing attention to environmental consequences. It is true that the service's clear-cuts are smaller and less disruptive than clear-cuts on private land often are. And it gives its clear-cuts a rounder, more natural looking shape, for what that's worth.

But the service also sells timber from steep slopes, risking erosion of the sort that may yet damage Alaskan fisheries. And the agency steadily infiltrates the forests with roads even when they threaten fast-disappearing species, such as the northern spotted owl.

One way the Forest Service has fended off criticism is with creative accounting. It claims, for example, that on balance it made money in fiscal year 1987. But this claim depends on amortizing logging roads over 60 to 150 years, when they're expected to last only 20. In any event, the Forest Service concedes that it loses money in at least half of its forests.

The Forest Service describes its mission with lilting phraseology, such as "balanced use," "wise use," and "multiple use," and professes to seek "the greatest good for the greatest number for all time." In plain English, that means providing timber to the country at virtually any cost.

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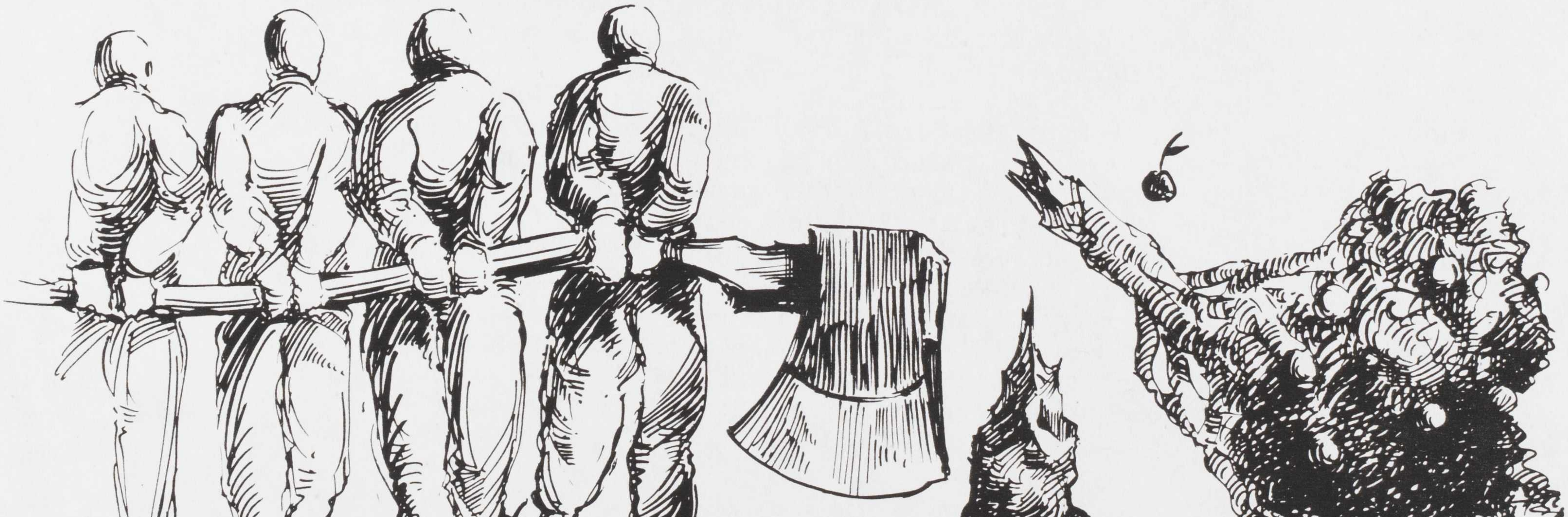

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