

Remarks

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I want to thank Harv Forsgren, the Intermountain Regional Forester, for his invitation to me to offer a few remarks to this very impressive gathering. I was raised in western Oregon, which provided the genesis for my love of forests. My beginnings of government service started over 50 years ago by serving in the Korean War and I subsequently became a political accident. As many of you know, I was Idaho's only 4-term governor and served as Secretary of the Interior in the Carter Administration, which was only a portion of my long career in public service. I am impressed with the agenda and really impressed that you would invite a former lumberjack to keynote a conference on science. For those of you from out of town—welcome. Spend your per-diem. We need the revenue.

When you have been around politics and government as long as I have—and in my case it has been a pretty steady preoccupation for close to 50 years—you sometimes think that no big problem ever gets fully resolved. If we are lucky, we make a little progress at the edges and maybe things get a little better, but it is pretty rare that we ever say: “Well, we got that problem licked.”

It reminds me of the old story about the inmates at a prison who had all been locked up for many years. They had been locked up for so long that they had heard every joke from everyone on the inside a thousand times. So, to streamline the joke telling, they just started numbering the jokes. One of the inmates would say, for example, I feel like telling old number 12 and everyone would laugh. Finally, one day one of the newer inmates who had only been in the joint for a few years decided he would try a joke and he said “how about number 7.” All the other inmates just stared at him and no one was laughing. Finally, the joke teller said, “What’s wrong—no one is laughing.” One of the real old timers spoke up and said: “You didn’t tell it right.”

I do sometimes feel we could just assign a number to forest health, another number to climate change, a different number to multiple use, and so forth, and I could just recite the numbers and sit down. The policy makers make endless speeches on these kinds of issues, but it frequently seems we make little real progress in solving problems. I am hoping that with a new administration now in place we will start solving some problems and I do have some optimism. I am encouraged by the stated determination of the new Obama Administration to sweep aside what I can only call an anti-science bias that existed in the previous administration and begin once again to rely on the kind of science and analysis that all of you produce. We simply must use the best science, regardless of how it may test the popular will or the politically easy position, if we are to make progress on terribly important policies related to climate change and utilization of biomass, among many others.

So, part of my message today is to encourage you to do all you can to recapture a central role for science—in your case silviculture—in the making of public policy. You are the experts and the rest of us depend on you to give us the data and the facts about trade-offs and options in order to make sound, smart public policy. Unfortunately, for too many years, the voices of the experts were drowned out by the political operators who think every problem is a partisan problem that can be solved by making the loudest argument. I truly hope the new administration values science. It is only common sense to do so.

In: Jain, Theresa B.; Craham, Russell T.; and Sandquist, Jonathan, tech. eds. 2010. Integrated management of carbon sequestration and biomass utilization opportunities in a changing climate: Proceedings of the 2009 National Silviculture Workshop; 2009 June 15-18; Boise, ID. Proceedings RMRS-P-61. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. 351 p.

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As some of you know, when I left the Idaho Governor's office in 1995, we established the Andrus Center for Public Policy at Boise State University. We have convened a number of conferences over the last 10 years or so that often deal with western natural resource issues. Back in 2004, we did a conference to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Forest Service. We talked a great deal about the management challenges the Forest Service has always faced and we reflected on the job going forward. As I was thinking about this gathering, I went back and looked at the report from that conference and I was struck by one section that really jumped out. It was a remark about climate change, and I quote the prominent climatologist, Dr. Tim Brown of the Desert Research Institute when he noted "there is scientific consensus that we are in the midst of climate change. For the West in the 21st Century, this means a warmer winter, less snow pack but more precipitation, and warmer summers. Drought will continue, comparable to the period of the 1930s or 1950s." In Dr. Brown's understated summary, he said, "This will be the challenge for management."

I think that is about right and that makes your work all the more important. Harv Forsgren's letter inviting me to offer some remarks today asked me to address how the Forest Service—and each of you—meets the challenge of managing the national forests for energy, economic development and environmental quality "in a changing climate." That will be a tall order and as Dr. Brown suggested in 2004, "a challenge for Forest Service management." I don't need to tell you that all three of these purposes (energy, economic development, and environmental quality) are very important. They can also be contradictory and competing. Some groups will push for one outcome at the expense of the other two. Finding the right balance is the real challenge because I doubt whether you can maximize all three objectives at the same time.

The facts are that the American public wants—and the politicians want to give—everything all the time. We do not like making tradeoffs and we do not like having to choose. For years—maybe forever—the Forest Service has been caught in this struggle. As we continue the debate over just what exactly the purposes of the national forests are, how do we find something approaching agreement around that question? One Idahoan would tell you the national forests exist to produce wood fiber. Another would tell you they exist to provide hunting and fishing opportunities. Another would tell you the forests help drive the economy of the state and particularly rural communities. This Idahoan would tell you that there is a measure of large truth in each of those answers. So what you do, in my opinion, and what policy makers must do, is find the delicate balance that creates an equilibrium that gives the American public the opportunity to have it all. That is, increased energy from biomass, a stronger economy, and the hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation that we so enjoy in Idaho and the remainder of the West.

