

# EVERGREEN



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**Should We Let Diseased  
National Forests Die and Burn?  
Is Restoration Forestry  
A Better Idea Than Zero Cut?**



Jim Petersen

**The Largest Forest Fire in American History** - On the night of August 20, 1910, a forest fire of almost unimaginable ferocity crossed the summit in the distance, headed east from Idaho into Montana. In two terrifying days and nights, fires from perhaps a thousand lightning strikes merged into one conflagration, destroying more than two million acres of National Forest timber in northern Idaho and western Montana. In the aftermath, an outraged nation demanded that Congress put the U.S. Forest Service in the fire-fighting business. Although the policy of “excluding fire” from forests has had disastrous environmental consequences, especially in fire-dependent ecosystems, it still enjoys wide public support. It has taken almost 90 years for the still young forest pictured here to re-establish itself on Lookout Pass near the Idaho-Montana state line, and it will be another century or more before this forest begins to take on publicly desired old growth features.

**On the cover** - Lightning and fire illuminate the night sky in northern Arizona’s Coconino National Forest. (USFS)

Environmentalism increasingly reflects urban perspectives. As people move to cities, they become infatuated with fantasies of land untouched by humans. This demographic shift is revealed through ongoing debates over endangered species, grazing, water rights, private property, mining and logging. And it is partly a healthy trend. But this urbanization of environmental values also signals the loss of a rural way of life and the disappearance of hands-on experience with nature. So the irony: as popular concern for preservation increases, public understanding about how to achieve it declines.

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Yellowstone* and *In A Dark Wood*  
*Evergreen*, September, 1990

# Should Logging Be Outlawed In National Forests?

A coalition of the nation's most powerful environmental organizations has asked Congress to approve legislation that would outlaw logging in National Forests. Their proposal appears to turn on two assertions. First, logging “destroys” forests, and second, the best way to “save” National Forests is to leave them alone.

We have sifted through hundreds of government-funded studies and can find no peer-reviewed scientific evidence that supports these claims. But there is compelling evidence that about half of the West's National forest land base is in big trouble. Not because of logging or livestock grazing, which have both altered the character of western forests, but more significantly because of an *absence* fire—a direct result of the nation's well-intended

**The timing of the “Zero Cut” proposal appears to underscore a disagreement in principle involving at least two environmental factions.**

policy of excluding fire from forests. More than any other natural agent—wind, insects, diseases or flooding—it was fire that energized the West's plant and animal communities for eons. Minus fire, millions of forested acres are dying. Worse yet, the *low-intensity* fires that sustained that helped maintain species diversity have given way to *stand replacing* fires that burn so hot they destroy everything, including nutrient rich topsoil, which is melted into a wax-like substance that water cannot penetrate.

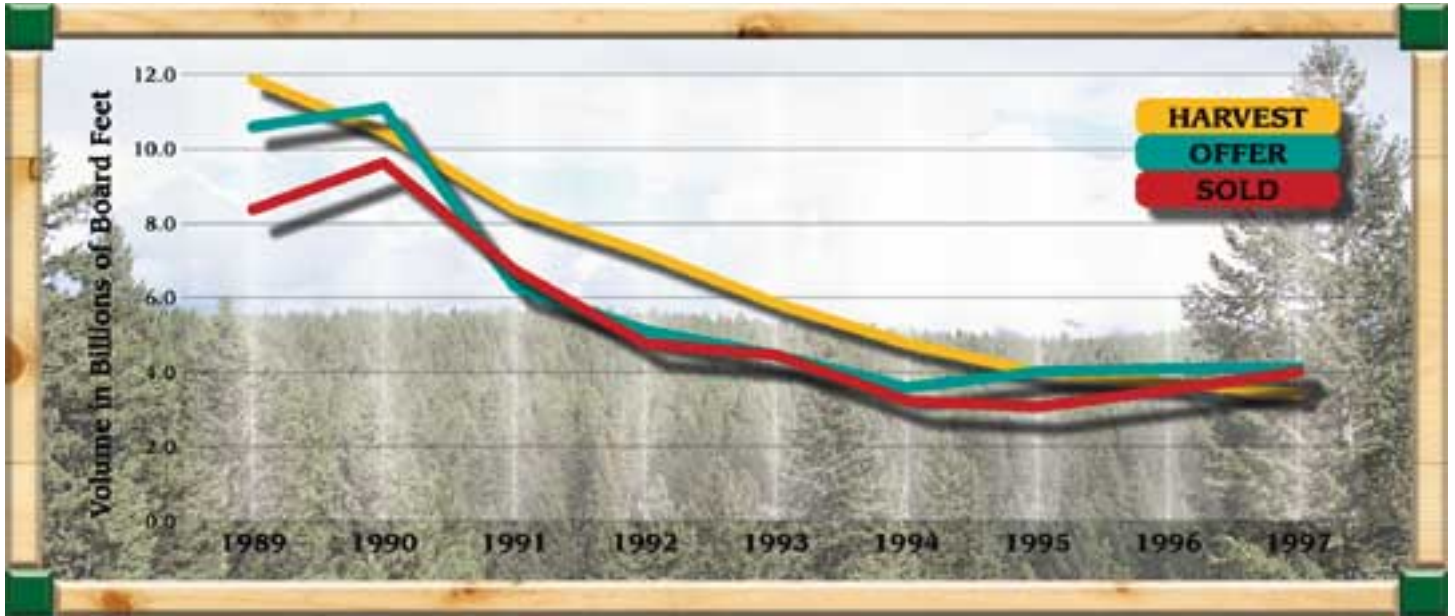
The so-called “Zero Cut” proposal underscores a looming debate *between environmentalists* over what to do about this situation. Environmental groups that are heavily invested in the no-harvest campaign say the best thing to do is leave these troubled forests to nature. But new environmental coalitions are taking shape in western communities. Remarkably, they see harvesting—in this case a less intrusive refinement called “restoration forestry”—as a way to circumvent the disastrous environmental impacts associated with increasingly destructive forest fires. Reducing the risk of such fires is—in turn—seen as the first step in the long process of restoring forest conditions and natural disturbance patterns that were prevalent before white settlement began.

