

"National Forest Land Sell-off is a Mistake"

By Sherman Bamford

The recent Administration proposal to sell off 309,000 acres of Forest Service lands is a sure-fire bad idea.

Congress should reinstate the current policy of funding rural schools from Forest Service budgets, including the PILT program, rather than resort to the cowardly measure of selling public land to feed temporary budget shortfalls.

Privatizing these lands will speed the loss of open space. According to the Forest Service's own statements, the loss of open space is one of the four greatest threats to forests today. Nationwide, "More than 21.8 million acres of open space were lost to development between 1982 and 1997, about 4,000 acres per day, 3 acres a minute. Of this loss, close to 10.3 million acres are in forestland. It continues today." Development poses the greatest threat in the eastern U.S., "where most private forests occur." (<http://www.fs.fed.us/projects/four-threats/>). We cannot afford to lose these public lands to development, especially in the southeast!

Even if it were true that the selected tracts "no longer meet National Forest system needs, are expensive to manage and are detached or isolated from national forest units as a whole," as Forest Service press releases on the land sale mistakenly claim, isolated tracts of public land have intrinsic value even while not actively managed. In the early 20th century, in the wake of dramatic flooding, eastern national forests were established from the purchase of damaged and degraded lands primarily for the purpose of reforestation and watershed protection. As these lands healed and forests were replenished, the crisis subsided. Increasing development now make such smaller tracts of open space all the more important on the landscape.

The proposal is not a good faith effort to balance the budget. For the last five years, the Administration has systematically devalued the stewardship mission of the Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service and other federal agencies in exchange for chimerical Enron-style juggling. It is no coincidence that the Administration also is currently studying a plan to outsource 21,350 full-time Forest Service jobs, almost 68% of the full-time positions, including much of its professional staff of law enforcement officers, firefighters, biologists, researchers, foresters, and geologists. (http://www.peer.org/news/news_id.php?row_id=651). These moves hurt agency morale and harm the public.

The land-sale program is risky and untested and there are no credible assurances that we can avoid returning to the trough again if the program does not generate the expected returns.

At its core, the land sale scheme takes public land from the Southern Appalachian region, where national forests comprise 8% of total land area, to pay for rural schools in the western U.S., where there is already a much greater public lands base. One-third of the acreage to be sold nationwide would come from the southern and mid-western U.S., but these regions would receive only 10 percent of the revenue.

The Forest Service continues to make misleading statements about the land-sale program. The agency claims that "most of the parcels to be sold are designated as 'custodial' meaning the boundaries are kept marked, but the areas aren't managed for watersheds, plants and wildlife habitat, scenic views, old growth trees or other purposes." [Source: U.S. Forest Service, see Roanoke Times article, "What Price will we Pay?", Feb. 21, '06, side-bar to article] In reality, over half the Virginia acreage is in an active management class, and many of the so-called custodial tracts actually have high watershed, wildlife, scenic, old growth, recreational, proximity to state parks, and other resource values.

Nearly all of the tracts proposed for sale areas support unique resources within their boundaries and none is a proper choice for liquidation under the agency's own selection criteria:

- Two tracts support significant natural areas (Craig Creek Shale Barren and Staunton Creek Gorge), recognized by the Virginia Division of Natural Heritage and the Forest Service for their exemplary natural communities or presence of rare species.
- One tract is within a "scenic corridor" near Rich Hole wilderness area and within a few miles of Big House Mountain, in the Lexington area. Another tract is an important highly visible gateway between the Roanoke Valley and the Dragons Tooth area and other national forest lands to the north. At least twelve of the tracts are rated with a scenic class level of one (highest out of five levels on the Forest) or level two (second highest out of five levels on the Forest).
- Four tracts are located near streams supporting endangered mussels that need very clean water to survive.
- Numerous tracts are located in officially designated Priority Watersheds, Source Water Protection areas, support trout waters, or are near municipal drinking water sources. For example, three large tracts north of Wolf Creek, are Priority Watersheds, watersheds with important aquatic species located "in close proximity to the Jefferson National Forests...where forest management activities may make a difference." (Jefferson National Forest Plan)
- Six tracts contain Forest Service documented old growth forest.
- One tract is connected to the North Fork of Pound Roadless Area.
- One of the "custodial" tracts is located within the unroaded 7,000-acre Dismal Creek area proposed for protection by conservationists in 1999. The tract contains old growth forest and one of the few areas on the Jefferson National Forest that is a "semiprimitive" area, providing remote backcountry recreational opportunities
- Many tracts are not isolated tracts, but are connected to larger pieces of public lands.
- Many tracts are many miles within the official proclamation boundaries of the national forests and should not be candidates for sale. For example, two of the tracts in Lee County are 5 miles east of the proclamation boundary and are the furthest tracts west in Lee County. Lee County has a very low percentage of Forest Service land (4%) already. The three tracts of land in Bland and Tazewell County are over 30 miles east of the proclamation boundary and are the furthest tracts west in this portion of the Forest; these tracts are surrounded by extensive tracts of public land, including lands around Burkes Garden to the east and by the 25,500 acre state-owned Clinch Mountain Wildlife Management Area four miles to the west.

We do not need to sell our public land and should not be asked to do so.

The federal government could easily fund rural schools as before if it were not continuing to hand out obscenely large amounts of corporate welfare without so much as blinking an eye. For example, recently, the Interior Department announced a proposal to forgo collection of \$7 billion dollars of federal oil and gas royalties at a time of record profits for the oil and gas industry (See Edmund L. Andrews, "U.S. Royalty Plan to Give Windfall to Oil Companies", February 14, 2006; the New York Times). Also, the Forest Service loses an estimated 1.2 billion dollars annually on its national timber and roadbuilding programs. We believe these programs could be scaled back, and monies could be shifted from these money-losing programs. By ending the commercial logging program and other corporate give-aways, and instead engaging in projects that truly restore the ecology of forests and public lands, we would all be much better off - financially and ecologically.

Our public lands are a priceless legacy to our children and grandchildren. Comments about the proposal can be e-mailed to SRS_Land_Sales@fs.fed.us, , faxed to (202) 205-1604, or mailed to USDA Forest Service, SRS Comments, Lands 4S, 1400 Independence Ave. S.W. Mailstop 1124, Washington, DC 20250-0003, through May 1 .

Letters to your U.S. representative and senators about your concerns are also highly important.