

Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region Centennial Forum: Summary Essayⁱ

By Ed Marston

To go forward into its 2nd century, we believe that the US Forest Service must first understand what happened during its first 100 years. Fortunately, the Forest Service Region-2 delegation to the Centennial Forest Congress in Washington, DC, who were responsible for this abstract, had the benefit of an outstanding Regional Forum from November 8, 2004, to November 10, 2004—one that portrayed the history and spirit of that 1st century. Thanks to an engaged audience, we got to see today's issues, today's challenges, and the spirit of the emerging Forest Service (Fig. 1).

If the Forest Service were the stock market, we would say that the agency's first 100 years were marked by a long and steady rise to its midcentury point, followed by a boom, culminating in the late 1980s and early 1990s by a shattering bust. The bust took the annual timber cut from 10 to 12 billion board-feet per year down to a few billion board-feet.

Of course the agency can't be fully represented by the size of the timber cut, any more than the dollar value of the Dow rep-

resents the United States. But a boom is significant because it is a sign of instability and a loss of balance and sustainability.

The boom was in marked contrast to the agency's early decades. We heard, for example, of an early district ranger who is said to have planted 1 million trees during his career. True or false, this anecdote about a sort of reverse Paul Bunyan sums up what we learned from various speakers: that the early Forest Service was about restoration and protection of land and trees.

We can only imagine the turmoil and pain within the agency when the Forest Service responded to a change in national values and turned to flat-out production of commodities, especially of timber, but also livestock, stored and conveyed water, and, late in the century, recreation.

A word here about recreation. It is interesting that the Region-2 Forum did not have any fights over logging or "overgrazing" or mining. But we did have a fire fight over recreation—about whether it is an always-beneficial use of the land or simply another use and abuse.

It is interesting that recreation is no longer a white knight, but simply another contentious issue for the Forest Service to deal with. The agency has been embroiled in fights over natural resource use for decades as the nation's values shifted from production back to protection. We are sympathetic to the communities and companies and agency staff that were caught in that shift. They were standing on the wrong historical corner just when historic forces changed direction...and they were run over.

This change in historic direction decimated communities and even entire states. It roiled the region's electoral politics. It set one class of people against another and has even influenced our national politics.

ⁱ Five delegates were selected to represent the Rocky Mountain Regional Forum at the Forest Service Centennial Congress (available at <http://www.natlforests.org/centennial>), held in Washington, DC, from January 3, 2005, to January 6, 2005; they were Ed Marston, Former Publisher, *High Country News*; Eleanor Towns, Regional Forester (retired), Southwestern Region; John Mumma, Regional Forester (retired), Northern Region and Director (retired), Colorado Division of Wildlife; Bob Budd, Past President, Society for Range Management and Manager of The Nature Conservancy Red Canyon Ranch; and T. J. Rapoport, Executive Director, Colorado Fourteeners Initiative. The delegates presented this essay, written by Ed Marston, at the Centennial Congress. The Rocky Mountain Region Centennial Forum was organized and carried out by a planning committee led by David Wheeler, Group Leader for Rangeland Management, Rocky Mountain Region.

