

Private Industrial Foresters and Forest Service Research—The Relevancy Question

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What is the nature of the relationship between U.S. Forest Service researchers and private industrial foresters? How can Forest Service Research maintain independence while serving agency and private forestry managers? We decided to seek input from someone outside of the Forest Service, so I asked Pat Connell, Vice President of Resource Operations for Rocky Mountain Log Homes, Hamilton, MT, for his views. Pat is a member of the Ravalli County Resource Advisory Committee that works with local citizens and the Bitterroot National Forest.

With 33 years as a private industrial forester, Pat is one of very few professional foresters in the nation's log home industry. He's passionate about private industrial forestry and shared with me his experience with Forest Service Research and views on many current issues. Pat cautioned that his views are those of a non-landed private industrial forester whose industry relies on agency timber sales. Foresters in this branch of the forest products industry may have interests in Forest Service Research that differ from those of commercial forest-land industrial foresters.

At one time, private foresters and researchers pursued “interrelated cooperative efforts” to solve mutual problems. Pat recalls working with researchers in the western Tree Improvement Program (a program that addresses tree genetics) and cooperative nursery efforts during the 1970s and early 1980s. Before the early 1990s, Forest Service Research employed more logging system specialists and economists. (Note: Forest Service records show that nationwide its research scientists in the forest products technology job series declined from 63 in 1985 to 17 in 2007, a 73 percent reduction, while the number of research scientist foresters shrank from 350 to 140, a 60 percent decline. Total number of Forest Service research scientists decreased from 985 to 547, a 44 percent reduction over the same period.) In addition, the National Forest System used to invite private foresters and Forest Service Research to provide input to National Forest interdisciplinary teams (IDT) in the interest of creating synergistic products.

Pat blames the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) for extinguishing these cooperative efforts. With FACA, says Pat, “We were the bad guys. We were from industry, and there were only extremely special situations where Forest Service and industry could ‘work together’ because of fear of collusive results.”

It's now difficult for industrial foresters to convey the costs of timber sale policy inconsistencies within and among



Pat Connell felling the first of several beetle-killed Douglas-firs on a Healthy Forest Restoration Act project on the Bitterroot National Forest. Pat says “the science of forestry and foresters cannot be fooled when the venue is the woods rather than the courts.” (Photo by Mary Beaver)

regions. According to Pat, economic realities are not adequately addressed when requiring new harvesting systems and equipment. “I’ve got stuff that requires incredible yarding distance, utilization standards that are insane, and as a result

the Forest Service is getting much less stumpage value than if there was a little more creativity!” While Pat thinks timber sales designed for multiple benefits are a worthy goal, too often the result isn’t viable for industry. There’s an opportunity for research

economists to involve private foresters in designing more realistic competitive bid processes to obtain best value. The small volume offered in today’s sales makes it unaffordable for private companies to invest in the innovative technology required to meet increasingly rigid contract specifications. Pat suggested researchers study the economic implications of current Federal timber sale policies and test contract specifications against reality.

According to Pat, lack of harvestable wood has forced the segment of the log home industry that is dependent on dead wood into Canada to acquire such wood. This occurs despite

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more wood volume growing annually on National Forests than being harvested or burned. Therefore, he recommends the Forest Service focus less on tree-growth research and more on what the National Forest System can do to satisfy National Environmental Policy Act requirements while providing a sustainable supply of wood.

Pat is unaware of any collaboration or partnership between Research and private foresters. This indicates that Research needs to do a better job informing the public about research taking place. He believes the agency needs to realize “industry actually knows something.” Opportunity exists for researchers and private foresters to collaborate in developing useful forest management tools and techniques. For example, Pat’s company utilizes dead wood in a unique way; yet few agency managers or researchers “have come to see what we do, what improvement we do, any thoughts we’ve got.” As a result, the agency seems unaware that markets are changing and how.

Useful technology transfer could be improved between researchers and private industrial foresters. For example, Pat suggested that district ranger stations, supervisors’ offices, and Research Stations provide indexes of locally conducted research in their foyers. Annotated bibliographies of this research by category and location would be helpful to private foresters and the public.

Relevancy is the basic question, Pat thinks. Who chooses what projects to research or conveys their needs and ensures scientific answers? This leads to the issue of Forest Service Research maintaining independence and credibility. Connell believes Research should serve the National Forest System,

providing information it needs. According to him, independence and credibility mean research that can be replicated. Without this, there’s a validity problem. Pat affirmed researchers require great autonomy for best science.

Pat believes Research provides data and information to National Forest System management about issues, but does not make management decisions. Moreover, informing and sharing “best science” seldom convinces those with ideological opposition to embrace sound projects.

Pat is disturbed by the mantra of forest restoration being necessitated by past fire suppression. In reality, he thinks fuels are accumulating because timber harvest has ground to a halt. “Right now we’re growing more than we’re burning [through all types of fires]. We have made a social change of opinion that we are willing to have our wood fiber supplied by Canada [and] want the National Forests to become de facto National Parks,” he says. Moreover, he thinks the agency’s ability to attack fires while they’re reasonably small has diminished because there are fewer agency and industrial crews working in the woods.

According to Connell, Research needs to provide information and tools to help managers analyze implications of “No Action” alternatives in projects: “Basically the No Action alternative is taking a photograph, and all subsequent proposed actions are compared to [this] photograph. In truth, there’s no such thing as a static forest. You can’t actively manage when you create an inactive, inanimate icon as a control.”

From start to finish, the Forest Service Research relevancy question is dependent on context. It must be answered in terms of what research results are needed, by whom, when, where, and for what purpose.

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analyses support the idea that song structure may be an important indicator of habitat quality—songs at native-dominated sites formed cohesive neighborhoods that were more similar to each other than those at knapweed-invaded sites. Sampling at additional sites over a range of habitats will be necessary to evaluate song structure as a broadly applicable measure of population status. Given the links between song learning, turnover rates, and habitat quality in songbirds, song structure may serve as a new and improved means of monitoring population status, including impacts of invasive species.

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restoration projects. We then retraced the route we used for the public tour and Chuck shared concerns expressed by the public on their tour.

These chances to interact—public to manager to researcher—take time and commitment, but it’s worth it to share information and perspectives while out in the forest together. It has been a key part of BEMRP’s efforts to work in partnership and share research results with others.

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works.” This partnership helps managers understand what’s “best science” and keeps researchers “grounded with what’s real.” Researchers are regarded as independent, so researchers’ involvement gives managers’ decisions credibility. These days, much of a forest manager’s job is social science-related. “I wouldn’t want BEMRP to lose sight of that,” he says.

Dan sees a role for BEMRP in travel management. This effort will require considerable social science research because people deeply value the National Forest, traveling through it by different means and for different reasons.

Outside the job, Dan pursues his passion for the outdoors by traveling, mountain biking, backpacking with Sharon and sons Dylan and Torrey, and fishing. “My real passion is golf. It’s a game that demands 100 percent focus. You can’t play golf and think about work.”

Wildland fire, lands, wilderness dams, and travel management—these challenges promise an exciting journey for Dan. Given his eagerness to work with diverse publics and openness to scientifically based research on management issues, Dan’s vision of quality land stewardship and customer service is becoming a reality on the Stevensville Ranger District.