

Scientists chastise Forest Service chief

In a letter to a congressional panel, a group says the agency pushes logging instead of thinning forests ripe for wildfires

By **MICHAEL MILSTEIN**
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A group of top Northwest scientists has fired back at U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth, saying the agency has only itself to blame for years of inaction that have turned Western forests into tinderboxes.

In a scathing letter to a congressional committee that earlier heard from Bosworth, the six scientists said the forest chief misrepresented their work to Congress and falsely implied that the Forest Service is bogged down by unwieldy policies and questionable science.

"Why the chief did it, only he knows," said Robert Beschta, an Oregon State University forestry professor who signed the letter.

Since becoming chief last year, Bosworth has blamed "analysis paralysis" for slowing agency projects, from Northwest timber sales to bridge repairs. A new Forest Service report titled "The Process Predicament" says procedural tangles have held up projects to thin clogged, flammable forests left from decades of fire suppression.

But the scientists from the University of Washington, Oregon State, Idaho State University, Pacific Rivers Council and the Center for Biological Diversity

said the Forest Service is mired in conflict because it pushes logging but neglects such pressing issues as decaying roads and the desperate need to thin forests ripe for fires.

"The agency often strives to ignore or deny the vast body of knowledge that has accumulated in recent decades, and instead favors antiquated policies," the scientists said in the letter to the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health.

Such direction "is not only a recipe for controversy, but also a recipe for the continued deterioration of forested landscapes," they said. "Humans, too, suffer when these resources are degraded, as will often happen if the forest practices advocated by the chief and 'The Process Predicament' report are continued."

The rebuke of Bosworth, a forester, contrasts with the broad support that former Chief Mike Dornbeck, a fisheries biologist, claimed among many scientists. So far it has drawn no response from Bosworth or the subcommittee.

The letter was prompted by Bosworth's June testimony about the "procedural knot" that he says binds the Forest Service, driving up costs and delaying decisions. Bosworth said he could not think of a better example of the "costly, complex and time-consuming" demands than a 1995 report by eight Northwest scientists.

The Beschta Report, named for the Oregon State professor who was its lead author, recommended ways to avoid environmental damage while salvaging

Blame: Salvage logging after fires is disputed

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leftover wood from burned forests. Three of the authors were based at the time at Oregon State, with others from the University of Montana, University of Washington, Idaho State, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

The report said fires play a vital ecological role in Western forests and advocated a "conservative approach" to logging or reseeded of burned terrain. It found little evidence that logging charred stands would slow future fires and said such cutting might do more damage than the fires.

"In this light, there is little reason to believe post-fire salvage logging has any ecological benefits," said the report, written at the behest of the Eugene-based Pacific Rivers Council, a conservation group.

Speaking to Congress, Bosworth called the report "an unpublished document of questionable science proposed for an advocacy group that has never been peer-reviewed."

Environmental groups have blocked salvage logging projects, including some in Oregon and Washington, by alleging in appeals and lawsuits that the Forest Service had not weighed the principles in the Beschta report.

It is, Bosworth said, a "powerful example of the incentive for land managers to fill, or overstuff, (decision) documents with excessive amounts of information — even if the information is of questionable relevance and does not illuminate the reasons for the decision."

But scientists who wrote the report said Bosworth distorted their work and misled Congress, blaming them for the failings of the Forest Service's outdated thinking.

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JAMES KARR,

A PROFESSOR OF AQUATIC SCIENCES AND ZOOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

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"The chief is in serious error to lay it back at the doorstep of scientists, who are saying, 'Pay attention to the ramifications of what you do,'" said David Perry, an emeritus professor of ecosystem studies at Oregon State who is a member of the National Commission on Science for Sustainable Forestry.

Bosworth's testimony "just flies in the face of the facts," said James Karr, a professor of aquatic sciences and zoology at the University of Washington.

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The Beschta Report was peer-reviewed by researchers at Oregon State and more than 50 others who endorsed it in a letter to the president, its authors said. Federal courts have upheld the findings, and the Forest Service itself directed field offices to consider the report when planning projects.

"It was peer-reviewed more than most peer-reviewed papers are," Karr said, "and far more than the Forest Service's own work is peer-reviewed."

Beschta, the lead author, said the Forest Service never introduced any studies to counter the report's conclusions. "If the chief thinks the science is questionable, they've had seven years to provide a response, but there's been none."

Deteriorating forest roads and overgrown, flammable stands pose the most immediate threats to forests, the scientists told Congress.

"Despite widespread recognition of these facts, the (Forest Service) diverts staff and money to extraordinarily costly salvage logging projects at the expense of reducing the . . . the road network or undertaking needed fine-fuels reductions in unburned forests," they said.

"There's this huge need to do fuel reduction, yet they seem to have this huge interest in doing salvage logging," Beschta said. "They could have been aggressively thinning forests over the last decade, and I don't know if they could have made a dent, but they certainly could have gotten further than they have."

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