

First, Put Out the Fire

Is it time to give America's forests back to our Native Americans?

Words & photos by Jim Petersen.

EDITOR'S NOTE: "First, Put Out the Fire!" is Jim Petersen's summation of 34 years of research, travel and writing. He unknowingly headed down this trail when he started *Evergreen*—known as "The voice of American forestry and science-based forest policy"—in Medford, Ore., in 1986.

"I was soon up to my eyeballs in dying trees in eastern Oregon's Blue Mountains," he says. "The Blues were turning a rusty orange and I had no idea why. A Forest Service entomologist explained that tussock moths and bark beetles were merrily chomping their way through thousands of acres of white fir, ponderosa and lodgepole pine.

"What's the Forest Service doing about this," I asked.

"Not much," he said. "We like to study things for a long while before we decide what to do."

When is enough enough? What determines the tipping point for federal bureaucrats and members of Congress to allow the U.S. Forest Service to step in and meet the West's wildfire pandemic head-on?

Other than thinning dense stands of dying trees adjacent to communities, the agency's nationwide response to forest mortality has been to beef up its fire department at the expense of its forestry

department. There isn't yet a real fire department in the Forest Service, but billions of taxpayer dollars have been redirected to wildfires at the expense of what was once the most respected and successful forest management agency in the world.

This funding shift has been accompanied by a jaw-dropping de-emphasis on actual forest management. The agency has been

reduced to the thinning and restoration work necessary to lessen the size, frequency and destructive power of wildfires fueled by dead trees. Tree mortality now exceeds net annual growth in most western national forests. We are slipping into the abyss.

There has been a 50-year history of declines in forests and forestry despite logical, science-based, real-world solutions to an environmental crisis that threatens our way of life in the West. Not just life as it was or is, but life as it could be if we busied ourselves repairing the damage insects, diseases, wildfires and failed forest policies have done in national forests over the last half-century.

I have zero desire to bring back the long-gone commodity-based federal timber sale program, but we do need to pull western national forests back from the brink of fiery collapse. Fire ecologists tell me that we have perhaps 30 years in which to per-



Serial litigators sued to stop the A-to-Z Project on the Colville National Forest near Colville, Wash. They lost in the 9th Circuit Court and Vaagen Brothers Lumber Co.—which paid more than \$1 million for the federally required Environmental Impact Statement—did the thinning work you see here. The company's drone took this picture. INSET: The Whittier firestorm in California's Los Padres National Forest. California is ground zero in the political battle to "save" forests by "leaving them to nature." How do you like it so far? (Wirephoto)

form a miracle on the 90 to 100 million acres of federal forestland that are ready to burn, or soon will be.

Can we restore natural resiliency on so many acres? No one knows. We have the knowledge and skill sets, but the billions in private capital needed to solve what is essentially a public problem are missing. I think it would quickly materialize if Congress authorized a forest restoration *system* that protected private investments in restoration and wood-processing infrastructure from serial litigators.

The Nature Conservancy would like to joint-venture a small-log sawmill somewhere near Wenatchee, Wash., where there is currently *no private market* for logs it would

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like to thin from dying national forests east of the Cascades. But it can't find an experienced partner willing to risk his/her capital on a project that activist lawyers could stop in its tracks. This story repeats itself in every western state.

I think Duane Vaagen would crawl in bed with The Nature Conservancy in a heartbeat if the Forest Service would guarantee him a 20-year supply of good-quality small logs in annual increments large enough to make the venture profitable. Twenty years is the time required to amortize an investment in the \$100 million range. Mr. Vaagen owns a state-of-the-art sawmill in Colville, Wash., and his work with forest collaboratives and small-log milling technologies is nothing short of miraculous.