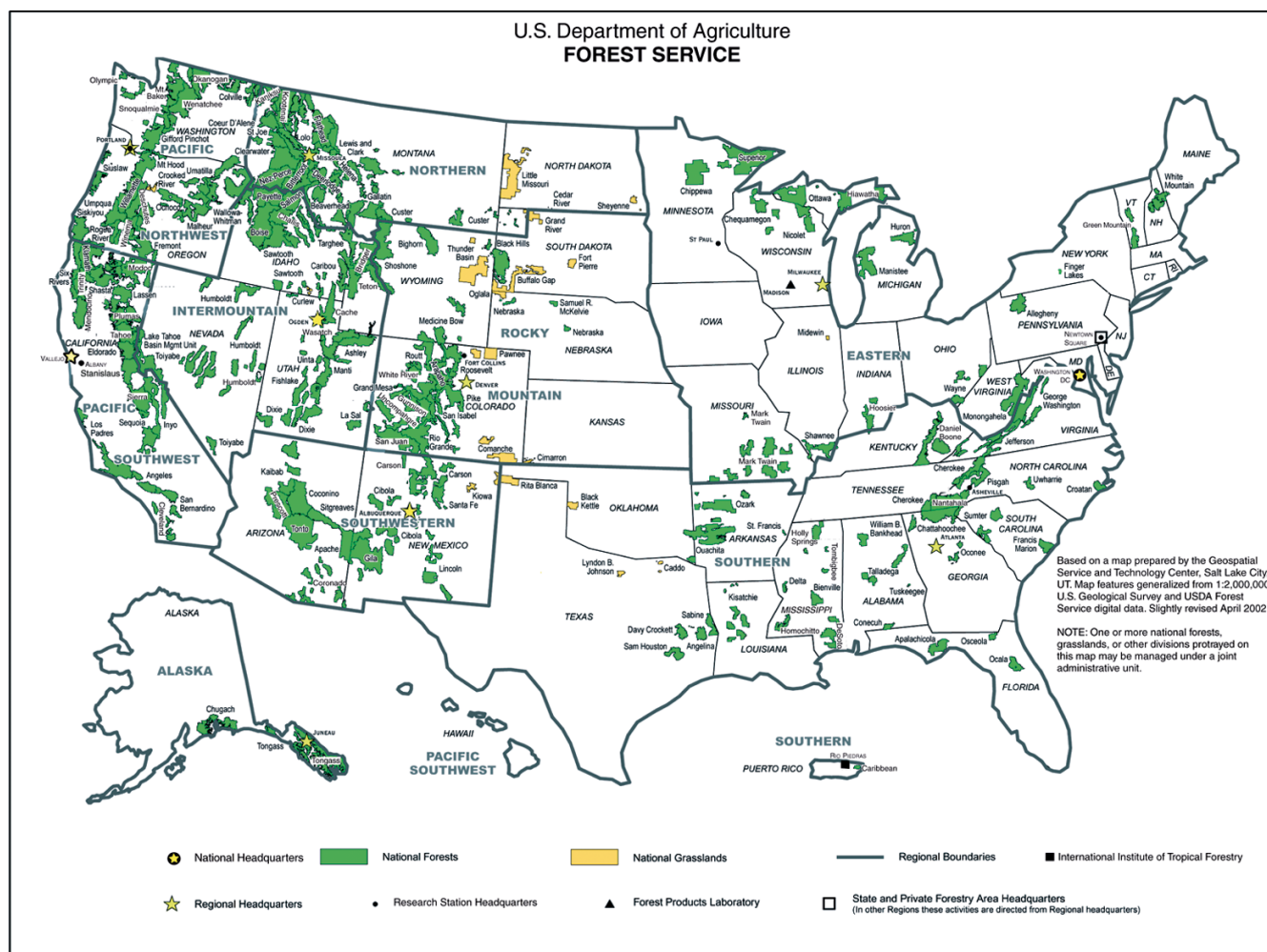


Figure 1. The National Forest System is divided into nine regions: Northern (R-1), Rocky Mountain (R-2), Southwestern (R-3), Intermountain (R-4), Pacific Southwest (R-5), Pacific Northwest (R-6), Southern (R-8), Eastern (R-9), and Alaska (R-10). There is no Region 7. Forest Service Research is divided into seven research stations (HQ in parentheses): North Central (St. Paul, MN), Northeastern (Newtown Square, PA), Pacific Northwest (Portland, OR), Pacific Southwest (Albany, CA), Rocky Mountain (Fort Collins, CO), Southern (Asheville, NC), and the Forest Products Laboratory (Madison, WI).

But that period is behind us. Passions and bitterness have subsided. But so has momentum. We are adrift.

Obviously, there are still conflicts. The Region-2 Centennial Forum could have sunk into acrimony over logging, or fire, or mining, or water, or grazing, or recreation. But we didn't. As a result, we got to make a number of observations that an acrimonious fight would have concealed.

One of the most provocative moments of the meeting came when our Regional Forester held up the 1905 *Forest Service Regulations and Instructions*—the slim, slight, 142-page, vest-pocket-sized bible that District Rangers on horseback used to manage their domain (Fig. 2).

Clearly written by Gifford Pinchot, the agency's founding Chief, this booklet said two things to us. First, that the Forest Service was a civilizing force, carrying the values of the larger society to the frontier. District Rangers were stopping theft and destruction of natural resources in the so-called hinterland just as reformers in cities were stopping

child labor, forcing slum owners to introduce running water and ventilation into tenements, and so on. The West at the founding of the Forest Service was part of a reform movement, national in scope.

The small booklet also asks a question: What is the meaning of its small size compared with the 8-foot-long shelf of policy manuals that has replaced it? And what is the relation between the handful of men on horseback who administered the same 191 million acres that are today administered by many more managers and technicians, most of whom are desk-bound.