Let me make a couple of comments about the debate over climate change, and in addition, offer some suggestions for you and the leadership of the Forest Service to help the policy makers sort through this debate. I suspect we have some consensus around this issue that climate is changing. If some of the change is the result of a "natural cycle" then the predictable human reaction will want to have us focus on how we can keep forests the way they are because we value them this way, even if we must go up against "Mother Nature." On the other hand, if it becomes more certain—as I believe it will—that human activity is at the center of climate change, it may become easier to attempt to manage forests to "keep them the way we want them." The real point is that climate change is likely to make it more difficult for you to manage for the three purposes—energy, economic development, and the environment. If climate change really has become your new overarching management issue then, I believe, the Forest Service should

be extremely transparent about how managing for climate change will affect the three big objectives.

A couple of thoughts on the biomass to energy issue. According to the Department of Energy, biomass is right now providing about 3 percent of all energy consumed in the United States and nearly 50 percent of all the energy from renewable sources. Biomass supplies more BTU's than hydroelectric energy. The latest number in Idaho, I'm told, is that wood bioenergy accounts for about 4 to 5 percent of all the energy consumed. Electric generation from biomass (not counting municipal solidwaste) represents about 11 percent of all generation from renewable sources in the United States. Biomass supplies almost six times the energy of geothermal, solar, and wind energy sources combined and worldwide biomass meets about 14 percent of the world's energy needs. But, no one as far as I know has a good handle on how much potential really exists in the West or the rest of the nation. It is not clear to me—maybe you'll get it figured out at this conference—how, once we figure out the potential, we will maximize the opportunity to generate more energy while still managing the national forests for wood products and recreation.

We need to think about the infrastructure needed to get the potential energy delivered. In addition, we probably should not be rushing to construct a lot of infrastructure until we know the amount of biomass realistically available from national forest lands and better understand what is involved with making it available. Because Forest Service silviculturists play a critical role in providing this kind of information, realistic plans can be pursued for utilizing forest biomass to produce energy. There appear to be two primary challenges. One is cost, and transportation is the largest component of cost. The second challenge is supply. Biofuels facilities must have a consistent supply of material, day in and day out, for the life of a project and this could mean 20 to 25 years. That steady supply issue presents a real challenge for you and the national forests. And the data about the amount of material available should drive decisions for how large an energy facility should be built, not the other way around. On this point, the developers of these big biomass plans need to hear from the technical experts about how much biomass is realistically available and how much it costs to get it out of the woods. I would encourage you to continue to play the role of honest, science-based reality checkers and resist the pressure that sometimes occurs to come up with research that justifies a political position. Don't get me wrong. I think we need to improve biomass utilization—and quickly. I do not think we will be able to move as quickly as we might like, because we have to do all this sorting out of priorities first and we have barely begun that effort. For example, we may need to reconsider a whole range of issues related to how we manage the national forests. We know that a lack of harvest can have serious adverse consequences. I've had a preview of some research that will soon be public that says, among other things, that tree mortality in Idaho forests due to overcrowding and drought is at the highest level since we started keeping records nearly 60 years ago. Mortality in the forests is now removing more timber on an annual basis than harvest and the accumulation of dead wood has now reached an all-time high. The overwhelming majority of the dead wood is in the national forests where it contributes the fuel to feed big fires that in turn have major cost and environmental impacts. Here is one other challenge for you in the Forest Service: I think it is very important that you be as clear as possible about the state of the science on carbon sequestration, specifically growing trees to hold carbon. As far as I can tell, we have been talking about this for 15 or more years and the state of the science—at least in terms of public understanding—has not advanced much. I would like to see more attention—quickly—on just what various sequestration

strategies really mean to a more effective policy aimed at controlling carbon. We have limped along in the United States for 25 years or more without a coherent national energy strategy. We continue to import way too much energy and clearly we can't drill our way to energy independence. We need to attack the issue in a comprehensive way and make some tough decisions. We haven't, until recently, been aggressive enough about fuel efficiency standards and we haven't placed nearly enough attention on better mass transit. We cannot summon the political will to deal with nuclear waste, so that technology remains largely on the shelf. Everyone agrees now, I think, that we must aggressively pursue alternatives, but doing so will not be fast or easy. Nevertheless, we must get on with it. The best policy, whether it's related to biomass, climate change, or carbon, will come about when we really utilize the science that you offer to give us the best, most honest information about which way we should move. I'm optimistic, as I've said, that we have some new leadership and new commitment to solving some of these old and perplexing problems. I hope if Harv were to invite me back in a couple of years, I would have the opportunity to thank you all for moving the ball on these issues. Good luck. We're depending on you.