To its credit, Congress has finally recognized the enormous risks our wildfire pandemic poses for rural and urban communities, wildlife habitat, air and water quality, and the wealth of year-round recreational opportunities that national forests offer. It has also blessed the work of diverse stakeholder groups that are helping the Forest Service resolve thorny issues that swirl about some forest restoration projects. But Congress has done nothing to protect collaboratives—or innovators like Mr. Vaagen—from serial litigators who are hellbent on stopping these projects, despite their easily document-



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Beetle-killed lodgepole and larch on the Clearwater-Nez Perce National Forest near Elk City, Idaho. ► Conservationist Brian Cotton beneath several old-growth ponderosa pines that continue to grow on northern Arizona's Coconino National Forest. These giants were protected from wildfire by removing hundreds of small-diameter pines that surrounded them—over the objections of environmental extremists. ► That's "Turtle," Dave Ehrmantrout's aging forwarder, removing some 100 small-diameter trees from an Idaho Panhandle National Forests thinning near Bonners Ferry in 2017. Ehrmantrout's low-impact mechanical harvesting systems meet Forest Service ground compaction standards. Today, this thinned area looks like a park and could withstand most wildfires.

ed environmental benefits.

Equally troubling, the pace and scale of work Congress has been willing to support is far too small compared to the sheer size of the ecological disaster that is unfolding in western national forests. I understand congressional desire to proceed cautiously where public assets are concerned. What I don't understand is widespread congressional willingness to blindly endorse false stories the anti-forestry crowd has been peddling for 50 years.

Lumbermen aren't "greedy"; loggers don't want to "chop down all the trees"; and most forest scientists long ago rejected the idea that there is an "invisible web of life" that can only be preserved by leaving nature alone. If this last point were true, we'd still be living in caves and hunting with spears.

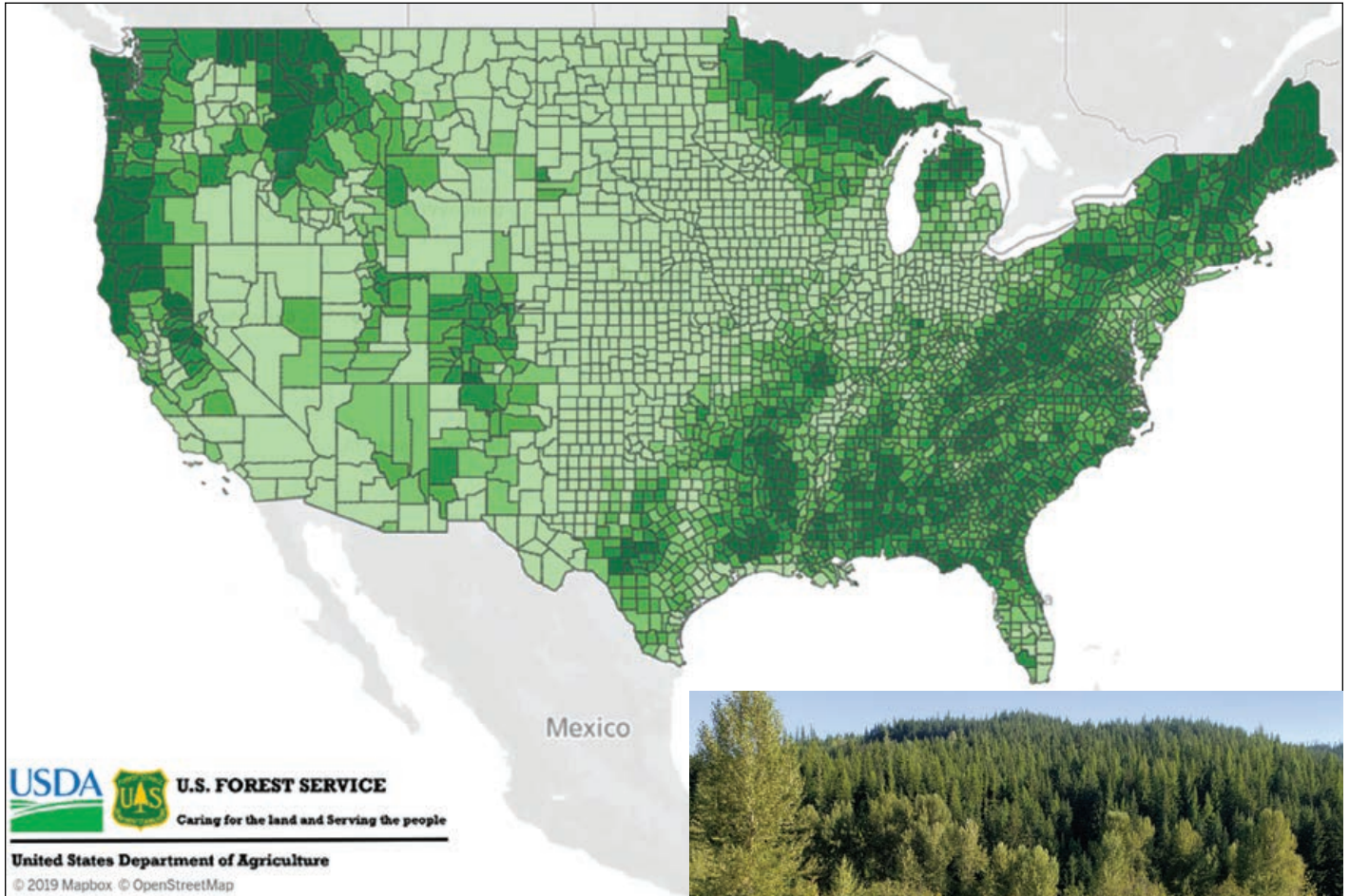
Restoring natural resiliency in wildfire-adapted forest ecosystems is not a smoke-and-mirrors routine. Private landowners, tribes and states have been doing it successfully for decades—and the quite visible results are easily documented on hundreds of thousands of acres. Why aren't the same science-based management principles in