For perspective, we asked forest scientists most familiar with western National Forests to explain why these forests are dying and burning up in increasingly destructive fires, what will happen if nothing is done, and what could be done to alleviate the underlying causes of these conflagrations. Their answers punctuate this issue. Absent is any discussion of the “forest health debate.” There is no agreed upon definition for what constitutes a healthy forest, though most scientists agree it is one in which desired future conditions (e.g. more old trees) are not threatened by current conditions (e.g. the increasing risk of catastrophic fire). After reading this report, you can make your subjective judgement as to the health of the West's National Forests.

It is easy to be cynical about the very nature of this debate. Environmentalists despair over the loss of forests; timber families mourn the loss of hope; and the Forest Service is vilified from all sides. But judging from what we learned in the course of this investigation, moderate voices representing timber and environmental interests could really help each other if they can learn to trust one another. We hope they can because the future of the West's forests is riding on their ability to convince skeptical publics that restoration forestry is not simply the latest disguise for perceived logging excesses.

Jim Petersen, Editor  
*Evergreen* Magazine

**Headed for Grants Pass**—A Grants Pass-bound log truck winds its way out of southern Oregon's Siskiyou National Forest in 1992. The Siskiyou has been the scene of frequently bitter public debate over the future of timber harvesting in the National Forest System. This truck belonged to the late R. B. Slagle. Mr. Slagle hauled logs for more than 50 years and was one of his community's most admired and most generous citizens. Faced with plummeting harvest levels he reluctantly liquidated his 20-truck operation in 1995, three years before his death.



**Declining harvests**—Since 1989, the amount of National Forest timber harvested has declined 72 percent, from 12.0 to 3.5 billion board feet annually. (USDA Forest Service timber sale reports)



Jim Petersen

**Habitat worries**—Anglers drift the North Fork of the Flathead River in northwest Montana. Many see timber harvesting in the adjacent Flathead National Forest as a threat to fish habitat.



Paradise Lodge Collection

**Solitude**—A hiker pauses along southern Oregon's historic Rogue River Trail. About 50 miles of the Rogue was designated a Wild and Scenic River in the 1960s. Harvesting is forbidden here.



Mike McMurray

**Threatened species**—The National Forest timber sale program began its long decline after the Northern Spotted Owl was listed as a threatened species in June 1990.



Jim Petersen

**Smoldering ruin**—the aftermath of the 100,000-acre Silver Fire, a 1987 conflagration on the southern Oregon's Siskiyou National Forest.

**T**he deer was hairless and purple. Where the skin had broken, the flesh was in patches. For a time, the deer did not look up. It must have been especially like Joe Sylvia, who was burned so deeply that he was euphoric. However, when a tree exploded and was thrown as a victim to the foot of a nearby cliff, the deer finally raised its head and slowly saw us. Its eyes were red bulbs that illuminated long hairs around its eyelids.

Since it was August, we had not thought of taking a rifle with us, so we could not treat it as a living thing and destroy it. While it completed the process of recognizing us, it bent down and continued drinking. Then either it finally recognized us, or became sick at the stomach again. It tottered to the bank, steadied itself, and then bounded off euphorically. If it could have, it probably would have said, like Joe Sylvia, "I'm feeling just fine." Probably its sensory apparatus, like Joe Sylvia's, had been

dumped into its bloodstream and was beginning to clog its kidneys. Then, instead of jumping, it ran straight into the first fallen log.

My brother-in-law said, loathing himself, "I forgot to throw a rifle into the cab of the truck." The deer lay there and looked back looking for us, but, shocked by its collision with the log, it probably did not see us. It probably did not see anything—it moved its head back and forth, as if trying to remember at what angle it had last seen us. Suddenly, its eyes were like electric light bulbs burning out—with a flash, too much light burned out the filaments in the bulbs, and then the red faded slowly to black. In the fading, there came a point where the long hairs on the eyelids were no longer illuminated. Then the deer put its head down on the log it had not seen and could not jump.

*Young Men and Fire*, Norman Maclean,  
University of Chicago Press, 1992