The answer is that the many, often conflicting, demands society has put on the federal lands have forced the creation of an ever-lengthening manual and behind it, a mountain of handbooks, environmental impact statements, legal briefs, judicial opinions, reports, and books.

It is not just the Forest Service that has bulked up without becoming better able to move the ball. Russell George,

head of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, told the Forum that although one set of laws and rulings says that Colorado's water is owned by the state, another equally authoritative set says the water is controlled by the federal government. This is typical of our society and is reflected in our laws, which embrace solitude and mass use of the land for recreation; endorse "let burn" and fire protection; and seek to protect endangered species and meet society's material needs.

Russell George said that to overcome the contradictions, federal and state agencies must remember that they serve the same people. The other requirement, he said, is that the various agencies must avoid confronting or trying to answer the big question. Never mind, he said, which governmental entity owns the water. Instead, go to the ditch or stream or diversion in question and solve the problem on the ground. That's the best we can do, he said, and even that is possible only if staffers extend themselves, and if their superiors, such as himself and Regional Forester Rick Cables, give their staff room to be flexible and daring.

This is good; it is admirable, but it is also makeshift.

Can we go beyond makeshift? Beyond maneuvering between laws and policies that, if strictly observed, can only lead to gridlock and can only demoralize and exhaust those who attempt to solve problems using them?

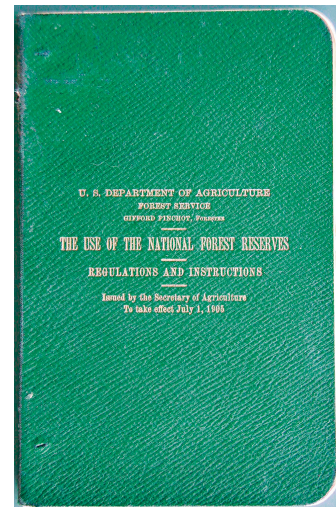
Probably the first step is to recognize that the responsibility is not only the agency's; it is a shared responsibility. From what we saw at the Forum, Region 2 believes that only partnerships among equals can make progress on the ground.

But part of the problem is the sole responsibility of the agency: to improve finance, hiring, firing, and policy making. For, unless the internal wheels turn freely, there will not be enough time to get things done on the ground, with or without partners.

We have no advice to give with regard to internal streamlining. But we do think there is a way in which the Forest Service can prepare for its next 100 years that will go beyond maneuvering between laws: Put environmental impact reports to much better use.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 is an extraordinarily clear, concise, and even poetic law. It calls on the various federal agencies to "achieve a balance between population and resource use which will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities." It asks the agencies to do this by using "a systematic, interdisciplinary approach which will insure the integrated use of the natural and social sciences and the environmental design arts in planning and in decision making which may have an impact on man's environment..."

There is no room to quote further. But the idea is clear: Impact statements should not be narrow, lawyerly documents that people read only under duress. They should be clear, truth-seeking documents that present issues as clearly and even-handedly as possible, using the best minds, best disciplines, and best writers and artists available. Impact statements



This original 142-page manual written by founding Chief Gifford Pinchot is today an 8-foot-long set of loose-leaf books.

should be written manifestations of the cooperative, multidisciplinary approach we expect from mature partnerships.

We believe that impact statements, done right, will tell Westerners things about our region that we don't know and that these reports will bind us together in common vision and common purpose.

Is this too idealistic? Is the Region-2 delegation to the National Centennial Forest Congress imagining an agency product that can't exist in today's world? We don't think so.

Not long ago, it would have been difficult to imagine the US Forest Service—which saw itself as king of the natural resource hill—eagerly partnering with other agencies and groups. After all, the Forest Service saw itself as king of the hill.

So a major change in attitude has already occurred. But further change is needed if we are to make additional progress. We are not suggesting a public relations campaign. Or the creation of another rhyming program, such as "Change on the Range." We are not looking for a big, comprehensive, centrally administered fix.

We are saying that when the agency approaches a particular issue imaginatively and openly and puts that approach into an impact statement, there will be a world of people ready to recognize and hail the work and the entity that produced it.

We do not believe we are trapped in a series of no-win situations when it comes to national forests. There are solutions, and those solutions will flow from the ground via partnerships, hard work, imagination, and the dissemination of the achievements in clearly written, honest impact statements of the kind envisioned so many years ago in the *National Environmental Policy Act*.

Author is former Publisher, High Country News.