practice in national forests?

I think Forest Service leadership has become so demoralized over the last 20-some years that it has chosen the path of least resistance: allowing large stand-replacing wildfires to do the "thinning" work it doesn't believe it can complete within a forest restoration framework that relies on mechanical thinning and prescribed fire. Again, it's a one-two combination that other public and private landowners have used for decades with great success *while complying with every federal law, rule and regulation.*

A significant part of the impasse we face is cultural. Most of us recognize our god-awful wildfire pandemic for what it is, but we have strong disagreements about what to do about it. Do we let nature take its course in forests that we all treasure, or do we roll up our sleeves and get to work?

I prefer the latter approach, which is why I wrote "First, Put Out the Fire!" The take-home message is that *if* we don't immediately confront this crisis, wildfires will consume more than half of our 190-million-acre federal forest estate over the next 30-something



This is “The mother of all Forest Service interactive maps.” It reaches deeply into all 3,001 counties, 64 parishes and 19 boroughs in the United States. If you track forest and rangeland wildfires and insect and disease infestations, this map belongs on your computer. You can download it from the Internet or link to it on pages 42 and 43 in Jim Petersen’s book, “First, Put Out the Fire!” RIGHT: Charlie Petersen on the North Fork of the Coeur d’Alene River, a prized cutthroat fishery in northern Idaho’s Panhandle National Forests, scene of more than a century of logging and replanting.



years. And blaming “climate deniers” won’t save a single acre.

We can’t log our way out of our mess—and it is our mess—because there isn’t time, and the public won’t allow it. Nor can we burn our way out using so-called “managed fire.” That technique is probably illegal because it constitutes a major federal action for which there is no environmental impact statement. It is a favorite among fire ecologists who seem oblivious to the environmental and economic harm that results from allowing big wildfires to burn until there is nothing left to burn.

If this is the best we can do, it’s time to give our national forests back to America’s first foresters...our Native Americans. Their forest practices embrace cultural, spiritual and economic values the Forest Service should copy. ■



Jim Petersen is founder and president of the nonprofit Evergreen Foundation. He has published Evergreen Magazine for decades and what used to be in print is now available online. After 34 years of research and travel, he was compelled to write a book that has been favorably reviewed by people who have forgotten more about wildfires than Jim says he’ll ever know. He saw firsthand the urgent need to



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pull western national forests back from the brink of fiery collapse and address the federal government’s refusal to meet the wildfire pandemic head-on. For a copy of “First, Put Out the Fire” (\$29.95, including shipping and handling), go to www.evergreen-magazine.com and click on the book cover icon. Jim says: “We had hoped to sell out by the end of last year but COVID killed five big bookselling events, so it’s the Internet. And yes, we gave books to every member of every natural resource-based House and Senate committee and subcommittee and staffer, plus all western governors and their staffs. The silence has been deafening. And no, we’re not giving up.”