

A forest balancing act

By Jim Niedbalski

Therein lies the conundrum — how best to balance use of the land you and I own 'for the greater good.'

NORTH ADAMS
A FRIEND of mine owns about 40 acres of forest, and he recently had a logger cut about 15 trees to sell to a lumber mill. The trees fetched him about \$1,500, and the logger left several cords of logs that he'll cut and split into firewood.

A short distance from the cutting area, you couldn't even tell that any trees were missing. The sunshine pouring into the forest through the former canopies of these big trees will nurture smaller trees to grow tall and splendid. My friend made a few bucks, gained almost two winters' worth of firewood, provided work for a logger and a sawyer for a day, and improved the health of his forest.

Let's take this example and increase it exponentially. The U.S. Forest Service manages 193 million acres of forest and grasslands — 8.5 percent of the nation's total land area — in 44 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

For the last 100 years, the USFS has worked, and often struggled, to maintain a balance of economic, recreational and environmental interests in the vast forests stretching from Florida to Alaska. As the forest service officially celebrated its 100th birthday July 1, it's important that it continues its multiple-use mission and seeks a balance of competing interests that will, in the words of Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the agency, "to provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run."

The spotted owl war in the Pacific Northwest in the mid-1990s, which led to thousands of acres declared off-limits to logging, was essentially the beginning of the end of widespread logging on national forests. Today's timber harvest on national forests, according to a 2003 speech by Chief Dale

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Bosworth, is just 13 percent of mid-1980s levels.

The companion "villain" to logging is the politically-charged roads issue.

Late in the Clinton administration, the forest service proclaimed a "no new roads" policy, praised by environmentalists and loathed by the timber industry. Now, the Bush administration is considering modifying or relaxing the road ban, with the opposite reactions.

Roads obviously alter an undisturbed landscape, but also provide vehicular access to previously unreachable areas. Roads are costly to build, and USFS districts have often lost money on logging contracts, as it reimburses loggers for building good-quality roads suitable for car traffic. The Bush administration also is promoting a Healthy Forest Initiative that would in part resume some cutting to help reduce devastating wildfire threats by thinning young, dense timber stands and removing diseased trees. While this sounds good, it's important for public watchdog groups and state foresters to work with the forest service to ensure that extensive cutting doesn't occur under the guise of fire prevention.

Indeed, the forest service has identified "fire and fuels" as one of the "Four Threats" facing the nation's forests in the next century. The others are invasive species, loss of open space, and unmanaged recreation, notably by Off-Highway Vehicles (OHVs). The numbers associated with these threats are staggering, according to the USFS Web site.

In 2004, eight million acres burned at a cost of \$740 million; the U.S. spends \$13 billion a year battling invasive insects and plants, with over 10 times that amount in related economic damage; housing and other developments near national forests contribute to the decline of 35 percent of imperiled species; and OHV use has increased from five million riders in 1972 to 36 million in 2002, and the sevenfold increase shows in damage to trails.

Therein lies the conundrum — how best to balance use of the land you and I own "for the greater good." Our national forests offer places to hike, ski, camp, bike, boat, fish, ride horses and hunt, as well as ride snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles. They provide trees and jobs for the timber industry and lease land for grazing animals and mineral exploration. These forests also protect watersheds, wildlife corridors and sensitive natural areas.

National forests are not national parks, which protect land in its current state in perpetuity but also attract millions of visitors to far fewer sites. While you won't find the 2,000-foot Yosemite Falls or Yellowstone's Old Faithful geyser in a national forest, you also won't find hordes of people, paved roads, hotels, restaurants or admission fees.

Massachusetts is one of six states (Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, Delaware and Iowa are the others) that do not have national forest. There is the Green Mountain National Forest in nearby Vermont, where almost 400,000 acres of forest in a mountainous strip of land running from Pownal to near Montpelier is within a day's drive of 70 million people.

In his essay "Tree Dreams," naturalist Roger Swain wrote, "Who hasn't looked at a maple tree and thought furniture?" With balanced management and public input, there's no reason we can't have both the tree and the table.

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